

Remembering Ignacy Sachs

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I was fortunate to meet Ignacy Sachs in October 1970 in Paris, at a meeting organized by the OECD on global challenges for science and technology policy. He had an enormous influence on my way of thinking and professional life. He became a mentor and dear friend.

We met frequently over the following decades in many different places, and I stayed with him and his wife Viola several times at their country house in Moulicent. Those visits were memorable. Ignacy and I would spend many hours discussing economic, social, environmental and political issues, until Viola interrupted us, pulled me out and said something like this: “enough of this rationalist nonsense, time to talk about emotions and feelings”. She and I would then spend quite some time discussing her provocative and iconoclastic views on Herman Melville, and how emotional, aesthetic and sensitive considerations shaped what we are and how we behave.

During one of such visits, we went to the Chartres Cathedral and Ignacy bought a photo of the stone carving of Aristotle to give me, saying he had one at his studio in Warsaw and wanted me to have one. You can see it behind me, next to Ignacy’s picture.

Now, turning to the many things I learned from Ignacy I would like to mention two: his conceptions about political economy and his ideas on the relation between human activities and the biophysical environment.

Ignacy had a keen sense of the balance between political and economic considerations in shaping social and individual behavior. He emphasized that both the State and the market were human creations, not immutable entities that exist on their own, and explored in depth the implications of such an idea. This helped me considerably through my long academic and professional career, as well as during my time as a politician. Ignacy introduced me to the work of Karl Polanyi and Michal Kalecki, which balanced the neoclassical economics perspective I had acquired from my professors at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. Many of my political decisions and choices were informed by the moderate approach to market forces and public policies that I learned from Ignacy.

His monumental and pioneering work on ecodevelopment, stressing why it is essential to incorporate environmental sustainability considerations in economic policymaking, has now become mainstream. His collaboration with Maurice Strong in the 1972 and 1992 United Nations conferences on environment and development reshaped our ways of thinking and led to new approaches to development strategies and policies. Now that these ideas are common sense, it is easy to forget how important and influential his contributions were at those times.

I just reread a special issue of a Mexican 1974 political economy journal, devoted integrally to Ignacy's work with commentaries from leading scholars and practitioners. It clearly shows he was ahead of his time. His analysis and proposals were prescient and could have been made today and be even more highly relevant.

By the way, I have recently referred to his writings on the necessary transition towards a "biocivilization" to supersede the period in which humanity has been depending largely on fossil fuels to provide energy. Championing the use of renewable energy, Ignacy foresaw the new epoch that is slowly unfolding before us.

My recollections of Ignacy would not be complete without mentioning his wonderful disposition, generosity, eagerness to teach and help, and his sense of humor. There was not a single occasion we met in which we did not end sharing jokes and laughing.

Finally, I would like to mention how fortunate I have been to also become friends with Ignacy and Viola's children. Wladimir joined the Social Systems Science program at the University of Pennsylvania, where I studied and taught; sadly, we lost him too early. Celine joined the World Bank at the time I was Chief of Strategic Planning there. She and Karol have remained my good friends over the years.

Let us remember and revere the memory of Ignacy Sachs, an extraordinary thinker, great mentor, wonderful man and dear friend./.