Evert Schoorl (1940–2018)

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On 24 June 2018 the historian of economic thought Evert Schoorl died in his home town, Amsterdam.

To his colleagues, Evert is best known for his lifelong work on Jean-Baptiste Say (1767-1832), the great classical French economist. Say formed the topic of his PhD-dissertation in 1980, which was the reflection of research he had started 10 years earlier (Schoorl, 1980). The dissertation was a blueprint for the research Evert would carry out in the decades to come: it combined careful historical analysis with an investigation of Say’s economics. We all know Say for his infamous ‘law of markets’, but Evert tried to show that the ‘added value’ of Say’s work was so much more. His thesis presented education and population as topics were Say was able to make progress. Moreover he was one of the first to use the Say archive to study the economic thought of Say and to sharpen our understanding of the historical context of his life and work. In 1980 we lacked a proper biography of Say. Evert’s thesis was one of the first attempts to fill this void. The subject would occupy him for the rest of his professional life. After his retirement he found the time to finish the biography: Jean-Batiste Say: Revolutionary, Entrepreneur, Economist (Routledge, 2013).

How different the situation is today. Thanks to the efforts of André Tiran and others the study of Jean-Baptiste Say and his work has greatly advanced, which resulted in, amongst other things, the publication of his collected works. In word and print, Evert contributed to this development (e.g. Schoorl, 1992; 2002; and 2010).

Evert’s biography was well received. Inevitably it rekindled the debate about the law of markets, exactly the type of discussion Evert tried to prevent. But he was very pleased with the assessment of Evelyn Forget in her review for the Journal of the History of Economic Thought (Forget, 2015). Forget correctly underlined that Evert aimed to combine history and economics. The search of the REAL law of markets is a fruitless endeavor. Those who want to understand Say’s contribution to economics need to appreciate that Say lived in a tumultuous period of history. For Evert, Say actively took part in

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three revolutions: the French revolution, the Industrial revolution and the establishment of economics as an academic discipline. The image of Say as a revolutionary in several ways forms the backbone of his biography. As Forget stressed, a work like this cannot just rely on a study of the published works of Say like the *Traité d’économie politique* (1803) and the *Cours complet d’économie politique* (1828). One of the strengths of the work is that Evert relied on the notes, letters and diaries from the Say archive but also on magazine articles and pamphlets to bolster his story. Forget acknowledged the “hard work of an historian of economic thought who tries to understand the historical context within which ideas are developed” and that is exactly what Evert tried to achieve.

Though he may not have belonged to the scientific *avant-garde*, Evert greatly enjoyed his contribution to several international projects led by esteemed colleagues, such as István Hont, Bob Coats, Marco Guidi, Michalis Psalidopoulos, José Luís Cardoso and others. Coats, the godfather of the sociology of economics approach, became a personal friend. Through these projects Evert found his second niche: the history of Dutch economic thought. Hont’s institutionalization project inspired Evert to explore the role of societies in the development of Dutch economic thought (Schoorl, 2001). He also teamed up with Henk Plasmeijer, an economist whom we remember for his studies on the history of marxism in the Netherlands. Evert and Henk formed a duo for many years. For Coats’ internationalization project they reviewed the development of postwar Dutch economic thought (Plasmeijer and Schoorl, 2001). Additionally they explored the role of textbooks in the development of 19th and 20th century Dutch economic thought (Schoorl and Plasmeijer, 2012). One of their key publications, written jointly with E. Buys and I. Maes, is the article “Comparing the Development of Economics during the Twentieth Century in Belgium and the Netherlands”, which was published in HOPE (2005). His last contribution to these international cooperative projects was published in José Luís Cardoso’s & Michalis Psalidoupulos’ book on the impact of the German Historical School in European Economic Thought. For this last work Evert and I wrote the chapter on the Netherlands (Tieben and Schoorl, 2016).

That Evert aimed to combine history and economics is not surprising: he was trained as both an historian and an economist. In spite of his PhD he never considered himself a researcher *pur sang*. Jokingly he would say that he belonged to the academic ‘foot soldiers’. He was a devoted teacher of economics and taught the subject on all levels: from high school to the post-graduate level. It was perhaps inevitable that his career would peak with his appointment as director of the graduate school of economics of the University of Groningen, a kind of *uber teacher* as he would say. His activities were not confined to academic research and teaching. He acted as ghostwriter and editor of
the biographies of several Dutch economists, such as Emile van Lennep and Wim Drees. An art-lover, he cherished his first art historical publication—on the painter Hendrik Valk and his brother, sculptor Willem Valk—just as much as his PhD-dissertation (Van der Laan, IJsselstein Mulder and Schoorl, 1999).

Evert excelled in the social aspect of our science: networking. He was a veteran of the diverse history of economic thought conferences around the globe. He attended the British history of economics society meetings from the early 1970s and hosted one of them at Groningen. In the 1990s Evert actively supported the foundation of the European Society of the History of Thought (ESHET). He was present at the ESHET founding sessions at Sophia-Antipolis 1994 and certainly did not forego the opportunity to enjoy the Mediterranean beach at that occasion. That also marked Evert: Enjoy life, while you can. He certainly practiced this motto himself. We jointly worked on a paper for the conference on Economics and Public Reason at Lausanne, last year. Evert planned to present our work there, but unfortunately his illness suddenly worsened and prevented him from going.

In the Netherlands he likewise operated as a bridge-builder between his two main interests, history and economics. In 2015 he took the initiative to organize an informal network for historians and economists studying the history of Dutch economic thought. The network hosts a successful yearly conference. We will certainly continue his initiative and shall miss his presence there. A good friend and inspiring colleague has passed away.

Evert left behind his wife Mieke, their three children and grandchildren.

References


