

“Be Serious!”: In Memoriam Herb Gintis

Review of Radical Political Economics
2024, Vol. 56(1) 140–145
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Political Economics
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DOI: 10.1177/04866134231213396
rrpe.sagepub.com



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Abstract

Herb Gintis, who left us in 2023, was a giant of left economics. He believed passionately in ideas and their power, especially in helping deliver a more just and desirable world. In a career spanning six decades, he asked the most profound questions about economics and its aims and possibilities, and inspired a generation of economists in turn. We here recount his work and our interactions with him.

JEL Classification: A11, P00

Keywords

game theory, radical political economy, contested exchange

I. Introduction

Herb Gintis left us with many words to remember him by, in an outstanding and influential corpus of scholarly output, as well as in Amazon reviews that showed his personality and erudition at least as clearly. He was brilliant in all his many intellectual incarnations, and through them all took an enormous amount of joy in the collective production of knowledge.

He really loved figuring out the right answer, while acknowledging that it meant being wrong along the way. For example, many years ago, when Herb was arguing about some social science issue with one of us, he stopped, sighed, and said, “Look Arjun, I look at the evidence and try to argue the point, and I’ve found that after five years, about 50 percent of the time I’m right and about 50 percent of the time, I’m wrong. But while I’m arguing, I’m 100 percent sure I’m right.”

That was typical of Herb. He would argue fiercely, brilliantly, sometimes wrongly, but always without rancor. There was a real sense in which he treated you as an equal in those interactions, taking your arguments seriously, and treating you as an individual with respect, even if you were a first-year graduate student—politically charged and raw, otherwise.

This kind of wide-ranging, generous intellectual spirit meant that people from very different backgrounds, and not even solely from economics, read and were inspired by him. Thus, for example, for one of us (Suresh), encountering the work of Bowles and Gintis as an undergrad was

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Date received: July 20, 2023

Date accepted: October 25, 2023

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a revelation. It was one of the things that made him resolve to start a PhD in economics at University of Massachusetts-Amherst, without having taken any real economics classes! For the other (Arjun), *Schooling in Capitalist America* (Bowles and Gintis 1976) was the only work he had read from a University of Massachusetts-Amherst professor (in a Sociology class) before arriving at Amherst.

As prominent members of the leftist frontier of economics, Herb and Sam Bowles held a very important space in the academy, and certainly were inspirations for innumerable young radicals. Both institutionally at UMass, where they trained generations of scholars, and in terms of working with similar-minded people in organizations like URPE, they had continued to buttress a leftist economics, one that was not hermetically sealed in heterodoxy. For example, the article “The Problem with Human Capital: A Marxian Critique” (Bowles and Gintis 1975) in the *American Economic Review* remains essential reading for illustrating many conceptual problems with neoclassical labor economics. The classic work on schooling was motivated by the deep observation that capitalist institutions produce a particular kind of people, not just goods and services, and the theme of endogenous preferences runs through Herb’s whole career. By the time we came to Amherst though, Herb had moved away from Marxism for some time, and in fact had a particular grudge against a variant that was popular at the time (making sure to note “this is a postmodernism free zone” on his web page).

At that time, Herb and Sam had finished their exploration of the contested exchange paradigm. Many of the imperatives were drawn from their radical beginnings, such as their work on labor discipline models. But the general approach was extensible to many domains outside labor. From the middle of the 1980s to the 1990s, they worked on approaches that put power, wealth, and unequal exchange at the center of microeconomic theory. Employers could credibly threaten workers with firing at no cost to themselves, exercising arbitrary power over workers even if there was free entry and no wage-setting power.

In the *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Bowles and Gintis (1993) proposed a post-Walrasian paradigm that foregrounded incomplete contracts, asymmetric power relationships, and featured game theory and its implications as central. In doing so, they suggested a return to the insights of classical economists who had always allowed for the exercise of coercion, power, and politics in their analyses. The concluding section of that article was in retrospect, a signpost for Herb’s next set of commitments. It is worth quoting some of that in full:

[T]he contested exchange approach may foster fundamental rethinking of the structure of economic theory and its relationship to empirical studies and neighboring disciplines. Such approaches endow economic theory with a degree of open-endedness and path-dependency more characteristic of biology and geology than of physics and mathematics. This is nowhere clearer than in the key analytical tool of post-Walrasian economics, game theory. Consider the multiplicity of defensible solution concepts, or the indeterminate status of rational action itself, in many game situations. Faced with this open-endedness, progress and relevance in economic theory may require a more symbiotic relationship with economic history, experimental studies, and econometric testing, areas of study which become even more essential when the axiomatic first principles are called into doubt. In this way, the post-Walrasian paradigm is likely to expand the disciplinary boundaries of economics to include, as in the 19th century, the selective study of law, history, sociology, psychology, and politics. (Bowles and Gintis 1993:100)

Subsequent interest in cultural and biological evolution and game theory flowed naturally from Herb’s concerns with endogenous preferences. His work on group selection, strong reciprocity, and cooperation was a modern upgrading and recasting of ideas going back to Kropotkin, about how the core evolutionary advantage of humans was pro sociality. It was also a different way of using game theory, avoiding the high-rationality fictions of the folk theorem, and favoring a low-rationality population-level approach that captured the evolution of preferences and standards of

behavior. Studying the cooperation of people around the world in experimental games was lending an empirical basis to the idea that material conditions shaped propensities for pro sociality.

An important theme in his last two decades became a cognitively and socially realistic interpretation of game theory as a core grammar for unifying the social sciences, from psychology to sociology to economics. This produced several books and articles, but perhaps most comprehensively *The Bounds of Reason* (Gintis 2009). This work moved beyond classical game theory, instead focusing on evolutionary and adaptive dynamics to understand human and other societies better. Herb emphasized that high-rationality justifications for game theoretic reasoning were patently unrealistic, and instead both explicit evolutionary/adaptive learning dynamics yielding Nash equilibrium as well as different notions of equilibrium (like correlated equilibrium) were needed to deploy game theory in environments with human decision makers in real world cultures. He argued that this allows a powerful language for understanding social norms as the outcome of population-level game playing. He also explained why different kinds of equilibrium enforcement (e.g., second-order enforcement) could preserve nonequilibrium behavior (e.g., cooperation in the prisoner's dilemma).

In his last two decades, Herb was also building agent-based and low-rationality models of general equilibrium. He seemed to have the insight that both market prices and social norms were emergent properties of human behavior under different institutional constraints and unified his interest in both. His 2007 *Economic Journal* article (Gintis 2007) and later work with Antoine Mandel (Mandel and Gintis 2014) are examples of this set of later interests.

It is fair to say that over time, it was not that Herb became closer to the economics discipline, but that the economics discipline became closer to Herb. At the very outset of his career, in his dissertation, he challenged the principle of exogenous preferences in neoclassical economics. In it, he had argued that preferences are created by the system, and then the system satisfies the preferences; so, one couldn't justify the institutions of capitalism solely on the grounds that they satisfy preferences. By the early 2000s, this was not apostasy anymore, and the post-Walrasian turn had considered many of his early criticisms. He saw that the economics of 2002 were very different from the economics of 1972. Herb's own 1972 *QJE* paper (Gintis 1972) on welfare economics is essential to understand what his generation was facing. As a result, Herb was also very aware of and excited by what was happening in the larger economics discipline. In many ways he was very keen to open a window to the best in mainstream economics. He arranged for one of us (Suresh) to visit Harvard for a semester and encouraged him to transfer to a more mainstream PhD program, seeing that there was exciting stuff afoot for someone with such interests.

Although Herb had moved away from a formal engagement with Marxism, his work continued to be inspired by a commitment to concrete improvements for the world, often from a progressive perspective. His co-edited volume with Melissa Osborne and Sam Bowles on *Unequal Chances* (Bowles, Gintis, and Groves 2008) is illustrative of this. In many ways, because of his substantial mathematical talents, Herb could have abandoned social science and focused only on formal modeling. But from his earliest scholarly days, when he quit mathematics because it was too disconnected from the real world (and returned to Harvard to switch his PhD to economics), mathematics and formalism were in the service of larger goals. If it was fun and exciting, all the better. What it wasn't was predictable or partisan in a particular way: he often offended comrades by holding seemingly more conservative positions. But in each case, it was the real world, rather than politics, that led him. As he said in an interview with David Colander:

I wouldn't say politics are central to my economics, but the only reason that I do what I do is because I think it's important in the real world. I'm not a shining moral light. I'm just a normal everyday person; I don't make any claims about my moral or political insights being anything special. But I can assure you that there is not a moment when I do economics, or whatever I do, that I'm not thinking

about how this is going to make a better world. That's the only thing that I care about. Even when I read math and physics all I care about is how it helps us better understand, and hence change the world. (Colander 2004: 87)

2. Herb as a Teacher

In our first years (we were separated by two years in graduate school), we both took Herb's Game Theory course instead of the normal sequence. The class was a joy. Herb traversed a huge range of topics in the most stimulating and iconoclastic way possible. And he was hilarious. One of us (Arjun) in the second class of the semester, opened a soda bottle which let out a loud sound. Herb turned and without dropping a beat said "Oh, the hissing doesn't usually start till the third week!"

His classes were exciting because we got to see how his ideas about evolution, dynamics, and social systems were being worked out right before our eyes. We both had the opportunity to be his research assistant for the books that he was writing at the time, *Game Theory Evolving* (Arjun) and the *Foundations of Human Sociality Project* (Suresh) (Gintis 2000; Henrich et al. 2004).

It was inspiring to see the work process of a real genius. Although we didn't know it at the time, Herb's talents were extraordinary in an academy filled with smart and eccentric people. Besides whatever he was writing about (say, the evolution of cooperation), Herb could engage at length in quantum mechanics (with serious math), computer hardware engineering, policy debates about anti-poverty, and Aristotelian morality. A quick glance at reviews on Amazon shows that he was willing to engage with them all. It was intoxicating to think that you could be both a specialized scientist and yet know so much about so much.

His work was the careful melding of research and pedagogy. Herb was interested in being a teacher and helping people learn and thought it possible to extend the deepest insights of the discipline to a curious hardworking person who wanted to engage. Even toward the very last years, he was writing online books like *Mathematics for Humanists* (Gintis, n.d.). His textbooks and notes were profound but often quixotic, stretching for what would ultimately be a deep insight but quickly throwing the reader into the deep end. Trying to work through his problems for the books and to simplify them or approach it in a more linear and systematic way was an accelerated education, and a glimpse into a rare mind at work. He was easily one of the smartest people either of us knew.

He was not an aloof genius and was always warm to us. He offered his home for us to stay when he was away, and when Suresh broke his collarbone badly in a bike accident, Herb picked him up from the hospital and accommodated his inability to type for many months.

As his Research Assistants and at points his interlocutors for the work he was doing on those books, we had different occasions to argue about politics and economics with him. Herb was also the real epitome of "no bullshit." One of us (Suresh) remembers trying to argue in favor of Chomsky's view on mass media, and Herb just rolled his eyes and said, "Be serious!" But as most people who talked with him have noted, even when he vehemently disagreed, he was engaged and good natured. He was better than always right; he was always open minded, so that upon getting a convincing counterargument, he would pivot instantly.

Over the years once we left UMass, we had occasion to meet with Herb at first occasionally, and then later, rarely. But when we could correspond, or meet, he was always warm. A few years ago, one of us (Arjun) wrote him a letter. Below is an excerpt; his response follows:

Dear Herb

Yesterday, I was teaching the Hawk-Dove game to students and was looking at the equilibrium on the blackboard and suddenly had a Proust-Madeleine moment. I was thrown back to around 1999 and the green blackboards of Machmer Hall and your rasping voice and humor describing all the games we learned. And here I am, officially middle aged and imparting these insights to my students in Bangalore decades later.

I don't know if I ever told you how grateful I was for that first year at UMass. I had done my undergraduate by correspondence and had never had a teacher of economics after high school. And then, there I was—fresh faced at 22, being taught all these amazing things about the world and I was getting paid for it! It was a real opening into the life of the mind and the genuine nobility (I use that term advisedly) of learning. It was a really moving experience, and one of the very best years of my life.

I guess there is nothing much more to say, except thank you for all that you did. People don't thank their teachers enough, and while I did not work with you as your student, I think of people like you, Sam, Jim, and others as my intellectual parents all the time. There is something of you that continues in this long stream of learning.

Arjun

Herb wrote back:

Dear Arjun,

Thank you for thinking of me, and for the kind words.

The fact that you have fond memories of your training in economics suggests that you are leading a happy, fulfilled life. At least, I know that I appreciate all my mentors from the past (including my parents and grandparents) because I enjoy my life in the present.

Herb

Herb was 100 percent right. So much of what he and others gave us were the tools to continue working with a sense of happiness, to feel that one could perform meaningful work, be serious, but also have joy through this in our day-to-day lives.

So goodbye Herb, and thanks, across the generations, for everything.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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