

Searching for Schumpeter: biography in economics

1. Introduction

Schumpeter! Ah, the very name conjures up an image of romantic hero who is inextricably linked to the entrepreneur of his theory of economic development. Until recently, only a few biographical sketches of Schumpeter were available and these accounts tended to perpetuate the one-dimensional romantic myth.¹ But in the past decade, four biographies of Schumpeter have appeared which draw extensively upon the Harvard archives as well as newly published material.² The overriding image that emerges is of a scholarly and encyclopedic intellect but a complex and paradoxical individual who viewed his achievements as failure.

The purpose of this paper is to use the biographies of Schumpeter as a foil to explore fundamental questions about the nature of biography of economists. The unprecedented cluster of biographies also provide a Schumpeterian twist in view of his stated aversion to his own biography despite having written biographical essays on the most famous economists.³ At the same time, the biographies offer a unique opportunity to address some fundamental and unresolved questions concerning the role of biography in economics.

An immediate question stems directly from the above phenomenon. What is the reason for the relative scarcity of biographies of economists, as observed, for example, by Rostow in his forward to Allen's biography of Schumpeter? With the exceptions of Hume, J.S. Mill and Marx ... all major contributors in areas transcending economics ... and recent biographies of Keynes (Skidelesky, 1992), Marshall (Groenewegan, 1997) and, as already noted, Schumpeter, very little has been written by way of comprehensive biographies of economists.⁴ Rostow speculates that the explanation lies as much in the uneventful lives led by many economists as in the complex nature of the biographical task. In regard to the latter, Jaffé has argued that the requisite skills of historian are seldom found amongst economists. Another hypothesis which embraces both sets of factors is the one developed in this paper,

¹ The early works are the collection of essays edited by Harris (1951) and a short biography by Schneider (1975, English edition). Brief biographical sketches are given in Spiethoff (1949), Goodwin (1983) and Tsuru (1983).

² The four publications are Marz (1991, English edition; 1983, German); Swedberg (1991), Allen (1991) and Stolper (1994). In addition, a recent reassessment of Schumpeter's work by Shionoya (1997) contains some brief biographical material.

³ See Schumpeter (). In a diary entry dated , Schumpeter states

⁴ Apart from Schumpeter, Keynes also wrote biographical essays of major economists (Keynes). Jaffé (1965) comments on the curiosity of the relative fewness of biographies of economists but also notes the concentration of some notable economists engaged in such biographies and cites Jevons (on Cantillon) Walras (on Gossen), Harrod (on Keynes), Sraffa (on Ricardo) and Hayek (on J.S. Mill). See also Moggridge (1989).

namely that the root cause is to be found in the ambiguous place of biography in economics.

A second and fundamental question follows from the first; what **is** the place of biography in economics and its relationship to literature and the history of economic thought? The role of biography in both disciplines has long been a contentious issue. In regard to literature, despite the popularity and wide readership of biography, critics have generally ranked this genre, defined simply as “the story of a person’s life written by someone other than self” (Oxford dictionary), well below prose and poetry. The reason appears to stem primarily from the nature and use (or misuse) of the source material. Unlike prose and poetry in which the sources for the story derive from the imagination, biographical sources come from a selection of “facts”. It is the misuse of this selection process that has led some critics to dismiss biography as mere gossip. However, other writers, notably Virginia Woolf have argued that it is through this selection process the choosing of “truths” which transmit personality which may elevate a biographer from mere chronicle to consummate craftsman.⁵

Within economics, biography has fared little better, being usually considered a branch of history of economic thought and described aptly by Kriesler (1994) as “a poor relation of a poor relation”. Debate on its role has focussed upon the issue of whether a linkage exists between a life and work and, particularly whether knowledge of a life helps in contemporary understanding of an economist’s work. The two opposing positions on this issue are represented by Jaffé and Stigler. Jaffé argues that great economic theories (citing Walras’ general equilibrium model) “must be understood as a work of art, and that, like all works of art, ... marked with the personality of its creator” (Jaffé, 1965, p.9). Stigler, in contrast, denies a place for biography in economics, relegating its place to the sociology of science arguing that “when we are told that we must study a man’s life to understand what he really meant, we are being invited to abandon science” (Stigler, 1982, p.).

Between these two extreme positions, others (see Waller, Kriesler, 1994 Moggeridge,) have adopted an intermediate stance, suggesting that biography in economics may serve several functions; including the “humanising” of the subject and the exploration of the circumstances, both objective and subjective that lie behind the work, with the second function considered to be the most significant. However, no attempt has been made to distinguish the unique features of biography of economists beyond recognition of its place within the history of economic thought and possible linkages with literature and history through acquisition and interpretation of observable facts.

A third question, then, is in what ways, if any, does biography of economists differ from biography in general? In regard to literature, the main area of overlap lies in demonstrating universal through the individual (or a broadening of the “humanising” function). The overlap with history of economic thought lies primarily in identifying the origins of ideas or vision and their influence in interpreting the work (in expansion

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of the second function). But what is the intersecting set between these two disciplines that might distinguish a biographical work of an economist?

One clue to finding the answer to this question may be found in recent research led by McCloskey (1986) and others (see, for example, Henderson and others, 1993) which interprets economic writing as a branch of literature. The main message of this research is that knowledge claims and language are tightly linked. In particular, the language of rhetoric plays a key role in communicating economic ideas, to persuade and convince contemporary readers. However, full implications of these studies for writing the biography of economists have not been explored fully. Nor has the role of mathematics as the language of economists been considered as an integral component of rhetoric.

The remainder of the paper develops more fully these questions using illustrative examples drawn from Schumpeter's biographies. Section II examines the literature and economics biography nexus with a focus on the central role of the process of selecting facts and its uses and misuses. Section III discusses the role of biography in the history of economic thought biography nexus with a focus on identifying the sources and influences acting upon the economist's vision. Section III examines the role of language and rhetoric, both mathematical and non-mathematical with a focus on its significance for the reception of the economist's vision. The final section presents concluding remarks and directions for further research.

II. Literature and selection process

Viewed from the perspective of literature, the central challenge confronting the biographer is to convey the "essence" of the individual while also demonstrating universal themes. This task involves a dissembling process whereby the biographer examines each fragment that makes up an individual's life and then selects certain facts to present a unified picture. By its nature, this selection process will reveal contradictory and sometimes paradoxical elements in the persona (but not necessarily in the works, when viewed in retrospect).⁶

The main sources of material may be categorised into three "voices", the voice of the subject, that is, selected material that transmits the subject's view of self and works; voices of peers and the voice of the biographer. The first category includes diaries, letters, and (in the case of Schumpeter and Keynes) biographies of other writers, parts of which may also be projections of self. The second biographical source includes, in addition to peer diaries and letters, contemporary reviews of works and, especially relevant for Schumpeter, recollections of former students. The last source includes personal recollections as well as a reconstruction of past events. The choice involved in the selection process operates at two levels, the decision to choose how much

⁶ The process is more eloquently described by Virginia Woolf in these words: "The biographer must be prepared to admit contradictory versions of the same face. Biography will benefit because from all this diversity, it will bring out, not a riot of confusion but a richer unity (Woolf,)."

weight to be given to each voice and then, within each voice category, which facts are “to be manipulated, brightened and shaded” (Woolf,).

Each source creates its own trap. Excessive reliance upon the subject’s voice may distort the picture (a possibility that Schumpeter was well aware of, as expressed in response to requests for autobiographical material). The distorted lens of self is also one reason why the recent shift towards autobiographical essays and structured interviews of “conversations” economists (see Klamer, 1984; Szenberg, 1992) falls short of biography. A particularly tricky source is the existence of a diary, usually considered by biographers to be a goldmine. A diary may contain deliberate deception (the most famous recent example being the diaries of Anais Nin), a lack of self-awareness or distant event by reflecting overly melancholy moods. The second and third set of sources also create a trap for the biographer insofar as peer voices and that of the biographer reflect projections of selves rather than the subject.

A repeated refrain from his biographers is Schumpeter’s complexity and apparent paradoxes. Allen sums him up as a “multifaceted man of paradox” (Allen, 1991, p.); Swedberg discovers him to be “a much more complex person than thought”. (Swedberg, 1991, p). The seeming paradoxes in Schumpeter’s life are many; his advocacy of mathematics as the language of economics but exclusion in his own works; his advocacy of capitalism but membership of the Berlin Socialisation Commission set up by the German Socialist government in 1916; his strongly-held view of economics as a science and outside politics but political ambitions and aborted career as Minister of Finance in Austria in 1919; his aristocratic pretensions but owing his position to hard work and, the ultimate paradox, an overwhelming sense of failure after a lifetime of outstanding academic achievement.

Schumpeter’s biographers fall into each trap. A diary dating from mid-1932 (just before Schumpeter left Europe for Harvard) is available in the Harvard archives written a series of notebooks and mixture of often unintelligible German shorthand, German and English.⁷ The approaches taken to the diary reveal much about the overall approach of each biographer to his subject. At one extreme, Stolper chooses not to use the diary on the grounds that its use is mainly gossip. At the other extreme, Allen and Swedberg make frequent use of the diary, usually to embellish the story.⁸ Both positions suffer from problems. Through his attempt to “protect” Schumpeter, Stolper also stifles a vital component of Schumpeter’s voice, namely his sense of failure and despair. Furthermore, relevant pieces of information are excluded that have some bearing upon specific issues discussed by Stolper, including Schumpeter’s alleged anti-semitism and anti-feminism that Stolper attempts to refute. However, at

⁷ According to Allen (p. 289), Schumpeter kept a diary throughout his life and the pre-Harvard parts were destroyed unintentionally, along with other papers. While plausible, there is no evidence of existence of an earlier diary.

⁸ The diary was not available to Schneider nor to Manz (who does, however, include a quote taken from Smithies in Harries ().

the other extreme, the lack of sensitivity shown by Allen and Swedberg in exposing parts of the diary undermine the integrity of their work.

The crucial issue as to whether the diary adds to our understanding of Schumpeter's life and work is raised only by Allen. He argues that, while the diary forms "natural part of his thinking process", it does not reveal a Schumpeter significantly different from his public image.

The charge against Schumpeter by, among others, Dr. Bauer then leader of the Austrian Socialist Party was the Schumpeter undermined deliberately the government's plan to socialise the Alpine-Montan corporation, one of Austria's largest iron producers through authorising the speculative sale of shares in this company to foreigners provide a significant resource for his biographers although missing the discovery by Jaffé in Walras' letters of the development of his ideas. Schumpeter carried out an extensive correspondence with other leading economists (including a brief correspondence with Keynes) and wrote numerous letters of reference for Harvard students, many of whom became the leading economists of their generation. Two letters (the Gulick letters") also throw some light on the controversial exciting Alpine affair while Schumpeter's brief tenure as State Secretary of Finance in Austria.⁹ The letters are a denial by Schumpeter that he authorised and sanctioned the sale of Alpine shares. From the perspective of biographical writing, the issue of interest is not so much Schumpeter's credibility but the selection process involved, namely the decision (by Allen, Marz, Swedberg) to quote the letters and how each biographer interprets past events.

Revelation about self may also come via a more indirect rout, through of Schumpeter's biographical essays of other economists. This source is used by Swedberg (in relation to Schumpeter's description of Pareto) and by Allen (in relation to Boehm-Bawerk) who views Schumpeter's admiring comments on "the harmony between the latter's life and work as lacking (and desired) in the former. However, some interesting opportunities for using this source are missed, especially relating to the Schumpeter and Keynes relationship which is discussed in all the biographies.¹⁰

The sources for peer voices include reviews of Schumpeter's works by contemporaries, letters, diaries and reminiscences, the latter coming mainly from former students. As appropriate, the reviews receive dominant attention. also provides a much needed assessment of Schumpeter's present standing in the light of recent theoretical developments such as endogenous growth theory, evolutionary economics and chaos theory. Relatively little use is made of letters or diaries of Schumpeter's peers with two notable exceptions, the Redlich and Wieser diary entries. Both sources are especially significant because they cast Schumpeter's in a very

⁹ One of the letters to Professor Gulick (dated August 7, 1944) is reprinted in Swedberg (see Swedberg, Appendix III). The Harvard Pusey library archives.

¹⁰ In a later essay, Samuelson observes that the qualities Schumpeter most admired about Marx were probably his (Schumpeter's best features (Samuelson,)

unfavourable light, as an ambitious intriguer in his earlier attempts at a political career in Austria.¹¹ Again what is of significance here is the selection decision (taken by Allen, Stolper) and the interpretation by each in light of Schumpeter's subsequent failed political career. Allen explains this failure as caused primarily by Schumpeter's "inordinate ambition" as well as his unsuccessful attempts to gain cabinet approval for his proposed policies, including the controversial capital levy.¹² Stolper places the dominant share of the blame on political circumstances but does accept that Schumpeter was "partly to blame for his political failure" (a view also shared by Gustav Stolper).

The third voice is that of the biographer, drawing upon personal recollections and reconstruction of events from a variety of sources, including parliamentary debates (Stolper) and FBI files (Allen). The relationship between biographer and subject is rarely neutral, the inherent symbiotic (and frequently idealised) nature of this relationship being noted by Freud in regard to his subject, Leonardo da Vinci.¹³ All of Schumpeter's biographies have had some personal contact, ranging from the close relationships enjoyed by Schneider and Stolper (and the latter, also through his father, Gustav Stolper) to the more distant student/teacher relationships of the others. The likelihood of a positive bias is not in itself necessarily a cause for concern (unless it results in Freud's "cold, strange, ideal figure") since such a bias may provide a humane and emphatic study. In this respect, it is interesting to compare the comments on Schumpeter's teaching which all biographies experienced directly. With the exception of Marz who found his teaching "casual and unsystematic", the assessment is very favourable and, indeed, underpins Allen's theme of "opening doors" to students' intellectual curiosity.¹⁴ However, the treatment of a significant event ... a boycott of Schumpeter's lectures in 1911 by University of Graz students ... is handled very differently by the biographers. Stolper gives this episode only a passing

¹¹ Redlich's entry (June 1916) reads: "His mixture of praise, flattery and bold disclosure of his trust in me represent a peculiar medley" (Allen, p. 154).

¹² The capital levy was proposed to remove the monetary overhang. The controversy concerned how the revenue was to be used; Bauer (leader of the Social Democrats) pressing for subsidisation of State enterprises which was resisted by Schumpeter. This insistence is consistent with Schumpeter's unwillingness to compromise on significant economic issues.

¹³ "... we bear in mind that biographers are fixated on their heroes in a quite special way. In many cases they have chosen their hero as the subject of their studies because - for reasons of their personal emotional life - they have felt a special affection for him from the very first." (Freud, in Gay, 1995, p. 478).

¹⁴ Other sources, including the open letter by Harvard students and later reminiscences all attest to the life-long influence of Schumpeter's. At the same time, their views are consistent with that of Marz; Schumpeter's influence lying not so much in what he said but his approach to economics. Tobin expresses this best in the following exchange with Klamer (1984, p. 98): "Schumpeter was my teacher, friend, and my Ph.D. thesis supervisor. He didn't sympathise with Keynes, but he was very helpful all young students:

Klamer: "What did you learn from him?"

Tobin: "You know, I don't think I learned anything particularly substantive from hi. I just learned a kind of general style of being an economist."

reference, stating that the boycott was caused by Schumpeter's difficult examination requirements. Allen, in contrast, interprets the cause of the boycott as Schumpeter's arrogance but also shows how Schumpeter managed to learn from this crisis ("the most spectacular University event in years") yet retain his integrity in not bowing to student demands to lower his academic standards.

Far more problematic is the creative reconstruction of certain events in Schumpeter's personal life undertaken by Allen and Swedberg. The picture painted, especially of his earlier years at Czenowitz and Bonn is highly entertaining but seems to derive mainly from stories originating with Schumpeter.¹⁵ Here, the charge of gossip is especially relevant for Swedberg who relies much on innuendo (for example, Schumpeter's possible illegitimacy, the reasons for his "falling-out" with Boehm-Bawork, Schumpeter's possible affairs while married to his first wife, the "stunningly, beautiful" Gladys Seaver and numerous other episodes). The temptation to engage in armchair psychology also proves irresistible for Swedberg who speculates on the competing influences on Schumpeter's psyche (the death of his father while aged only four, stepfather, overly ambitious mother) which he suggests might have prevented development of an authentic sense of self. Alas, Hesse's warning against the amateur psychologist as biographer goes unheeded: "the patient is dead, there is no danger of his confronting them so they can go ahead and fantasise at will" (Hesse, p. 173).¹⁶

II. History of economic thought and vision

The preferred lens used by economists for examining the role of biography of economists is history of economic thought (see Jaffé, 1965, Stigler, 1982; Walker, 1983; Moggridge, 1989; Kriesler, 1994). Insofar as a role exists for biography within this sub-discipline, it lies within the two main streams; explaining the evolution of economic ideas ... their genesis and acceptance (or rejection) by contemporaries ... and interpreting their meaning. As in literature, there is no consensus on the role of biography in either function. This section discusses the broad issues of debate and then illustrates various aspects using again Schumpeter's biographies. Particular emphasis is given to the role of vision, both because of its significance and Schumpeter's writings on the scientific process.

Genesis of ideas

A useful starting point is Schumpeter's writings on the scientific process (see Schumpeter, 1976, pp. 41-47). Schumpeter distinguishes between three main stages of scientific work: the first stage (the vision) ... "the preanalytic cognitive act "that supplies the raw material for the analytic effort, the second state ... the

¹⁵ One suspects that Schumpeter would have especially enjoyed reading Allen's description of him in his pre-Harvard youth, never "boring", flamboyant and sparkling.

¹⁶ A comparison of the amateur with Freud's essay on da Vinci reveals all the shortcomings of the former when engaged in such precarious undertakings.

conceptualisation of the theory and the third stage (the analytic work) which is the interaction of the surviving elements of the original vision with rigorous analytical techniques.¹⁷ In discussing Schumpeter's vision was to view capitalism, like Marx, as a dynamic or evolutionary process in which the essential source of change is generated by the entrepreneur who initiates change in productive methods.¹⁸

Schumpeter's biographers devote considerable attention to determining the origins of his vision. Their approach is to rely primarily upon environmental sources and within this class, the respective role of intellectual origins *vis-à-vis* empirical observation. The majority view (and one shared by Samuelson (1981) in a later essay on Schumpeter's extended vision of the decline of capitalism) is to argue for intellectual influences. Consistent with Walker's argument there is little agreement on the precise intellectual origins. Marz presents a dissenting view, arguing for a key influence exerted by Austria's lagging economic development in the late nineteenth century. However, his thesis suffers from several weaknesses, as discussed below.

Schneider states the first claim in the intellectual origins stakes, referring to and citing from an unpublished paper written by Schumpeter in 1905 (the year of the latter's graduation from the Faculty of Law at the University of Vienna). The paper in true "Schumpeterian" fashion is an extensive and exhaustive survey of theoretical work by U.S. economists from the end of the 1880's. Schneider claims to pinpoint the source of Schumpeter's vision to two influences, that of J.B. Clark and W.G. Langworth Taylor. Clark, in particular, acted as a precursor on two counts; his emphasis on the distinction between statics and dynamics and his identification of five key factors initiating economic change, including change in productive methods. The role of Langworth Taylor is to emphasize the role of credit in economic development.

Setting aside the influence of Marx, the hypothesis of a single or dual influence on Schumpeter is not very convincing when considered against the background of his exceptionally wide reading (in six languages; English, French, Italian, German, Greek and Latin) and propensity to¹⁹ cite from obscure sources. Curiously there is not mention of the 1905 work in the other biographies. However, at the other extreme, the

¹⁷ In his essay on Keynes, Schumpeter defines vision in the following words: "every comprehensive 'theory' of an economic state of society consists of two complementary but essentially distinct elements. There is, first, the theorist's view about what is and what is not important in order to understand its life at a given time, let us call this vision" (Schumpeter, 1966, p. 208).

¹⁸ In a letter to Professor Hanoi, dated 1948 (reproduced in), Schumpeter wrote: "Myself, I began at an early age to look upon economic life essentials as a process of change, and I tried to make the main features of this change the centre of my own type of theory. In doing so, I discovered that a number of phenomena such as entrepreneurial profit, interest and credit found ready explanation within existing evolutionary schema".

¹⁹ Schumpeter's treatment of J.B. Clark and Longworth Taylor in his **History** is also instructive. J.B. Clark merits a lengthy discussion and a generally admiring tone. However, Clark is criticized for his failure to distinguish between statics and the stationary state. W.G. Langworth Taylor has only a brief mention (p. 1116) in which his contribution to the theory of credit is noted as not attracting the attention it deserved.

citing of multiple origins which range from representatives of the Austrian school (Somhart, Wieser), the English classicists (J.S. Mill, Marshall) and the obscure Wirth is equally unsatisfactory.²⁰

Marz argues for a major influence stemming from Austria's lag in economic development in the late nineteenth century.²¹ Marz's thesis suffers from two weaknesses, structural and substantive. The structural fault lies in the nature of his biographical work which is made up of a series of loosely connected essays. The more serious weakness is that his thesis admits only a minor role for the entrepreneur in Australia's development. Instead, the main linkage lies in the role of credit and banking, both secondary, albeit significant features of Schumpeter's vision of capitalism.

²⁰ According to Marz, Schumpeter's idea for his entrepreneur derived from a book by Wirth published in Vienna in 1876. Schumpeter's only reference to Wirth in his **History** is to an 1858 publication which he notes was one of the first to provide a descriptive classification of crises but is noted as insignificant.

²¹ Marz also discusses the role of intellectual forces, including the significance of class as discussed in Pareto and elitism as well as the general climate of collapse, imperialism and war at the turn of the nineteenth century.

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