Sir Hans Singer

Born on 29 November 1910 in Elberfeld, Germany, Hans Wolfgang Singer died on 26 February 2006.

Professor Sir Hans Singer had an extraordinarily productive career as a pioneer economist of development and as an international civil servant in the early years of the United Nations.1 His professional life spanned nearly seventy years, over which his early analysis of British unemployment matured into a wide-ranging exploration of the international and national causes of persistent world poverty. For him, theory and practice were always linked, whether he was operating as a UN official or as an academic consultant. He created many new insights; and he helped to create a range of new UN economic agencies.

Born in the pre-First World War Rhineland into a middle class family of secular Jews, the young Hans was originally intended for his father’s profession of medicine. He studied at the University of Bonn, where he was attracted into the discipline of economics by the engaging teaching style of Joseph Schumpeter, author of The Theory of Economic Development (1912). His first dissertation subject was the Kondratieff cycle. When Schumpeter left Bonn for Harvard in 1932, Singer began anew with a dissertation on urban economics under Arthur Spiethoff.

As a liberal activist in the student association — along with Wolfgang Stolper and August Lässch — Singer was attacked by pro-Nazi students. Since his father had already been murdered by the Nazis, he decided to leave Germany for Turkey. Then Schumpeter wrote to Keynes, recommending Singer for one of two refugee scholarships at Cambridge. There, accompanied by his young bride Ilse (née Plaut) whom he’d married in 1933, he completed a PhD on urban land values under the supervision of Colin Clark. Singer thus combined his interest in the economics of the very long run with the analysis of urban rents. The key results were reported briefly in Colin Clark’s The Conditions of Economic Progress (1940).

Clark’s strongly empirical style of economics, and his aversion to unsupported theory, rubbed off on the young Singer, and was evident in his post-doctoral research. Keynes got him his first research job with the Pilgrim Trust, researching the conditions of the long term unemployed. Under the aegis of Archbishop William Temple, he, together with Walter Oakeshott and David Owen, produced Men Without Work (1938). They conducted sample surveys in unemployment black spots, and produced their statistics with the aid of punched cards. They also lived with some of the families in their samples — thus pioneering the method of mixing quantitative with qualitative research.

They stressed the moral and psychological losses inflicted by unemployment, as well as the purely economic waste. This finding has been strongly reiterated by current research on the economics of happiness. Oswald and others have found that lack of employment is one of the most important causes of the divergence between income level and reported levels of subjective happiness.2

Singer’s first university appointment in 1938 was at Manchester. The Nazis had put Singer on a list of those to be arrested after the invasion of Britain. Ironically, it was the British Home Office that interned him briefly at Huyton in 1940! Keynes pleaded vigorously for his release, after which he produced a series of twelve consecutive articles on the state of the German war economy for the Economic Journal. He later worked for the Ministry of Town and Country Planning, trying to remedy official ignorance of urban economics.

After the war he wanted to resume his academic career in Britain, but in 1947 his new employer (Glasgow University) agreed to second him to the fledgling United Nations, despite his reluctance to go. When he arrived in New York, he knew only Michál Kalecki, Sidney Dell and David Owen (who had become the first head of the UN Department of Economic Affairs). In the end, however, he served the UN for twenty-two years with deep energy and commitment and a cornucopia of policy ideas.

Singer stressed the accidental element in his transition to being a development economist. He claimed that he had been selected because David Weitraub, an American official of the UN, misunderstood the British term ‘countryside planning’, thinking that it meant ‘national planning’, when it actually meant ‘countryside planning’. His delight in telling this story emphasises the fact that he never took himself over-seriously, and was one of the most modest of men.

He made his mark almost at once, with a study of the terms of trade of developing countries in 1948. Using British trade data, he pointed out that (contrary to the classical economists’ view) the terms of trade for countries exporting primary commodities had been declining for a hundred years. His study was passed to Raúl Prebisch, of the UN Economic Commission for Latin America, who used it to assert that the metropolitan countries were retaining all the benefits of global productivity increases. The UN thereby became associated with unorthodox economics. Singer’s sole authorship of the secular decline doctrine — usually known as the Prebisch-Singer thesis — has been recognised only recently.3

The doctrine drew swift attacks from Jacob Viner, Gottfried Haberler, Gerald Meier and others, but in the 1980s it held up well under a variety of heavy-duty statistical tests undertaken by John Spraos, David Sapsford, Tony Thirlwall and others. By the 1990s, it had become generally accepted.4 Even the IMF now advises developing
countries to regard primary commodity booms as temporary, and price collapses as permanent.

Singer campaigned for a soft loan facility to be established within the UN. This was a function given in 1960 to the World Bank rather than the UN, as he had advocated. For this advocacy he was abused by the right-wing US press, and for a time suffered from depression. When Kennedy became President, however, he strongly supported the US initiative for a UN International Decade of Development. He was also instrumental in preparing the ground for the launch of the World Food Program, and remained a lifelong advocate of giving aid in the form of food.

The era of decolonisation altered the political balance of the UN, increasing demands from developing countries for UN assistance. Hans Singer was active in designing and advocating several new UN specialised agencies in the 1960s. These included the UN Special Fund for technical assistance, which was then absorbed into the UNDP; the UN Industrial Development Organisation; the UN Emergency Fund for Children and the UN Research Institute for Social Development.

Throughout his UN phase, Singer had maintained a copious flow of professional publications on all aspects of development, including technical assistance, human capital and the welfare of children. He favoured a planning approach to development, but was not an uncritical advocate of overseas aid. Rather, he showed that, because of the fungibility of funds, uncoordinated project aid was likely to be an ineffective form of development assistance.5

At a time of life when many would welcome retirement, Singer resumed his British academic career at the newly established Institute for Development Studies on the campus of Sussex University. In the 1970s, he led (jointly with Richard Jolly) the ILO Employment Mission to Kenya, which paved the way for further work on strategies of redistribution from growth. This idea was taken up by the World Bank, but abandoned in the 1980s when neo-liberal policy rhetoric dominated the Bank’s agenda. In fact, it foreshadowed today’s renewed development policy concern with the promotion of ‘pro-poor growth’.6 The Kenya Mission was innovative in that it stressed the potential of the informal sector of the economy, previously regarded as stagnant, to create employment and reduce poverty.

Publication continued apace while he was at IDS, his personal bibliography well exceeding four hundred items by 2002. Nevertheless, he always found time for the many students and overseas visitors who sought him out for discussion and guidance. His generosity in this respect was legendary, with the result that he was more widely renowned abroad than he was at home. His manner was ever humble and self-deprecating. He was blessed with a well developed sense of humour, often exercised at his own expense. Nevertheless, beneath the surface was a quiet firmness of conviction that did not easily yield. It was this combination of approachable gentleness and well-defended arguments that made him such a sought after interlocutor.

Perhaps because of his diffidence, honours were slow to come. He was eventually the recipient of five academic *festschriften*. Once he reached eighty, he received honorary doctorates from the universities of Glasgow, Kent, and Sussex in Britain, and from overseas universities in Argentina, Austria and Portugal. Cambridge, however, stood aloof, despite initiatives from below the level of the professoriate. In 1994, he was knighted by the Queen ‘for services to economic issues’.

Although he never produced a single large systematic work, Hans Singer was a source of insight and inspiration to all who knew him. The breadth of his vision, the sharpness of his intuition and the craftsmanship of his arguments were all outstanding. Fortunately, like Austin Robinson, he was spared the intellectual decline that usually comes with great age. Again like Austin, he attained his 95th birthday before he passed peacefully away. Ilse Singer died in 2001. Sir Hans is survived by one (of two) sons.

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