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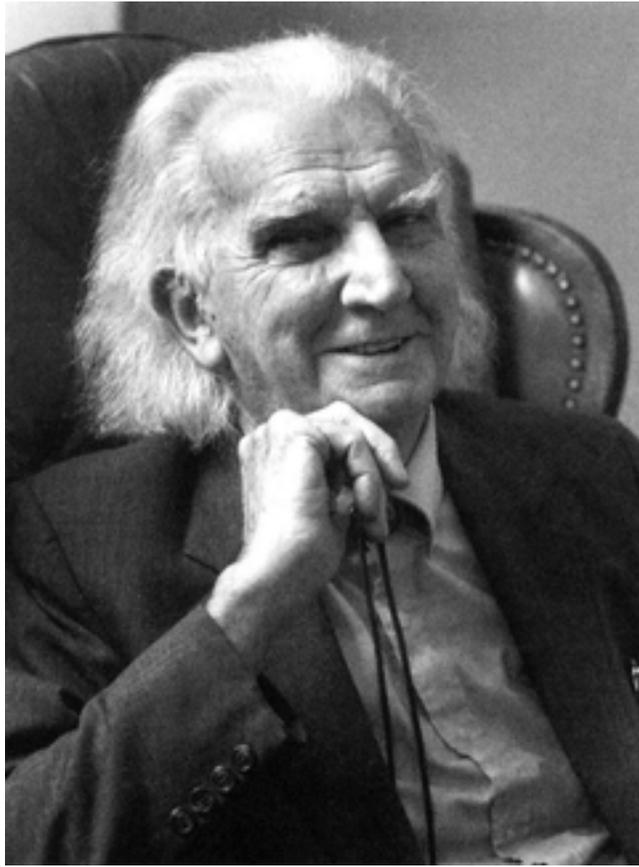
KENNETH EWART BOULDING
1910—1993

A Biographical Memoir by
NATHAN KEYFITZ

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Biographical Memoir

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Kenneth S. Bowling

KENNETH EWART BOULDING

January 18, 1910–March 18, 1993

BY NATHAN KEYFITZ

KENNETH EWART BOULDING—ECONOMIST, man of letters, ardent peace activist—made his contribution to the body of economic knowledge with a combination of humanistic values and technical proficiency. Reading his papers, written from the early 1940s to the 1990s, one sees a mastery and creativity not only of economics but of all the social sciences and ethics as well.

Boulding was born in Liverpool, England, on January 18, 1910, and died in Boulder, Colorado, on March 18, 1993. Five years after taking a degree at Oxford with first-class honors he left for the United States, where he spent the rest of his life, first as a U.S. resident and then as a citizen. Married in 1941, he and his wife, Elise Bjorn-Hansen, were together for the subsequent fifty-two years, in which they saw five children, John Russell, Mark David, Christine Ann, Philip Daniel, and William Frederic, into the world and into professional life. I first met the young couple in 1946, when Kenneth and I were teaching at McGill University in Montreal and Elise was a student in my sociology class. We have kept in touch ever since.

Boulding was awarded honorary doctorates by over thirty universities; he had prizes not only for economics but also

for political science, peace research, and scholarship in the humanities. He was, in turn, president of the Society for General Systems Research (1957-59), president of the American Economic Association (1968), president of the International Peace Research Society (1969-70), president of the International Studies Association (1974-75), president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (1979), and president of the section on economics of the British Association for the Advancement of Science (1982-83). He was a member of the National Academy of Sciences (elected in 1975), the Institute of Medicine, and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

He settled first at the University of Michigan in 1949. In 1967 he moved to the University of Colorado at Boulder, where he became distinguished professor emeritus in 1980. But there were many intervals of work and teaching elsewhere in the course of those years. The list of places where he visited for weeks or months is as long as the list of universities that gave him doctorates.

It is impossible to write a biography of Kenneth Boulding without speaking of Elise. They collaborated on many things, but their strongest common interest aside from bringing up their five children was the peace movement.

Few names are mentioned more often than the Bouldings among the founders of the international peace research movement that gained prominence in the 1960s. But Kenneth was also a founder of another movement that came to prominence about that time—systems analysis as a way of unifying the sciences, natural and social. The search for isomorphisms—propositions of the same structure valid in two or more disciplines—was part of what animated it, but many other propositions have turned up as well. And what may well be called a third movement, evolutionary economics, that he wrote about nearly twenty years ago, became

prominent in the late 1980s and 1990s. While none of the three movements has quite fulfilled the brilliant prospects of its first youth, all have become a durable part of the academic and extra-academic research scene.

Kenneth Boulding was a judicious statesman of science. He speaks of “economics imperialism,” the attempt on the part of economics to take over the other social sciences,¹ and, although his loyalty to his main profession was lifelong and unchallenged, still he didn’t like imperialism even here. He was very conscious of the power of economics for dealing with economic problems, but he never tired of pointing out the large areas of life in which its techniques do not apply. He could be critical of features of the modern world that economics has brought into existence through the power of its ideas, just as he could praise the political and other dimensions of freedom that come with a free economy.

Kenneth Boulding would have nothing to do with the idea of a nonnormative social science. In the tradition of the great economists of the nineteenth century, one that has largely disappeared in the twentieth, he was not embarrassed to say of American power,

Unless we “stand for” something in the world . . . that power will lose legitimacy and will eventually disappear.²

But that does not mean that he ceased to be an economist in dealing with values. Opposing a common ethical view that freedom and justice are absolute, so that we cannot permit any injustice whatever and certainly no infringement on freedom, he spoke of an “ethical market”:

[W]e have to ask ourselves how much justice are we willing to give up for so much liberty.³

Crowds in revolution do not think that way but in absolute terms; they are not aware that without compromise the great

danger is social disorder. What follows disorder is tyranny—a dictatorship with neither liberty nor justice. A compromise is not perfect, yet only compromise is workable.

Though a leader in several major innovations, Boulding was no enthusiast for new fashions in social science just because they are new:

One of the elements which easily may lead to a worsening of the decision-making process at present is the increasing fashionableness of gaming . . . [including] business gaming in the corporation. It can provide illusions of certainty about the future which may turn out to be quite disastrous. . . . A similar criticism can be levelled at techniques like the Delphi method.⁴

Boulding had many loyal students, who owed much to the inspiration his lectures provided. But the essential Boulding is inimitable. Those sparkling insights that brighten everything he wrote are not a methodology that can be taught by a master and then learned and practiced by others. One goes through some 3,000 densely packed pages in the collected edition of his papers and finds little repetition and in nearly every page striking ideas. Yet Boulding had no ambition to construct a system, a scheme, or schedule that would have a slot for each idea. Neither the profusion of brilliant ideas nor the seeming disorder in which they came forth was to the liking of those fellow professionals who want to standardize the field, to provide a package of knowledge and technique that all the qualified would share and apply, to certify economists as competent to apply that package, so that they will be the physicians to the economy.

That is not the only feature of Boulding that worried some schools of economics. Another was his recognition, especially from the 1970s onward, that growth—meaning increase of consumption without limit—could not possibly be the prime objective of society and the individuals in it.

[E]conomics has been incurably growth-oriented and addicted to everybody growing richer, even at the cost of exhaustion of resources and pollution of the environment.⁵

In reading through Boulding's work one is astonished at how far he anticipated ideas that were reinvented years later and that many social scientists have not yet tumbled to. Back in 1958 he took up ecological questions:

Are we to regard the world of nature simply as a storehouse to be robbed for the immediate benefit of man? . . . Does man have any responsibility for the preservation of a decent balance in nature, for the preservation of rare species, or even for the indefinite continuance of his race?

And even in his early conventional years one detects a note of irony in his couplet:

The wise economist is loath
To give up anything for growth.⁶

I cannot believe that Boulding's sole objection to unlimited growth was the ability of the environment to stand it. His deeper objection comes from other sources. Perhaps the same source that made Keynes say that once the economic problem has been solved for all classes the motives (self-seeking, preoccupation with work and production) that achieved this would be seen at their true value, as something to be ashamed of.

The love of money as a possession—as distinct from the love of money as a means to the enjoyment and realities of life—will be recognized for what it is, a somewhat disgusting morbidity, one of those semi-criminal, semi-pathological propensities which one hands over with a shudder to the specialists in mental disease.⁷

Keynes was optimist enough to believe that this would occur by itself and in this century. Boulding, because he was younger and lived longer, saw further history unfold—including numerous wars, persistent inequalities, injustice of

every kind that showed too little tendency to diminish with rising GDP, that made such optimism more difficult for him. The best he could do was to express a hope—far short of a forecast—that we can learn

to fly the great engine of change . . . that it may carry us not to destruction but to that great goal for which the world was made.⁸

Yet with a different image his thought here is the same as that of Keynes:

The spurt [of growth] from the 1930s to the 1960s bears some resemblance to human adolescence, even to the production of a slightly pimply youth culture.⁹

When Boulding discussed progress he distinguished its measurable economic aspect, efficiency in the workplace:

a rise in the amount of any commodity that can be produced with one man-hour of labor time.¹⁰

With that definition there is no danger of confusing economic progress with progress overall. We are told again and again throughout his work that as we learn to make things faster we do not necessarily move toward a more satisfying life in a tolerable environment.

It is to be expected that one as rich in ideas as Boulding will be interpreted differently by readers of different generations and differently by professional economists and others. What precedes is an attempt to portray his style of thinking as seen by a nonsectarian social scientist of his own generation.

NOTES

1. K. E. Boulding. *Conflict and Defense: A General Theory*. New York: Harper, 1962. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1988, p. viii.

2. K. E. Boulding. *From Abundance to Scarcity: Implications for the*

American Tradition. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1978. Collected Papers, vol. VI, p. 525. Boulder, Colo.: Associated University Press, 1971.

3. K. E. Boulding. Prices and values: infinite value in a finite world. In *Value and Values in Evolution*. New York: Gordon and Breach, 1979. Collected Works, vol. VI, p. 600.

4. K. E. Boulding. Social risk, political uncertainty, and the legitimacy of private profit. In *Risk and Regulated Firms*, ed. R. H. Howard, pp. 82-93. East Lansing: Michigan State University Graduate School of Business Administration, 1973.

5. K. E. Boulding. Toward a modest society: the end of growth and grandeur. In *Economic Perspectives of Boulding and Samuelson*. Durham, N.H.: Whittemore School of Business and Economics, University of New Hampshire, 1971. Collected Works, vol. VI, p. 85.

6. K. E. Boulding. *Principles of Economic Policy*, p. 21. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1958.

7. J. M. Keynes. *Essays in Persuasion*, part V, 1931. Reprinted in *The Collected Writings*, vol. IX. London: Macmillan, 1972.

8. K. E. Boulding. *Conflict and Defense*, p. 343. New York: University Press of America, 1988.

9. K. E. Boulding. *Collected Papers*, vol. VI, p. 87. Boulder, Colo.: Associated University Press, 1971.

10. K. E. Boulding. *Principles of Economic Policy*, p. 21. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1958.

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