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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert B. Ekelund, Jr., Robert F. Hebert. *Secret Origins of Modern Microeconomics: Dupuit and the Engineers.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999. xvi + 468 pp. $40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-19999-3.

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Published on EH.Net (July, 1999)

Appropriated Origins of Microeconomics

Secrets should be divulged and not belong to a few only. Therefore, right from the start the secret of the origin of modern microeconomics is given away by presenting it as the main thesis of this book, namely that "Microeconomics as we now know it was developed first and foremost by engineers rather than economists, and that its origins were French rather than British" (p. xi). So right from the beginning we know where we are and this book is seemingly set up to prove this claim. That is a pity, because it puts this book into a historiographically questionable framework: Whig history with the phrasing that belongs to it. "French econo-engineers, and a few kindred 'foreigners' who were drawn into their orbit," the author states, "were not merely forerunners of neoclassical microeconomics: they were its inventors" (p. 11). The next phrase is an even better example of this framework: "[T]he theory of utility and demand emerged like a chrysalis from the empirical cocoon of more than four decades of engineers' practical attempts to calculate and understand value" (pp. 75-76).

This is a pity, because this historiographical strait jacket hinders us from seeing the real value of this work: Robert Ekelund and Robert Hebert convincingly argue that the intellectual tradition of microeconomic inquiry can be traced back to the works of the members of the Corps des Ingenieurs des Ponts et Chausses (French corps of state civil engineers), most notably Jules Dupuit (1804-66). This is a rich book that discloses materials that before were inaccessible to historians of economics. They were inaccessible for two reasons: First, most of the French works discussed by Ekelund and Hebert have not been translated, which is certainly a handicap in a discipline whose language is predominantly English. The second reason is that materials mainly belong to the engineering literature, which is not the usual place to look for the origins of economics. This latter attitude has changed among current historians of economics, thanks to contributions like those of Ekelund and Hebert.

The analysis of the French engineering literature (Chapters Three through Twelve) is preceded by a very informative chapter on French educational institutions, before and after the French Revolution, which explains partly why in France the contributions of the engineers were neglected by economists. The history of the French econo-engineering starts with an overview of benefit-cost studies from the seventeenth century onwards. Then it is shown how Say's value theory, specifically demand theory, was perceived by the engineers. Of importance was the discussion of whether and how (marginal) utility should be incorporated in the demand analysis. Next the authors give an exposition of (mainly) Dupuit's treatment of competition, monopoly, duopoly and costs-based pricing. Next comes an examination of Dupuit's analysis of price discrimination. The remaining chapters discuss the issues of spatial economics, the empirical studies of the engineers, and Dupuit's views on property and policy. Altogether these chapters give a clear exposition of the economic problems that French Ponts engineers faced in era of major changes in the French infrastructure. If you want to, you can already recognize elements of the later microeconomics. But why should these works of the French engineers only have value in relation to modern microeconomics? On the contrary, this book shows how engineers dealing with their daily and earthly problems came to ingenious solutions that are very instructive to modern economists. For too long they were neglected in the history of economics. Ekelund and Hebert's tribute to their work remedies this short-

coming.

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Citation: Marcel Boumans. Review of Ekelund, Robert B.; Jr.; Hebert, Robert F., *Secret Origins of Modern Microeconomics: Dupuit and the Engineers*. EH.Net, H-Net Reviews. July, 1999.

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