

BOOK REVIEW ON PROF. DR. ERWIN DEKKER (2021). *JAN TINBERGEN (1903-1994) AND THE RISE OF ECONOMIC EXPERTISE*. CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2021.

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Abstract: *Jan Tinbergen was the first Nobel prize winner in economics. He shared that honor with Ragnar Frisch. The focus of their research that earned the Nobel prize, was “pioneering work in the field of econometric, the field at the intersection of statistics, mathematics, and economic theory” (p. 125). Erwin Dekker, a cultural economist provides this very comprehensive book about Jan Tinbergen. Dekker is on the faculty of Erasmus University, in Rotterdam, Netherlands.*

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Introduction

Erwin Dekker is on the faculty of Erasmus University, in Rotterdam, Netherlands. His main area of work is in cultural economics. He has written a highly readable, detailed account and analysis of the life and work of Jan Tinbergen. The bibliography and footnotes in Dekker’s book, certainly serve as good quality sources, for any scholar of the history of economic thought. The first Nobel Memorial Prize for Economic Sciences was awarded in 1969. The two economists who earned that prize in 1969 were Jan Tinbergen and Ragnar Frisch. Specifically, the award was given in recognition of their “pioneering work in the field of econometric, the field at the intersection of statistics, mathematics, and economic theory” (p. 125). Jan Tinbergen had four siblings. His parent were teachers (p. 17). Amazingly Nicholas, a brother of Jan, earned his own Nobel prize, that one in physiology and medicine, in 1973. Nicholas Tinbergen won his Noble prize for discoveries about the association and elicitation of individual and social behavior patterns in animals.

Discussion

Jan Tinbergen earned his Ph.D. in physics. “Afterward he decided that economics was more promising” (p.70). Paul Ehrenfest directed the physics dissertation of Jan Tinbergen. Interestingly, Tinbergen was encouraged by Ehrenfest to work in economics, including efforts in mathematical economics. In 1924, Ehrenfest showed Tinbergen some of Ehrenfest’s work on oligopolistic competition (p. 70).

Tinbergen’s business cycle theory came about from Tinbergen’s ideas including the concept of lagged variables. He also showed variables exert influence on other variables (pp. 150-154). He worked as a researcher for many important groups, including the League of Nations and the United Nations. Another important institution that Jan Tinbergen worked with, was the IMF (International Monetary Fund). One of the major research groups in the

Netherlands that Jan Tinbergen was associated with, was the Central Planning Bureau (CPB) (p. 234). International cooperation should be a goal in some endeavors, according to Jan Tinbergen (pp. 163-191). In 1938, Jan Tinbergen, along with some other intellectuals, advocated the acceptance of Jewish refugees into the Netherlands, where Tinbergen lived. His actions suggested that he did not believe in a strict line between science and politics (p. 204). How reconstruction was conducted after World War 2, is an interesting case. Tinbergen did not think that there should be reparations or territory from countries defeated in the war. Tinbergen was cognizant of the disastrous consequences that came about from the Treaty of Versailles that ended World War 1 (p. 220).

It was in the 1930s, when econometrics arose as an approach to economic analysis. Of course, Jan Tinbergen and Ragnar Frisch came to be two of the most influential men in the area of econometrics (p. 209).

Fascinatingly, the personal thrift of Jan Tinbergen “was notorious: he never owned a car, measured the amount of water he took to cook tea, rejected any of the perks that increasingly came with his status as world-renowned professor, and apologized for ‘indulging’ in chocolate milk rather than plain milk with his lunch by suggesting that it contained more calories” (p. 219).

Conclusion

To Tinbergen there appears to be a need for long-term plans, and this is can be a guide to both government and business (p. 317). Jan Tinbergen “was fearful of international conflicts, economic instability, and environmental destruction and moved by social injustice” (P. 430). The idea that economists should aim to improve society is often present today (p. 430). Many economists will be inspired by the works and life of Jan Tinbergen and the decision to read this book will prove fruitful.