

Hans Singer Memorial

30 November 2006

Using the Ideas of Professor Sir Hans Singer
to Help Reshape International Development Policy



Professor Sir Hans W. Singer
29 November 1910 – 26 February 2006

The Professor Sir Hans Singer Memorial

Portcullis House, London
Thursday 30 November 2006

Using the Ideas of Professor Sir Hans Singer to
Help Reshape International Development Policy

Chair: Lord Meghnad Desai
Parliamentary Host: Ann McKechin MP

Speakers:

Edward Clay, Senior Research Associate, ODI
Professor Sir Richard Jolly, Honorary Professor and
Research Associate, IDS
Professor Raphael Kaplinsky, Professor of
International Development, Open University
Simon Maxwell, Director, ODI
Professor Frances Stewart,
Queen Elizabeth House, University of Oxford.



Sir Hans Singer: Economist who saw how terms of trade marginalised the world's poorest people

No economist of the 20th century was as persistent in focusing on the problems of developing countries or so creative in exploring what could be done to accelerate their development as Professor Sir Hans Singer, who has died aged 95. He had a career lasting seven decades from 1936, as an émigré from Hitler's Germany receiving his doctorate at Cambridge, to a lecture last November. Extraordinary vision and energy issued from a small man, of modest appearance and mild-mannered stance, head often cocked to one side and bushy eyebrows, with a friendly but questioning smile. He was widely loved and deservedly feted.

Singer was one of the first economists employed by the United Nations, joining the UN economic affairs department in 1947. Working alongside the UN's first economist, David Owen, with Sidney Dell, VKRV Rao and Michal Kalecki, Singer gave intellectual edge to the rapidly expanding international organisation. Those were the days when the UN was acknowledged to be in the lead, the World Bank still being preoccupied with reconstruction in postwar Europe, and Singer rapidly became its working economist of choice, moving from new department to new department.

Singer left the UN in 1969 to become one of the first fellows of the new Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Sussex. His prodigious output continued, though now under his own name. John Shaw, in his biography published in 2002, lists Singer's output: 107 books, 83 major reports, over 260 professional articles and an almost uncountable number of book reviews, letters to the press and other pieces. Singer added a few more books and articles during the last four years.

Undoubtedly, Singer's best known work relates to the declining terms of trade experienced by developing countries. Generally referred to as the Prebisch-Singer thesis, we now know the underlying analysis ought to be attributed to Singer himself, as argued in a recent book by John and Richard Toye.

The thesis, first published in 1949, tracked the long-term decline in terms of trade between developing and developed countries and analysed the causes. At the time, when Keynesian preoccupations were with short-term fluctuations in commodity prices, Singer's work attracted controversy. Many economists disputed the existence of a decline, but today professional opinion has shifted in Singer's favour. Much of the action Singer recommended has however not been taken, so that countries still dependent on coffee, cotton and other primary commodities for the bulk of their export earnings continue to lose out.

Singer made many other fundamental contributions to development thinking. In the 1950s, as secretary to the committee which recommended the creation of a UN fund for economic development, Singer did much of

the technical work to create a soft-loan facility for poor countries. The fund was to be called by the acronym Unfed, until Singer pointed out how unfortunate a name this would be. So, as he delighted in telling, it became Sunfed, the Special UN fund.

None the less, Eugene Black, president of the World Bank at the time, did his best to keep it unfed, opposing the proposal for seven or eight years, and referring to Singer as "one of the wild men of the UN". By the end of the 1950s, the idea of concessional loans to poorer countries was accepted and became the basis for IDA, the International Development Association, established in 1960 and still serving today as the World Bank's main arm and multibillion-dollar mechanism for concessional lending to developing countries.

In 1961, the UN responded to President Kennedy's call in the general assembly to set up a Development Decade focused on reducing world poverty. Singer was the main drafter of the blue book which provided guidelines for implementation. His ideas on aid and development always had a creative eye to policy applications. He was the first to write about the problems of "fungibility" - how development assistance provided for one purpose could be used to support quite another, since it eased general budget constraints. This was one reason why Singer opposed tough conditionality in the use of aid.

Singer fashioned many of the ideas underlying food aid and the creation in 1963 of the UN World Food Programme, which bestowed on him its Food For Life award in 2001. Singer was one of the first economists to work in the Economic Commission for Africa and later served as the first director of research for Unido, the UN industrial development organisation (1967-69). For Unicef, Singer wrote the first document on children and economic development, which he thought so important that for several months he set aside his work on terms of trade. Indeed, there are few UN development agencies to which Singer did not at one time or another contribute.

Some of Singer's most significant contributions came at the IDS. He helped draft the Sussex Manifesto: Science and Technology to Developing Countries during the Second Development Decade (1970). He revisited his theory of declining terms of trade, to give more attention to the part played by technological advance in developed countries. Singer was one of two main advisers to the World Employment Programme of the International Labour Office. In 1972 I was co-leader with him of the mission that produced the ILO Kenya report, Employment, Incomes and Equality. Singer on this mission originated the concept of redistribution from growth, which later became the theme for a seminal World Bank-IDS study, Redistribution with Growth. The Kenya report was also the first international document to draw attention to the positive contributions of the informal sector and laid the foundation for the "basic needs strategy" which for a few years became fashionable orthodoxy after the World Employment Conference in 1976.

Singer was born into a Jewish family in the Rhineland. At Bonn University, his brilliance brought him to the attention of the renowned economist Josef Schumpeter. In 1933, when Singer had to flee Nazi Germany, Schumpeter wrote to John Maynard Keynes in Cambridge, and Singer became only the fourth student to obtain a doctorate under his supervision. Soon after, Singer embarked on *Men without Work* (1938), a study of unemployment in Britain, supervised by William Temple, then Archbishop of York and later of Canterbury, with William Beveridge as its main adviser. Singer and his colleagues, Walter Oakeshott and David Owen, lived with poor families in five towns, to ensure a first-hand feel for the issues. Their study had an important influence on Beveridge's famous 1942 report on Social Insurance and Allied Services and his later *Full Employment in a Free Society*.

Notwithstanding these contacts and a post at Manchester University (1938-44), Singer was interned for about six weeks in the early months of the second world war, until released at Keynes' personal intervention. Singer often said he developed his deep sympathy for marginalised people in developing countries by growing up as a Jew in a Catholic area of Protestant Germany and later coming to Britain as a refugee. In 1945-46 he was at the Ministry of Town and Country Planning, and in 1946-47 at Glasgow University, till the call came to New York.

Singer maintained his extraordinary warmth, gentle manner and human concerns over his whole life. In the UN he was admired for his outstanding professional qualities, ready willingness to help and scrupulous avoidance of gossip and infighting. The UN old guard remembered him as maintaining his integrity even when singled out for attack by Senator Joseph McCarthy (for his work on Sunfed). Indeed, because of these pressures, Singer resigned from the UN in 1953, and only an appeal by Dag Hammarskjold, newly appointed as secretary general, stopped him leaving.

Singer was married for 67 years to Ilse Plaut Singer (obituary, March 13 2001), who brought her own moral commitments and an incisive and independent perspective to their partnership.

Singer always found time for others - for students as for colleagues - even while maintaining his prodigious output. He gave what was to be his last lecture without notes, pausing only to elaborate a point or to explain his early calculations for the UN on how much aid would be needed if developing countries were to accelerate their growth and development. Knighted in 1994, for services to economic issues, Singer is survived by his son Stephen.

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Professor Sir Hans Singer: Expert on the economics of developing countries, esteemed for his contribution to reducing world poverty

Professor Sir Hans Singer was Britain's most highly respected authority on the economics of developing countries, a field he helped to pioneer, and to which he made innumerable theoretical and practical contributions.

From early work on the economics of poverty in 1930s Britain, his professional trajectory led him to the UN, where he helped to establish the Department of Economic Affairs in 1947, and then on to five decades of research, policy advice and practical action all across the developing world.

Singer will be remembered with affection and respect in academic institutions and in the corridors and assemblies of UN bodies, but also by the politicians and planners of the many countries where his wisdom contributed to the reduction of poverty and the achievement of a better life

An asylum-seeker in his early days, he fled Germany in 1933; studied in John Maynard Keynes's circle at Cambridge; carried out pioneering research on poverty in the UK before the war; and then embarked on a 50-year commitment to developing countries, first with the UN and later from a base at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Sussex. His last book, a review with Kunibert Raffer of six decades of unequal development, was published in 2001, when he was 91.

Hans Wolfgang Singer was born in 1910 in what is now Wuppertal in North Rhine-Westphalia, the son of a doctor. Destined to be a doctor himself, he enrolled at the University of Bonn in 1929. However, he was won over to economics by the lectures of Joseph Schumpeter and by the influence of the trade economist Arthur Spiethoff.

Just as a research career was opening up, however, the Nazis came to power. Singer was forced to flee, first to Switzerland, then to Istanbul, where he thought of opening an academic bookshop. His stay was short, however. On the recommendation of Schumpeter, Singer was offered a scholarship at Cambridge and the opportunity to continue his studies with Keynes.

By 1934 he was married and installed at King's, embarking on a lifetime's loyalty to, and fascination with, Keynes and Keynesian ideas.

Singer will be remembered best for his contribution to the theory of development economics, of which he was a pioneer — identified as such in a noted volume, *Pioneers in Development*, edited in 1984 by two others of that band, Gerald Meier and Dudley Seers.

Singer's most famous idea, developed in early work at the UN, is that the price of primary commodities inevitably declines relative to that of manufactured goods. This is to the long-term disadvantage of developing

countries, which tend to specialise in the production of such commodities — as producers of coffee, among others, have found to their cost in recent years.

Raul Prebisch, at the UN Economic Commission for Latin America, developed similar ideas, and the Prebisch-Singer thesis, as it became known, has played a central part in development thinking for a generation, more especially as the empirical evidence in its support has strengthened.

Singer made many other intellectual contributions. His early work on unemployment in the UK, carried out for the Pilgrim Trust, made points about social exclusion and the culture of poverty that would be familiar today. For that work he toured the country, observing — and also living side by side with — the poorest in the land.

Over a 20-year period at the UN he contributed ideas about education and human capital formation, the importance of investing in children, and the case for international aid, including food aid.

At IDS, from 1969 onwards, he added poverty and unemployment to this list, most notably in a famous 1972 study on unemployment in Kenya, which he led for the International Labour Organisation with Richard Jolly.

He also wrote about the architecture of the international financial system, and was a notable critic of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

Singer was firmly in the Keynesian tradition, a radical, a structuralist and often also, given the tenor of the times, a troublesome critic of the Establishment: indeed, he was revered by many as an original “dissenting economist”.

He received six honorary doctorates and was the honorand of five festschrift volumes celebrating his work. In 2004, just before his 94th birthday, he was awarded a lifetime achievement award by the Development Studies Association of the UK and Ireland, the professional body of which he himself had been president between 1988 and 1990.

Like Keynes, Singer was as much interested in action as in theory. A picture of Keynes at the Bretton Woods Conference in 1944 hung outside his office at IDS, and he was committed throughout his life to multilateral organisations and principles. Many institutions can trace Singer’s involvement in their foundation or early development: among these are the UN Development Programme, the World Food Programme, the UN Economic Commission for Africa, and the UN Research Institute for Social Development.

His many writings — more than 100 books and 350 other publications, carefully catalogued by his biographer, John Shaw — constantly return to the practicalities of development.

Hans Singer was knighted in 1994, just recognition of his service to his adopted country, as well as to the wider international community. His merits had been identified much earlier, however. His referees for citizenship in 1938 included Keynes, William Beveridge, Archbishop Temple and the vice-chancellor of Manchester University — “overkill,” Singer thought, although in the event his citizenship was not granted until 1946.

When Singer was briefly interned in 1940, Keynes and Temple agitated for his release. It was good that they did: Singer contributed to the war effort by researching the German war economy from his base at the University of Manchester, and then served at the Ministry of Town and Country Planning, working on urban land issues.

He was at Glasgow University in 1947 when a request came from New York to help David Owen establish the Department of Economic Affairs at the newly created United Nations. Singer responded, somewhat reluctantly, and to his surprise found himself assigned to work on “(developing) country planning” — a topic on which he claimed no expertise, but which his new employers read off, erroneously, from his ministry experience. Never mind — 22 productive years followed.

At 59 Singer returned to the UK, and to a fellowship at IDS, then recently established. He helped to build it into an institution recognised as a global powerhouse of thinking about development, leading research and action on the main debates over 40 years about the causes and remedies of poverty in the developing world.

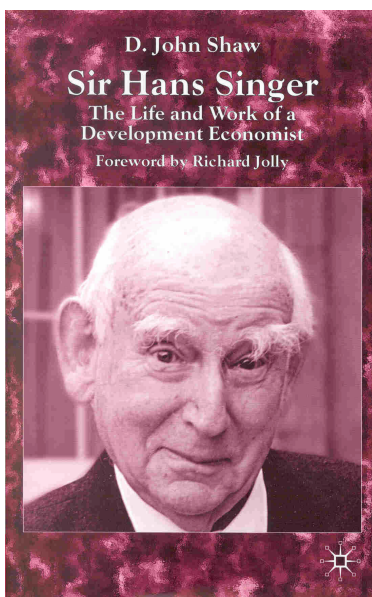
Singer’s own contributions ranged over poverty and unemployment, trade and finance, aid and social development. He was an inspired teacher, a tireless interlocutor, a tenacious advocate and a colleague much loved by researchers and students from many countries.

Most started in awe of Singer’s history and reputation, but soon discovered a disarming gentleness, a twinkling sense of humour, and great generosity with time and ideas. Some even dared face him over the chess board.

Singer was married for 67 years to Ilse, who died in 2001. A strong woman and a determined campaigner on her own account, she tolerated his all-embracing commitment to work as well as his domestic incapability.

Singer is survived by his son, an elder son having predeceased him.

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Sir Hans Singer - The Life and Work of a Development Economist

D. John Shaw

This is the first biography of a world-famous pioneering development economist, Sir Hans W. Singer, who is better known throughout the developing world than any other economist, living or dead. It gives a detailed account of the way in which the 'twists of fate' led him to becoming a leading development economist. It contains a thematic synthesis of all his major theoretical and conceptual work and of the many initiatives in which he has been involved to solve the problems of developing countries.

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