

In Memoriam

David S. Landes (1924-2013)

By

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David Landes was a great narrative economic historian. Although fully aware of the New Economic History and a lively participant in many of its debates, he is known primarily as the author of masterful narratives written throughout the latter half of the twentieth century.

Many of Landes' books can be grouped into three topic areas that express the focus of his many detailed stories and descriptions. The first topic is the growth of technology, given a primary place in economic history by the importance of the Industrial Revolution and in economics by the pioneering work of Robert Solow. The second, related topic is the role of entrepreneurs in economic history. Technology does not arise solely from broad economic forces; it is created and nourished by adventurous and ambitious men we call entrepreneurs. And the third topic follows Landes' interest in people into the role of culture in economic affairs, for entrepreneurs operate in societies, not in isolation. I describe two books in each area here to summarize the enduring contributions of David Landes.

The lead book in the first area is *The Unbound Prometheus*, a detailed account of the technology developed in Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This book describes how the world economy was freed from the Malthusian constraint of static resources. Cipolla (1962) identified this transition as one of the two major events of economic history, and Galor (2011) made it the center of his unified growth theory. Landes supplied the evidence

behind these broad generalizations in a riveting narrative of discoveries. He added a detailed case study to this general narrative in *Revolution in Time*, the history of innovation in the clock and watch industries. Time, ever elastic in Malthusian times, has become uniform in modern life, and the accurate measurement of time changed our perceptions as much as the new goods produced by other technologies.

Individuals appear prominently in these books, but they are overshadowed by the innovations they made. Landes turned his focus to the people in *Dynasties*, which placed entrepreneurs in families to see how long families could support the businesses started by these exceptional men. (They were exclusively men in the time frame of Landes' work.) He found it was quite unusual for business acumen to be transmitted within families. He generalized these observations in a book edited by him, Joel Mokyr and William Baumol on the role of entrepreneurs in history that described comparable innovators in many times and places.

This concern with individuals and families leads naturally into the analysis of societies and cultures. But while we can see this progression in Landes' work in retrospect, it is clear he had this underlying concern all along. His first book, *Bankers and Pashas*, was about the conflict of cultures between industrialized Europe and less "developed" Egypt in the late nineteenth century. This interest continued while Landes explored the other topics described here and came into the foreground again in his magisterial summary of technological, national and cultural change in *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations* (1998).

This marvelous book contains many insights, but one stands out starkly in the world today. Landes argued that no society that excluded women from economic activity could prosper. These societies were ignoring half of their human capital, fighting as it were with one

hand tied behind them. Even more important in Landes' account was the attitude in the dominant men engendered by gender discrimination. Men feel powerful in their domination of women, and they are interested in preserving the status quo and reveling in their superiority. They consequently are less likely to become entrepreneurs who change economies and societies. Landes described this syndrome in the Middle East, and it may extend also to several states in the United States where women's rights are being sharply restricted, placing women in a subservient class with African Americans.

The books by David Landes describe here are delightful and informative at the same time. They will remain relevant to current concerns as long as technological and cultural changes are in the forefront of our minds and work.

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