

Comments on Harry Trebing from Rodney Stevenson

Personally, I owe a great debt to Harry Trebing; most importantly, I owe my career to him. I was one of his doctoral students at Michigan State University. In 1970, after my second year of graduate school, Harry took me to Washington DC when he was hired to be the Chief Economist of the newly established U.S. Postal Rate Commission. Having provided a rich scholastic education on institutional economics and social control, Harry led me into the reality of regulation - and a realization that the study of institutions should be seasoned with the experience of them. Harry saw me through to the completion of my dissertation, helped me join the evening faculty of the University of Maryland and paved the way for my joining the Office of Economics of the Federal Power Commission. Subsequently I was hired by the University of Wisconsin, Madison, into the position once held by Harry's major professor.

Harry was an Institutional Economist trained in the University of Wisconsin Veblen-Commons tradition. While Harry tended towards Commons in his study of public utilities, in private he exhibited strains of Veblen's acerbic clarity. As with other leaders of the institutionalist movement, Harry focused on the social control of economic power, maintaining a normative perspective that government could and should be a powerful instrument for advancing the public good. Harry's work, in its variety of forms, contributed greatly to the advancement of public utility regulation. His contributions were built on an extremely sharp intellect, a facility with relationships, and an almost encyclopedic knowledge of the utilities - an understanding of production technologies, consumption necessities, market possibilities, collateral consequences, and governmental influences - all within the historical arc of social-economic systems.

As a student, Harry studied under Martin Glaeser, a leader in the Institutional Economics movement and a preeminent public utility economist. As a scholar, Harry was drawn towards hermeneutic immersion. He was the Jane Goodall and Margaret Mead of the public utility sector - he lived among those he studied. Within the span of his career, he was a member of economic faculties of three universities, served as the Chief Economist for the U.S. Federal Communications Commission and the U.S. Postal Rate Commission, conducted education programs for generations of public utility regulators and practitioners, and organized decades worth of public utility conferences. As a scholar, he provided salient assessments of the shortcomings of the neoclassical economic approach to regulation. As one with a clear understanding of public necessities, technologies, and industry practices, he provided insightful assessments of the need for and application of public utility regulation. His insights and assessments were explained well in his various publications.

Harry was an institution builder, creating his own Institute of Public Utilities at Michigan State University as well as strengthening and assuring the vibrancy of academic institutions such as the Transportation and Public Utilities Group and the institutional economics organization, the Association for Evolutionary Economics. He had a phenomenally rich set of relationships spanning academe, industry and governments as well as the manifold enfolding disciplines. His network of relationships served as a basis for currency in understanding evolving public utility issues, and the opportunities for effective mentoring of various aspiring scholars and practitioners. Drawing on his relationships and cache of goodwill, he brought together those who differed by industry, discipline, and perspective. He would bring together regulators and

the regulated, economists and engineers, ethicists and accountants, humanists and executives. Harry was a scholar adept at understanding, building and maintaining institutions. He was an institution himself.

Though institutional economists like Harry have made seminal contributions, there is an imbalance between the importance of their work and its appreciation within academe. Harry trained legions of regulatory leaders and practitioners, but had only a handful of doctoral students. Harry wrote insightful articles, but did not publish in mainstream A-list journals. Harry's scholarship was built on the messy inductive approach of institutional economists, but credence given by mainstream economic departments favors the tidiness of reductive deduction and mathematic symbolism. But it is Harry's work and the influence he has had on others that will be most useful for those who will shape future regulatory institutions.

Few among the thousands who attend the annual ASSA sessions are aware of the importance of Harry Trebing and the impact of his work. In this regards, like the infrastructure industries he studied, awareness and appreciation belie critical importance. I am fortunate to be among those who knew and appreciated him.

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