

Remarks at URPE 40th Anniversary, New Orleans, January 3, 2008
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1. At the outset, I want to emphasize this is one person's recollection of events that took place 40 and more years ago. I will spare everyone a disposition from cultural studies about memory and its purposes, both the strength and failings of memory, not to mention adding 40 to whatever age we were forty years ago and what happens to our memories. But having said this as a qualifier, my memory is very keen about those days – as are the memories of so many others during the 1960s – because these were critical formative years that have carried me through my adult life. I venture to say that my memory of those years around the creation of URPE is more vivid than for many other events closer to this day. I have extended my remarks beyond what I had time for in New Orleans so as to write down what I recall before I forget it.

2. I also want to note that my task to “represent” Ann Arbor and the University of Michigan (U-M) is more than a bit humbling, because there were anywhere from 15-20 others who played crucial roles in the formation of URPE – some of whom are here but many others are not. I do not dare to say my recollections are theirs but only one person's among a larger number who were involved with the creation of URPE.

3. I could not begin without also acknowledging the absolutely central role played by Professor Daniel Fusfeld, who had only recently arrived at the University of Michigan and taught the large introduction to economics class. It was perhaps an accident that among the new class of teaching fellows (TF) Dan had in 1964, about 6-8 of us had experience in the civil rights movement. When the Viet Nam war issue hit the campus like a thunderbolt, this group — who did not know each other before arriving in Ann Arbor (with perhaps one or two exceptions) – swung into action and took the lead among the U-M TFs by joining the faculty members who organized the country's first teach-in. But the TFs went further. Some of us decided to make a stand and proposed withholding grades for males, because at that time a grade point average determined whether a male student retained his deferment. We said we would not be the ones to decide who would be drafted and potentially injured or killed. Needless to say, this was a stance that risked our careers at the U-M but also put Dan Fusfeld, a dedicated liberal social democrat who was opposed to the war and a teach-in leader, in an awkward position. But he defended us and argued with his economics' department colleagues that the department should oppose any retribution against us. What a stand by him, which I only really appreciated when I started to teach and faced

similar challenges. Without Dan, I don't know if the rest of my story would have taken the direction it took. (The withholding of grades never happened but that is another story)

4. URPE was, therefore, derivative of the Civil Rights and Anti-War movements. I for one wanted to study economics, because I thought it was the clearest way for me to understand and do something about the inequitable distribution of power that produced an unequal distribution of income and economic outcomes. I was motivated and captivated by J.K. Galbraith's (1958) book, *The Affluent Society*. It said on the back cover he was an economist, and I wanted to become one like him. Others were motivated by the unequal allocation of power across countries and we eventually appropriated an earlier, but updated, analysis of imperialism. But the central point is that initially we were motivated by the 60s – the national (civil rights) and international (Viet Nam war) contexts – in examining how economics and what we were studying did or did not help us through the thicket of these highly charged domestic and international issues. Economics, as it was taught and we were studying it, did not and so began our search for how to make economics “relevant” in the language of the day, the period around 1964-1965.

5. When the Viet Nam war issue hit the campus and the first teach-in was called in early 1965, the economics TFs, and TFs in other departments, joined in using our organizing skills learned from civil rights work. Incidentally, the way in which the faculty leadership came to a teach-in is itself worth an historical detour. Initially, a strike was called by a small group of faculty, largely younger and untenured. Older faculty members with impeccable political credentials, who had been engaged in many battles over decades at the U-M, objected saying this betrayed their calling as teachers. Why not simply suspend teaching as usual and teach about the war in Viet Nam in all classes, sort of a sit-in and work-in but not a strike. As I recall Kenneth Boulding, from the econ department, was one of the faculty who formulated this position. Then, what came to be even more dramatic, was a proposal to have a non-stop teach in starting from 5PM when classes ended until 8AM the next morning. Thus was born the Teach-In movement that spread almost instantaneously across the nation.

6. Frustrated with economics' classes, we began a process of self-education that ultimately led to the formation of URPE. We started a study group that read Marx and Marxist economists (Marx, Sweezy, Magdoff, and others), institutional economists (Clarence Ayres, Galbraith, and Veblen), and other writers that addressed our interests. We became part of U-M's Free University – alternative non-credit classes to supply the raw material of ideas and knowledge not found in the

U-M's curriculum. We offered a class on "Political Economy," resurrecting that 19th century description of economics that best suited our interests in the intersection of economics and politics, power and justice. Thus began our labeling as Political Economists – today called "branding" – that allowed us to differentiate ourselves from conventional economics and directly take on issues of economic justice, whether domestically (race, poverty, and inequality and later gender) and imperialism as a substitute for conventional market based international trade and conventional economic development analyses.

7. These experiences, augmented by anti-war movement activity, were formative and defining for many of us. A second wave of new graduate students and TF's arrived around 1966 who mirrored the political experiences of the first group and seamlessly joined in the growing interest among graduate students in political economy within the economics department. As some of the original group were starting dissertations, we began around 1966 to discuss how this creation of political economy (PE) at the U-M could be sustained. We thought we had found a way to teach, research, and publish that was consistent with our contemporary development of PE. A key word being "contemporary" because at that time we were motivated to address the big issues in the country and the world first and secondarily had an interest in developing any one theory. So although we learned from Marx, Veblen, Ayres, Sweezy, Madgoff, Keynes, and others, we were not as interested in developing their theories as we were in applying them to the problems that consumed us. The question we kept returning to was how to do this in an academic environment where a new untenured faculty member was susceptible to all the socializing apparatus of the university system, especially in economics departments, which at that time were not as market oriented as today but nevertheless were limited from our perspective. Keynesians were predominant in many departments but in a very narrow technical frame that removed the significant social and political analysis of Keynes. (There are some documents about this period in the URPE archives at the University of Cornell, especially a February 4, 1967 set of notes that summarizes three meetings.)

8. The next external political event that played a role in the creation of URPE was the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago. Although similar dissents from economics' orthodoxy among graduate students and some faculty were occurring elsewhere, we knew virtually nothing about this in Ann Arbor. Likewise for those other campuses about the U-M in the day before personal computers, faxes, and the internet has made it easy and routine to communicate among networks of movements. Relegated to the telephone and mail was quite isolating. Nevertheless, largely

through personal contacts various of us knew of others studying economics in graduate programs that were not delivering what we wanted.

So we invited whomever we knew to Ann Arbor in advance of the summer 1968 Chicago convention to discuss and think about setting up an organization to promote political economy – to test whether or not there was interest in this undertaking. About a dozen or 15 people came as I recall. We discussed a permanent organization that would encourage the development of PE as an alternative to the socialization process we knew would greet us after leaving the relatively safe harbor of graduate studies where we could at least count on support from a group of similarly committed individuals.

9. In the aftermath of the tumultuous 1968 convention, the impetus for the creation of URPE progressed. The American Economics Association (AEA) was scheduled to meet that December 1968 in Chicago for its annual meetings. A debate ensued in the executive committee of the AEA about whether to cancel the Chicago venue and meet elsewhere. The committee was evenly divided and it fell to the AEA President (or was he President-elect, I don't recall) to cast the deciding vote. Ironically, this fell on the shoulders of the U-M's Kenneth Boulding, a Quaker and pacifist who had himself been involved with the creation of CORE – a major front line civil rights direct action organization – and someone whose name was synonymous with virtually every good cause undertaken by faculty at the U-M. For reasons that are outside the scope of these remarks, he cast the deciding vote to keep the AEA meetings in Chicago.

10. The Ann Arbor group then swung into action and implemented a plan that had been incubating for more than a year – namely to form an organization around political economy and go ahead with the creation of a parallel association to the AEA. Why this moment? Many members of the AEA – including some very prominent members – objected to going to Chicago and called for a boycott of the meetings. So successful was this boycott call, that there arose a need for an alternative site for a meeting so the job market could take place. Philadelphia was chosen as the place for these alternative meetings, which were initially just for job placement interviews. The Ann Arbor group decided, however, to organize substantive panels around political economy topics. The organizers of the alternative meeting had no objection and even paid for the meeting rooms. This was the first of what is now 40 years of URPE sessions at the AEA. I decided the new PE organization needed a record of these meetings, and we used the papers from this first set of panels (where we could get written versions of remarks) as the

launching of the our first publication – we called them *Occasional Papers* – which became the forerunner of the journal.

The Philadelphia meeting was a great success. We came away with the impression that there was a large audience for what we had been talking about. We now had a mailing list of several hundred people from across the country, new allies, some respected established members of the profession, and a stronger motivation to get even more serious about what the organization would do.

11. Sometime prior to the December 1968 Philadelphia meeting – I don't recall when – the Ann Arbor group met to create a name for the organization. We wanted to be a “union” not an “association” with the important connotation of solidarity and linkage to a past, when an earlier group of academics and public intellectuals from a political economy tradition played an instrumental role in American society. We were a union “for” not “of,” promoting a conceptual framework in which to study the economy and not merely a collection of individuals. And of course we had to have “political economy” in the name. Over too many beers and other substances we finally came up with the Union for Radical Political Economics – the last word chosen instead of “economists” to convey the idea of a movement instead of only an organization of individual economists. URPE was its acronym, and it will now forever be written in stone that it was meant to rhyme with BURPE, which we thought had additional symbolic meaning in confronting the AEA, and not a long “eeee” at the end.

12. Now back to the main story line. Back from the heady experience in Philadelphia, and with a new-found confidence derived from a much larger group of interested economists than we had ever imagined, we earnestly set about putting the organization on a proper footing. During the early part of 1969 we decided to:

- have a summer conference in a camp-like atmosphere over a week or more when we could be away from our desks, telephones, and other commitments to focus exclusively on PE and the URPE organization. We also wanted an opportunity to create solidarity among URPE members (only later called “bonding” in psycho-babble) as well as add a cultural component, which we fulfilled by inviting folk singers to the camp. The first was held in the summer of 1969 in northern Michigan at a UAW camp
- start a journal (I agreed to edit) which we called the *Review of Radical Political Economics*

- have regular sessions as part of the AEA “allies” in the Allied Social Science annual winter meetings
- establish dues and an organizational administrative apparatus
- create a logo with the help of a designer at a U-M institute with whom I worked that also included a distinct typeface, which remains intact (and later the dancing Marx tee shirts)
- publish a newsletter

Looking back on this now, I am astonished at our (and especially my) innocence and naivete that we should undertake such an ambitious project with no resources, most of us finishing graduate school and looking for our first job, and with no professional experience for most of this. But this was the sixties, after all, and we thought anything was possible.

13. Everything we did worked and each part of the larger project we initiated was more successful than the preceding one. We had a strong response to the solicitation for membership in URPE from the Philadelphia meeting. This provided us with some cash to do things. The first summer meeting was successful – both in size and quality – far beyond our expectations. Articles started to flow into the journal faster than I had imagined, and our editorial board worked hard to keep up. Subsequent AEA sessions added to our membership list. Word spread, the journal’s articles were well-received, URPE’s reputation spread, the summer conferences became larger and we were fully launched into all of the aspects of our huge project.

I was fortunate, along with Larry Sawers (also from the U-M), to be hired by American University’s James Weaver and Charles Wilber in 1969 whom we met in Philadelphia at the alternative meetings. They were typical of imbedded PE faculty who had enough departmental authority to influence appointments. There were others at universities who found this first cohort of PE graduate students from around the country, we found them, and individuals received faculty appointments. At AU, we also embarked together on creating the first opportunity to study PE in a Ph.D. program – a theoretical track in Political Economy – which thrives to this day. PE classes and degree programs were started at several other universities by the mid-1970s. By the end of the 1970s, URPE was solidly entrenched and through the teaching, research, and publications of its members was having an impact on the social sciences.

14. Forty years is a long time for an organization like URPE to not only exist but to reproduce itself through several generations of political economists. I am looking forward to celebrating with you its half century anniversary.