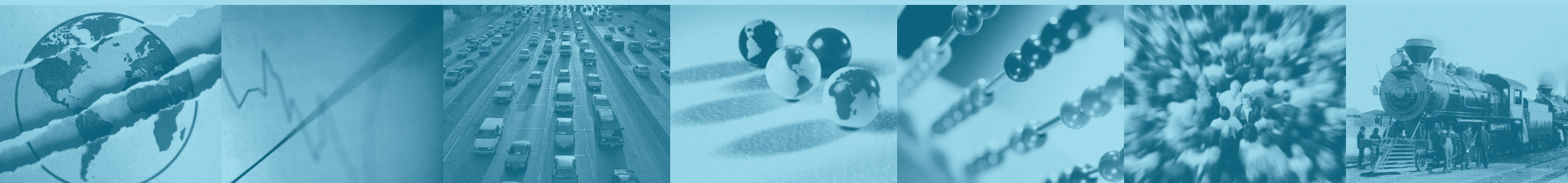


OBITUARY

# Anton Barten (1930-2016)



July 13, 2016

Anton Barten passed away on June 15, 2016 at the age of 86. We lost an inspiring researcher and a true gentleman, who has been very important for both the Department of Economics at KU Leuven and CORE. Ton Barten was a Fellow of the Econometric Society and a corresponding member of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Ton started his scientific career at the Econometric Institute of the “Nederlandse Economische Hogeschool”, now Erasmus University Rotterdam, an initiative of Jan Tinbergen and Henri Theil, who became the supervisor of Ton’s PhD thesis. The topic of his thesis was the empirical analysis of consumer behavior. He derived the conditions that can be imposed on demand systems when consumers are rational. Importantly, as stated in the report of the Nobel Prize Committee awarding the Nobel Prize to Angus Deaton, “the first attempt to test whether or not [these] properties [...] can be rejected was carried out by Barten [...], who estimated [...] the Rotterdam model (after the Dutch economists who first formulated it), using aggregate Dutch data.” As a matter of fact, the conditions were rejected over and over again, but this did not at all discourage Barten from his theoretical work. On the contrary, throughout his career he remained a strong believer in the necessary interaction between theory and empirical research.

In 1966 Jacques Drèze took the initiative to set up CORE, the Center for Operations Research and Econometrics. CORE was a common interdisciplinary project of the Université catholique de Louvain and KU Leuven. As part of the agreement, KU Leuven was required to hire a top researcher to be affiliated with CORE. Both universities enthusiastically invited Anton Barten. Ton, who was at the time active in the Dutch Central Planning Bureau but preferred an academic career, accepted the offer and moved to Belgium.

During his first ten years in Leuven, when CORE was still located there, Anton Barten’s scientific production was impressive. He pursued his research on the specification of complete demand systems. This resulted in many influential publications in top journals such as *Econometrica* and the *Review of Economic Studies*. His most cited paper is the first article in the very first issue of the *European Economic Review*. A second field of interest was the construction of

macroeconomic policy models, for which he could build on his experience at the Central Planning Bureau. From an academic perspective, this work was less innovative. However, inspired by Tinbergen, Barten considered this an important contribution to a better society. The European Commission and the Belgian Planning Bureau have extensively used the models he constructed.

At CORE, the place to be, he met top economic researchers from all over the world. He became Research Director from 1970 to 1974. Lifelong friendships were built there, for example with Jacques Drèze. Foreign visitors were received at his home and his wife Hetty, along with Monique Drèze, organized the social life at CORE. Ton became a visiting professor at the universities of Berkeley, Chicago and Philadelphia.

After CORE left Leuven to move to Louvain-la-Neuve, Ton Barten remained a key figure in the Department of Economics at KU Leuven. He served as chairman of the Department in the seventies. He was a very committed teacher, who prepared beautiful and elegant lecture notes for his students. He organized regular meetings with Dutch econometricians and, along with his econometrics students, he organized visits with institutions that applied econometrics to policy analysis, such as the Belgian Planning Bureau. At the same time, he remained a popular occasional poet at student gatherings.

In the late 1980s Barten was involved in setting up the Center for Economic Research (CentER) at Tilburg University in the Netherlands. He became the first research director of CentER, and in 2008 Barten was awarded an honorary doctorate by Tilburg University for his role in the foundation of CentER.

Barten was a great supervisor to many PhD students in various areas of econometrics. His students were always recognized as co-authors in the case of joint

research. Ton brought his students in Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve into contact with economics as a science, with both its strengths and weaknesses. He was an altruistic, modest, inspiring and erudite scholar.

His main lasting contribution to economics is most likely the concept of the “Barten scale”. During a trip with his family, when they wanted to buy lemonade, he multiplied the price of lemonade by six: two parents, four children, six lemonades. He pondered with the idea that, when people live together, shared consumption makes it possible to realize returns to scale. How will consumers allocate their budget in these circumstances? Ton wrote down his answer for the first time somewhere in a hotel room: the idea of using a traditional demand system, but adjusting the relative prices of the commodities to take into account the degree to which these commodities are shared with other household members. The Barten scale was first proposed in 1964, but his original intuition has remained relevant to the present day: it plays a central role in a recent paper (May 2016) on this subject by Pierre-André Chiappori, published in *The Economic Journal*.

Barten delivered an obituary speech for Jan Tinbergen at the Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences. On that occasion he expressed his admiration for Tinbergen, but the words he used to express this admiration are also directly applicable to his own career: “The life and work of Anton Barten are an example, a rare example, of high quality scientific research, inspired by a deep social commitment. With his scientific work, he wanted to serve society. As an economist he was looking for the ideal organization of the economy, balancing efficiency and justice, not as a purely theoretical construct or as an ideological dream, but as a real-life project.”

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