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Gerard Debreu [Ideological Profiles of the Economics Laureates]

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Abstract

Gerard Debreu is among the 71 individuals who were awarded the Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel between 1969 and 2012. This ideological profile is part of the project called “The Ideological Migration of the Economics Laureates,” which fills [the September 2013 issue of *Econ Journal Watch*](#).

Keywords

Classical liberalism, economists, Nobel Prize in economics, ideology, ideological migration, intellectual biography.

JEL classification

A11, A13, B2, B3

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http://econjwatch.org/file_download/720/DebreuIPEL.pdf

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Gerard Debreu

by Daniel B. Klein and Ryan Daza

Gerard Debreu (1921–2004) was born in Calais. He attended the *collège* there, where he was introduced to the “austere beauty of mathematics” (Debreu 1991, 3). During World War II, he continued his curriculum at Ambert and Grenoble in the Free Zone under the Vichy government, then left for Paris to enter the École Normale Supérieure in 1941. Outside of his schooling, Debreu did forced labor for the occupying German troops rebuilding streets and bridges (Düppe 2012, 418).

At the École, Debreu came under the influence of Henri Cartan, a founding member of the Bourbaki collective of mathematicians. Till Düppe describes the collective and Debreu's connection to it: “The most striking feature that Debreu must have experienced as liberating was the anonymity of mathematics that

'Bourbaki' as a collective represented. Rather than each single member speaking out in his own name, they aimed at letting *mathematics speak for itself*." (Düppe 2012, 419).

Bourbaki's purpose was "to mathematize mathematics and thus liberate it from pragmatic context in science" (Düppe 2012, 421). Düppe concludes that "the problem of Debreu's Bourbakism was thus not a particular philosophical belief about the role of mathematics in economics, nor any specific belief about economic reality. Debreu never learned to enjoy discursive, explicative, let alone contestable intellectual activities" (ibid.).

Debreu's education was interrupted by a stint in the French army following D-Day. After the war, Debreu took work as a researcher under Maurice Allais, then left to study in the United States. In 1950, he took a job in Chicago at the Cowles Commission for Research in Economics. From 1955 onward, he was professor at various universities, spending most of his time at Yale University and University of California at Berkeley. Debreu became a U.S. citizen in 1975, doing so in part because he was impressed that the American political system could have removed Richard Nixon from office for his crimes (Arrow 2011).

Well known for his collaboration with Kenneth Arrow (1954) to produce a general equilibrium proof, Debreu focused on the mathematics, not ideology, of economics. Düppe (2012, 416) writes that Debreu "was silent about the use of general equilibrium theory for either social engineering or libertarian justification." Debreu claimed never to have been a member of a political party (Düppe 2012, 443). Nobel chairman Assar Lindbeck said, "You would not get much of an economic policy discussion out of him" (Atlas 2005). Düppe adds that when writing his Nobel lecture, Debreu intended "to remain as internal as possible, that is, to avoid any controversial interpretations" (Düppe 2012, 441). As a new laureate, Debreu refused to comment on the Reagan Administration's economic policies and cared little for the press saying that he helped to mathematize Adam Smith's invisible hand (Düppe 2012, 439-440).

Among Debreu's few political forays were belonging to the National Academy of Sciences' Committee on Human Rights and studying academic freedom in Pinochet-era Chile (Arrow 2011, 325). Debreu tried to keep his support of human rights from other entanglements. Debreu once declined an invitation by Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, and then wrote in his personal notes: "I told [Perez's secretary] that according to the information she sent me, and that I received on Feb. 12, Human Rights were, contrary to my initial understanding, only one of several issues to be discussed by Perez. The other issues are complex economic questions with high political coloring. I told her I would *not* sponsor any of the events connected with Perez's visit" (quoted in Düppe 2012, 443 n. 18, emphasis in original).

In 1994, Debreu sent letters to Jacques Chirac to argue for government control over nuclear plants, but this action may have been related to personal connections between Debreu and the state utility Électricité de France (Düppe 2012, 424 n. 3).

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Peter A. Diamond

by Daniel B. Klein and Ryan Daza

New York City-born Peter Diamond (1940–) graduated *summa cum laude* from Yale University with a major in mathematics. While at Yale, he took several economics courses, including one taught by Gerard Debreu. After his undergraduate education, during the summer of 1960, Diamond worked under Tjalling Koopmans at the Cowles Commission (Diamond 2011a). Diamond decided to pursue his graduate degree, studying both math and economics at MIT before switching completely to economics (Diamond 2007, 546).

After earning his Ph.D. in economics, Diamond taught at the University of California at Berkeley for several years before returning to MIT, where he has been ever since (Diamond 2011a). In 2010, he shared the Nobel Prize in Economics with Dale Mortensen and Christopher Pissarides for their analysis of markets with search frictions. In addition to unemployment, Diamond has worked on incomplete markets, social insurance, and intergenerational inefficiencies (Barr 2011).

Diamond grew up in an apolitical family, and he did not become interested in politics until his undergraduate years, when, as stated in his kind reply to our