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Robert Heilbroner, Writer and Economist, Dies at 85

By **HOLCOMB B. NOBLE**

Robert L. Heilbroner, an economist and writer of lively and provocative books that inspired generations of students with the drama of how the world earns, or fails to earn, its living - books that made him one of his profession's all-time best-selling authors - died on Jan. 4 in Manhattan. He was 85.

His death, at New York Presbyterian Hospital, was announced Monday by the New School University, where he was professor emeritus on the graduate faculty of political and social science. The cause was a brain stem stroke after a three-year bout with Lewy body disease, a brain disease similar to Alzheimer's, his son David said.

Dr. Heilbroner's first book, "The Worldly Philosophers: The Lives, Times and Ideas of the Great Economic Thinkers," written before he received his doctorate, is one of the most widely read economics books of all time. He was also a prominent lecturer as well as the author of 19 other books, which sold more than 10 million copies and, in many cases, became standard college textbooks.

A witty writer, he called himself a "radical conservative," an oxymoron suggesting that, like Don Quixote, he wanted to rush rapidly forward, break the mold - and end up right where he was. But in that he was only half joking. He did indeed want to conserve the basic separation of the national economy from the national government, as suggested by Adam Smith in the 18th century. But he believed, too, that when the economy was hit with severe recessions or high unemployment or yawning income gaps, for example, government had to intervene with public spending that stimulated economic activity and generated jobs and the construction of public works that contributed to higher living standards.

Although popular with students and the general reader, he was regarded by mainstream economists as a popularizer and historian whose insights made no great contribution to the study of the field. He, in turn, saw their reliance on mathematics and computer modeling as narrow in vision and as losing sight of the very purpose of economics - to help improve the well-being of people at work and of the society they work in.

"The worldly philosophers," Dr. Heilbroner said in a 1999 interview, "thought their task was to model all the complexities of an economic system - the political, the sociological, the psychological, the moral, the historical. And modern economists, au contraire, do not want so complex a vision. They favor two-dimensional models that in trying to be scientific leave out too much and leave modern economists without a true understanding of how the system works."

Dr. Heilbroner himself was the first to admit that he was not an economists' economist. He preferred writing to plotting the sale of widgets and calculating the effects of a heat wave on corn futures. And he was interested more in the history of economics and in what he considered its true dynamics than in working within the field itself. He liked to say that his chief accomplishment was in conning millions of students into thinking that the field was both interesting and in tune with their social ideas.

"The Worldly Philosophers," published in 1953 (Simon & Schuster) and still in print, is widely regarded as one of the best texts for infusing clarity and excitement into the history of economic thought.

John Kenneth Galbraith, the Harvard economist who, like Dr. Heilbroner, was often shunned as an outsider by mainstream economists, called the book a "brilliant achievement handled nearly to perfection." It went into its 10th edition in 1998 - 35 years after it was first published while Mr. Heilbroner was pursuing a doctorate at the New School for Social Research in Manhattan.

Mainstream economists, while critical of the way Professors Heilbroner and Galbraith practiced economics, nevertheless acknowledged the importance of several of their observations. Milton Friedman, the godfather of American conservative economists, who shared both assessments, said Professor Heilbroner was right on point, for example, with his attack in "The Crisis of Vision in Modern Economic Thought" (Cambridge University Press, 1996; written with William Milberg). By the end of the 20th century, the authors argued, economists had lost their concern for the social or political implications of their work, seeing themselves solely as sophisticated mathematical or statistical analysts.

"He was correct," Mr. Friedman said. "There was an increasing tendency to move economics in highly specialized directions without any real view of its broader aspects."

Robert Lewis Heilbroner was born on the Upper West Side of Manhattan on March 24, 1919, the third child and only son of Louis and Helen Heiler Heilbroner. His father was raised in a poor family in North Carolina but later prospered with a chain of men's clothing stores he founded in New York. He died when Robert was 5. The family business was sold, and he and his sisters were sent to private schools.

The family chauffeur served as a surrogate father for 10 years, Dr. Heilbroner later said, playing a major role in shaping his thinking. As a student at Harvard, Dr. Heilbroner planned to major in writing but took a course in economics and, he said, "I took to it like a duck to water." After Harvard, he went to work in New York at the retail chain founded by his father and found that he hated the job. It took him 23 years after leaving Harvard to earn his doctorate in economics, however.

Moving to Washington at the start of World War II, he worked with the Federal Office of Price Administration until he was drafted, assigned to Army intelligence and sent to the University of Michigan to learn Japanese. Over the course of the war, he interviewed some 2,000 enemy prisoners in the Pacific, gaining valuable information from voluble captives. The war taught him that he had a facility with language and words, and, after a brief term with a Wall Street commodities firm, he began writing freelance magazine articles on economics. He sold several to Harpers magazine, and caught the attention of editors at Simon & Schuster, who suggested that he write a book. He took their advice, quit business forever and from then on rarely stopped writing.

In 1952, he married Joan Knapp, an author of children's books, and they had two children, Peter and David. His sons survive him, as does Ms. Knapp, from whom he was divorced in 1975, the year he married Shirley Eleanor Davis, who also survives him.

Mr. Heilbroner completed his doctoral course requirements by 1952 and finished "The Worldly Philosophers" the next year. The book was an account that laymen could easily read about the lives and theories of the economic superstars of the past, among them Adam Smith, Robert Malthus, David Ricardo, John Stuart Mill, Karl Marx, Alfred Marshall, Thorstein Veblen, John Maynard Keynes and Joseph Schumpeter. It was an immediate hit, and eventually sold millions of copies.

But his Ph.D. took him 10 more years. He started and abandoned three dissertations. After "The Worldly Philosophers" was published his faculty advisers scolded him, saying the book would have filled the bill beautifully. So he submitted his next manuscript, "The Making of Economic Society," and was promptly awarded his doctorate. Later books included "The Limits of American Capitalism" (1966); "Between Capitalism and Socialism" (1970); "Marxism: For and Against" (1980), with Lester Thurow; "The Nature and

Logic of Capitalism" (1985); and "Behind the Veil of Economics (1988).

In "21st Century Capitalism," (W. W. Norton & Co., 1993), Dr. Heilbroner explained his radical conservatism with a bow to Adam Smith. Dr. Heilbroner agreed with Smith that the separation of the economy and the state was central to capitalism and a nation's economic health, and essential for political liberty. But he believed that from time to time the people's government had to wade in with major repairs.

He said in an interview in 1998 that "feelings of dismay" penetrate the contemporary mind over unstable or depressed world economies and the widening income gap. He also noted capitalism's shortcomings in dealing with "externalities" - for example, "the higher laundry bills and health costs of people living in Pittsburgh before the pollution of the steel mills was brought under control." "Negative externalities," particularly the pollution of land, water and air by private enterprises intent on holding down costs cried out for government intervention, he said, whether in the form of taxes, subsidies, legislation or regulation.

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