

PAUL BAIROCH

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Paul Bairoch was born in Antwerp in 1930. He was the son of a Jewish family that emigrated from Poland to Belgium in the 1920s, and that later went into exile in a small village in Gers, France during World War II. After the war, Bairoch moved to Brussels, later spent a short period in Israel, and started studying economic history upon his return to Belgium. While a research fellow at the University of Brussels, Bairoch developed statistical time series on the national statistics of Belgium, worked on his doctorate, and in 1963, presented his thesis, titled “The Starting Process of Economic Growth”. He then went on to teach in a number of universities and even worked at GATT for a time. From 1972 onwards, Bairoch was a member of the faculty at the University of Geneva, where he was director of the Center of International Economic History until his death in 1999 in Geneva.

A trait common to all Bairoch’s research in economic history from his thesis onwards was that he based his opinions on data, and when the data did not exist, he found a way to collect or construct it. Bairoch can be seen as a pioneer of cliometrics, and believed that without data and statistical information, economic history is left to eradication. David Landes (1998, p.XIII) even gave Bairoch the nickname “collector and calculator of the numbers of growth and productivity”. Another characteristic typical of Bairoch’s research is that he was not afraid to be non-conformist and present views that ran against the mainstream.

Bairoch worked in three main subjects: economic development and growth, urban studies, and international trade.

Population, Cities, and Urban Research

Bairoch was interested in the relationship between urbanization and economic development, and examined urban evolution from the Neolithic period to 1900. He developed series on sizes of cities from 800 to 1850.

Bairoch’s main achievement in this field was showing that there was a typical pattern of urbanization: Traditional societies reached their maximum urban population rapidly, leveling off at somewhere between 8 and 15 percent (Europe reached this level around 1300), and maintained this proportion until the onset of industrialization, when the urban population then surged. He also observed that for non-developed countries, urbanization has negative consequences for agricultural development.

Development, Industrialization, and Inequality

The main topic of Bairoch’s research, from his PhD on, was the dynamics of development and the inequality between developed and developing countries. In his last book, *Victoires et Déboires*, a formidable synthesis of the economic and social history of the world, Bairoch tried to explain the preeminence of the West, and the setbacks (*déboire*) suffered by the Third World.

Regarding the mechanism of development of the West, Bairoch insisted on the necessity of an agricultural revolution, and also on the importance of institutions. He had also a strong interest in the development of technological progress in the 19th century, and stressed the differences between it and the diffusion of the science-based technology of the 20th century.

Bairoch also analyzed at length the reasons for the backwardness of the Third World, and through the use of comparative statistics, his analysis includes a comparison between the present economic progress of Third World countries and that of developed countries at the times of their takeoffs. Bairoch's conclusions were that the absence of an agricultural revolution and failure to reduce fertility rates were among the most binding facts impeding development. He was therefore pessimistic about the prospects for development of the lagging countries, especially those in Africa.

Regarding inequality, Bairoch stressed that before the industrial revolution, no appreciable difference in *per capita* income separated Western Europe from the rest of the world, while the gap between the developed and the developing world increased thereafter. Moreover, regarding the effect of colonialism, Bairoch stressed that not only was colonialism largely unprofitable for the West, but also harmed the Third World. Bairoch was a proponent of foreign aid to reduce the inequalities.

International Trade

Probably Bairoch's best-known work is *Myths*, in which he sets the record straight on twenty commonly held myths about economic history, among them that free trade has historically led to periods of economic growth; a myth associated with those who "...could be described as a conservative group that romanticizes the 19th century and makes free trade almost into a sacred doctrine" (p. XIV).

Bairoch claimed that the idea that free trade was the rule during the 19th century is a myth based on insufficient knowledge and misguided interpretations of the economic history of the United States, Europe, and the Third World, since protection is the rule and free trade the exception. Moreover, Bairoch expressed doubts that free trade leads to economic growth. His thesis was that during development, countries use protectionist policies that they dismantle once they industrialize. He showed that Britain protected its home market until British firms in the main sectors dominated the market, and only later on did Britain advocate free trade.

I cannot conclude without mentioning Bairoch's personality: He combined the best of open-minded curiosity and a powerful intellect with warmth, humanity, and overwhelming kindness to all who knew him.

Bibliography

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