

Obituary

Kenneth Boulding (1910 – 1993)

Once again, as so many times before, the Nobel Prize in Economics or Peace has not been awarded to the most qualified and deserving of living candidates: the greatest of economists and humanitarians of our era, Kenneth Boulding, died on March 18, 1993, in Boulder, Colorado.

He is survived by his wife, Dr. Elise M. Boulding, a sociologist, and his five children and sixteen grandchildren.

While assorted “Nobels” continue to be given out to social engineers and technicians exercising their college calculus on experiments with humans and human conditions, Professor Boulding left over 800 passionate articles (plus three dozen books) dealing with general, human, biological and economic systems, philosophy, religion, war and peace . . .

Boulding’s intellectual and moral insights were too unsettling and so uncomfortable to neoclassical economists and monetarists, that his challenges went often unanswered by the profession and only a few of the now dried-up “main-stream” economists openly declared their understanding of his work – because Boulding was both correct and right – more than often.

His pacifism did cost him his wartime post as an economist at the (peace-oriented?) League of Nations. In spite of such open ostracism, he published his “Economics of Peace” in 1945 (still in print today) and devoted his life to promoting peace, helping to establish the Peace Academy, United Nations University and other kindred institutions.

Many of my generation have become accustomed to the stammering wit of the great man, his white mane, penetrating stare and sheer brilliance of intellect so effortlessly humanizing and adorning

many of our otherwise dull meetings and conferences. I for one have thought that “Boulding” would simply go on forever, that he was an integral part not only of economics, but of life itself. I can still see him, a white-haired patriarch, taking a just-before-dawn swim in the ocean of San Juan – the only one of all conference participants, all younger and fitter than him. A lone Moses-like figure, wading into the sea, showing the way to the meek who just would not follow . . . and so inherited the Earth.

Kenneth Boulding was born in Liverpool, England, in 1910, into a family of deeply religious Methodists. He himself became a Quaker as a young man. Son of a plumber, he won a chemistry scholarship for Oxford, but soon switched to economics. In 1931, the *Economic Journal*, then edited by John Maynard Keynes, published Boulding’s first paper on economics. After short teaching fellowships at Harvard University, the University of Chicago and the University of Edinburgh, Scotland, Professor Boulding came to the United States for good. After teaching at a number of colleges, including the University of Michigan, he settled at the University of Colorado in Boulder in 1977.

Boulding’s first book was the elegant and simple “Economic Analysis”, achieving four editions between 1941 and 1968. In 1949 he also won the John Bates Clark Medal of the American Economic Association, a prize given every two years to the economist under age 40 judged to have made a significant contribution to economic thought. Boulding was among “the best and the brightest” of his generation of economists. Among the large number of high-level positions held, Boulding became president of the American Economic Association in 1968 and in 1970 president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), Society for General Systems Research (SGSR), atp.

He was awarded dozens of honorary degrees.

Boulding was also a poet. His rhymed verses adorned scientific proceedings, his recitals enlivened conferences and he also published three volumes of poetry (e.g., “Beasts, Ballads and Bouldingisms”). He was also a sculptor, water-color painter and singer: he could sing entire Gilbert and Sullivan musicals from memory and recite nearly all of Wordsworth.

Professor Boulding died without seeing the final product of his latest book project (edited with Elias L. Khalil) on *Social and Natural Complexity*, still under review. This volume was conceived at the 1990 Washington Meeting of the Society for the Advancement of Socio-Economics (SASE). Among the contributors are Karl H. Pribram, Niles Eldredge, Vilmos Csanyi, Henri Laborit, Hermann Haken, Howard H. Pattee and Peter M. Allen, to name just a few.

Personally, I consider myself very privileged – and humbled – to have known Ken Boulding personally and to have had the opportunity of spending these quiet talks and walks with him, basking in the warmth of intellectual discourse, which emanated from his entire personality in an unparalleled and, for me, in a previously unexperienced depth. Whether at conferences in San Juan, Montpellier, Denver, Boulder, Washington or New York, somehow I always managed to have this precious private time with Ken.

I considered myself unlucky and often felt significantly underprivileged in my academic studies and career for not being associated with any great teacher-mentor or master scientist who would provide me with example, advice, guidance and professional introduction; I have therefore been a *ronin*, masterless man. So, I took naturally to Boulding, through contacts and correspondence, to compensate for what I perceived as academic deprivation, lack of intellectual stimulation, challenge and relevance.

Boulding, without ever knowing it, influenced the topic of my dissertation and thus of my subsequent academic career: Multiple Criteria Decision Making. How? Through one of his typical poems, of course.

As a young Ph.D. student of business economics at the University of Rochester (1967), I read

through a book of proceedings entitled *Views on General Systems Theory*, edited by M.D. Mesarovic in 1964. There it was, on page 61, the devastating indictment of economics, operations research and mathematical programming, pure Boulding:

Programming sticks upon the shoals
Of incommensurate multiple goals,
And where the tops are no one knows
When all our peaks become plateaus
The top is anything we think
When measuring makes the mountain shrink.

The upshot is, we cannot tailor
Policy by a single scalar,
Unless we know the priceless price
of Honor, Justice, Pride, and Vice.
This means a crisis is arising
For simple-minded maximizing.

K.B.

God only knows how I feared – a year before receiving my Ph.D. in Operations Research – of becoming a part of (or even a witness to) this Boulding’s “simple-minded maximizing”! So, the field of MCDM was born a few years later. Thank you, Ken.

In 1979, Boulding agreed to write a Foreword to the volume *Autopoiesis, Dissipative Structures, and Spontaneous Social Orders* (Westview Press, Boulder, 1980). There he wrote:

“The idea of autopoiesis is truly an idea whose time has come, and it is not surprising that it has generated a considerable intellectual excitement in a number of fields.

The basic idea can be summed up in terms of process by saying that chaos is unstable. This is a somewhat shocking idea for a generation raised on the concept of entropy.

The history of the concept of autopoiesis remains to be written. One can certainly argue that Adam Smith had the basic idea in the ‘invisible hand,’ but this lay dormant for 200 years. Whether it pops up in the interval, perhaps, for instance, in the mathematical studies of chaos in the 1940s, is another question I will not venture to answer. It is certain that the idea has popped up now, and is likely to have a considerable im-

pact on a good many disciplines, from thermodynamics to sociology.”

In 1981, Boulding wrote yet another Foreword, this time to my *Autopoiesis: A Theory of Living Organization* (North-Holland, 1981). His interest in autopoiesis was now quite apparent:

“There is something about this whole enterprise of autopoiesis that is slightly reminiscent of the voyage of Columbus. Its pioneers, F.J. Varela, H.R. Maturana, and M. Zeleny, like Columbus’ three boats, probably thought they were heading for the Indies, that mysterious, still largely unknown, though spicy realm of human knowledge that studies the overwhelmingly mysterious and complex phenomenon of life. What they may well have sighted is a whole new continent, which no Amerigo has yet named, but the hazy outlines of which are now visible to the early explorers. This is nothing less than the study of the whole developmental process of the universe, that is, the general theory of evolution.”

Boulding was a more thoughtful and more insightful student of free markets, in the best tradition of Smith, Menger, von Mises and von Hayek, than all latterdays “Friedmans” taken together. From the same Foreword:

“Evolution, however, is clearly primarily autopoietic. A chicken may be a centrally planned economy, at least in some degree originating from its egg of the plan. An ecosystem, however, is free private enterprise beyond the wildest dreams of Milton Friedman. It is not a ‘community,’ whatever the biologists say. It has no mayor; it has no perceptible plan. It emerges by the invisible hand of ecological interaction.”

These are just small examples of Boulding’s writ-

ing style, undoubtedly heavily biased towards my own (most favored) passages.

Although Boulding was an unsurpassed gentleman of wit, character and style, his rare expressions of disapproval or wrath could be formidable. I recall the entire audience at a conference in San Juan (in the early days of Gorbachev’s “perestroika”) falling silent, speechless and genuinely embarrassed, when Ken alone took up an overzealous young Russian “reformist” and offered him a most passionate lecture on the morality of free markets, democracy and human respect for individual human beings. The following spontaneous standing ovation was one of the earliest demonstrations against the dehumanized, experimental nature of Gorbachev’s “perestroika”. Only a few of us realized then that the worst was still to come for Russia and that even Gorbachev himself was going to be surpassed in his blatant disregard for human beings by the so-called “shock-therapists” of the “new world order”.

Ken also wrote a remarkable set of rhymed poetry for the UNU international conference in Montpellier, France, but it did not find its way into the proceedings, *The Science and Praxis of Complexity* (United Nations University, Tokyo, 1985): too undignified and unusual “americanism” for normal European or international consumption, I presume, I for one have studied Boulding’s rhymes and often found them deeper and more enlightening than the stale and correct scholarly discourses.

Omnia sponte fluant, spoke Comenius, Boulding Understood.

Milan ZELENY
 Graduate School of Business
 Fordham University at Lincoln Center
 New York, NY 10023
 U.S.A.