


Barbara Bergmann (20 July 1927–5 April 2015)

The Economic and
Labour Relations Review
2015, Vol. 26(3) 493–495
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1035304615595605
elrr.sagepub.com



In Steve Pressman's book *Fifty Major Economists*, there are biographies of 48 men; the two exceptions being Joan Robinson and Barbara Bergmann. It says much about the academic economics profession that neither was awarded a Nobel Prize. Barbara's contemptuous attitude to the Nobel Prize was the subject of her article 'Abolish the Nobel Prize for economics' (Bergmann, 1999). She begins provocatively: '... having a Nobel Prize for economics is making the economics profession look ridiculous'. She goes on to explain why. Both Joan and Barbara were iconoclastic and neither resiled from making trenchant and sometimes sarcastic criticisms of leading members of the mainstream academic establishment. Barbara favoured direct investigation of economic phenomena as an alternative to statistical inference and expressed her contempt for the perpetrators of new classical economics:

Lucas and Rapping did not, of course, proceed to investigate the factual issues they had raised in the direct way I had suggested would be appropriate. Instead, they proceeded in what I think deserves to be characterized as an insanely indirect way. They got some macro-economic times series data ..., threw the data into a computer and ran some regressions ..., (then) reported that the printout gave only modest support to their ideas, but was not inconsistent with them (the entrails of the next chicken they ate were probably also not inconsistent with the Lucas–Rapping ideas, but they refrained from reporting that). (Bergmann, 1989: 35–37)

Barbara was born in the Bronx in 1927; the granddaughter of Eastern European immigrants. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) rejected her application to study engineering, so instead she went to Cornell to study mathematics. Subsequently, she worked for the New York Office of the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, where she got to appreciate the importance of collecting and using data rather than abstract model-building. Her attempt to have the only black employee in this office promoted was unsuccessful. In 1953, she entered Harvard's Graduate School and earned an MA and PhD in economics. During her Harvard years, Barbara worked as a Teaching Assistant for Wassily Leontief and Franco Modigliani.

After graduating from Harvard, Barbara was first a senior staff economist for the Council of Economic Advisors, and later, at the Brookings Institution. In 1965, she joined the Department of Economics at the University of Maryland and stayed there until 1988, when she became Distinguished Professor of Economics at American University.

Barbara made major contributions to the economics of race and gender, including a rigorous advocacy of affirmative action as an indispensable solution to the racial and sexual discrimination which persists in society. The dust jacket of her book *In Defense of Affirmative Action* includes the following quotation from John Kenneth Galbraith:

Barbara Bergmann as much as anyone I know combines good compassionate sense with first-rate professional competence and a wonderful capacity for getting and organizing the relevant information. This is evident in this excellent book.

Inter alia in this book, Barbara, with typically robust vigour, attacks Glen Loury's assertion that affirmative action discourages the acquisition of skills by the targets of this policy. Having demolished his argument, she observes,

Perhaps the reader is beginning to wonder about the appropriateness of Loury's appointment to the Economics Department at Harvard. But the reader should be informed that silly theories are no disqualification there, as long as they are expressed mathematically. (Bergmann, 1996: 143)

In a footnote, she evidences three such 'silly' theories.

Barbara published in *Econometrica* in 1973; *Journal of Political Economy* in 1979; *American Economic Review* in 1969, 1973, 1981 and 1994; *Journal of Human Resources* in 1971 and 1993; *Feminist Economics* in 1995, 1997 and 2000; *Journal of Economic Perspectives* in 1989 and 1990 and *Journal of Economic Behaviour and Organization* in 1988 and 1990. Probably, her most famous and influential publication was the book she first published in 1986 and reprinted in 2005, *The Economic Emergence of Women*, which has been cited over 1000 times (Bergmann, 2005).

Predictably she had no sympathy for Gary Becker's theory that economic Darwinism would eliminate racial and sexual discrimination:

Most economists are not capable of seeing that wage setting and other employment practices were and are affected by societal systems of status differentials, whether in the harsh regime of the pre-civil rights South, or in the subtler regimes of race and sex favouritism that are still in force everywhere today. (Bergmann, n.d.)

Confirmation that despite Gary Becker, racial and sexual discrimination in employment is persistent and pervasive is to be found in the results of the direct investigation method which Barbara favoured (Riach and Rich, 2002). In her article 'Why do most economists know so little about the economy?' Barbara argued that '... the subject matter of economics is a lot closer to anthropology than to mathematics' (Bergmann, 1989: 33). She recommended that economists should adopt the anthropologists' technique of participant observation. Once in 1988, when I was explaining my current research to a Fellow in a Cambridge Senior Common Room, she replied that I sounded more like a sociologist than an economist. This would have confirmed the disdain which some of my Monash colleagues had for me, but it would have impressed Barbara.

Barbara Bergmann was a founder member of the International Association for Feminist Economics and served as its President. She also served as President of the American Association of University Professors and the Society for the Advancement of Socio-Economics.

Her beloved husband of more than 40 years, Fred, died in 2011. She is survived by her two children, David and Sarah, and three grandchildren.

Australian economists will be interested to note that her work in computer simulation was initiated by Guy Orcutt, who was Don Cochrane's collaborator on the Cochrane–Orcutt estimator.

Reminiscences of Barbara Bergmann

In 1987, Judy Rich and I published the results of our field experiment of sexual discrimination in the Melbourne labour market. Because of Barbara's eminence in the study of sexual discrimination in the labour market, we sent her a copy. At that stage, we were unaware of her campaign for direct investigation of markets, so we were delighted to receive the following reply:

Thanks a lot for sending me the article that you and Judy Rich wrote on testing discrimination. I think it is a contribution to knowledge to a degree rare in economic research ... (W)e should do a great deal more of this kind of work than we do, and maybe yours will inspire some.

In view of the obstacles we had faced from the Monash hierarchy in conducting this research, Barbara's accolade was particularly welcome. In the past 20 years, the field experiment literature has flourished, as demonstrated by Harrison and List (2004).

In 1994, Judy Rich and I were invited to present our experimental research on sexual discrimination to the conference of the Eastern Economic Association in Boston. Afterwards, we travelled to Washington to meet Barbara for the first time and spent a delightful evening with her and Fred, who introduced us to his collection of 'Dean jokes'. We met Barbara from time to time at Feminist Economics conferences, and in 1996, I successfully nominated her for an Honorary Doctorate at De Montfort University. I am sure she would have been delighted to know that in 1998, she was joined in the select group of 'Riach-nominated Honorary Doctorates' by Barbara Castle, who had been the Cabinet Minister responsible for the introduction of 'equal pay for equal work' in the United Kingdom.

It has been one of the great privileges of my academic life to have had both Joan Robinson and Barbara Bergmann as friends, mentors and referees.

PA Riach

IZA, Bonn. Email: Peterriach@aol.com

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