

GÉRARD DE BERNIS (1928-2010),

IN

MEMORY<sup>1</sup>

Arturo Guillén and Gregorio Vidal  
Department of Economics  
Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana,  
Unidad Iztapalapa, in México.

A great heart and a lucid mind ceased to exist on Christmas Eve of 2010. After suffering from a sad disease that deprived him of his fruitful intellectual life for many decades, the French economist Gérard Destanne De Bernis died of an unexpected heart attack. Gérard de Bernis is without a doubt one of the most important French economists of the twentieth century. A student of Maurice Byé and François Perroux – another twenty first century giant of French economic thinking -, De Bernis was a Marxist and communist by conviction, a fecund thinker, but also, in his own way, a man of action. As a university student in France at the end of the forties, De Bernis was president of the National Union of Students and director of the student newspaper *La Quinzaine*. Named Assistant Professor at 25 years of age, he was assigned to Tunisia, where he participated in the independence struggles of the former French colony, which earned him sanctions from the French government and a forced return to his country.

Unlike many intellectuals from France and other developing countries – including Marxists- that revel in eurocentrism, Gérard was always a third world man, an authentic internationalist. He was an advisor to various African governments that achieved independence. He worked closely with the revolutionary government of Boumediene in

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<sup>1</sup> Translation of the Spanish by Wesley Marshall (Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Unidad Iztapalapa in Mexico).

Algeria, significantly influencing its economic strategy<sup>2</sup>. He maintained ties with governments and unions in Vietnam, Mozambique, Congo- Brazzaville, Morocco and Iraq, among other countries. He supported the creation of the independent research center, ARCIS, during Pinochet's dictatorship. He was an emeritus professor at the Université de Grenoble and president of the Institute of mathematical science and applied economics in Paris (ISMEA, from its initials in French), where he succeeded its founder François Perroux in 1982, until his illness forced him from his post.

De Bernis's work is vast and rich, although scantily diffused, even in his home country of France. Among his principle books and articles are *Relations Économiques Internationales* (1987)<sup>3</sup>, with Maurice Byé; two tomes collectively signed by the Groupe de Recherche sur la Régulation de la Économie Capitaliste (GRREC) titled *Crise et Régulation*<sup>4</sup> and various articles in the series "Théories de la régulation" in the journal *Économies et sociétés*, published by the ISMEA<sup>5</sup>. His only book in Spanish, *El capitalismo contemporáneo* (1988), was published in Mexico<sup>6</sup>.

The book *Relations Économiques Internacionales* corresponds to the fifth edition of a text by Maurice Byé. The document was completely rewritten by De Bernis, but as he highlighted in the preface, in agreement with the widow of Byé, his name was maintained as recognition to the intellectual debt that De Bernis owed to his professor. The edition totaled 1,336 pages, in which many aspects of international economic relations are presented. The most relevant theoretical references are expounded upon and the theory of general economic equilibrium applied to international economic relations is explored.

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<sup>2</sup> G. de Bernis « Industries industrialisantes et contenu d'une politique d'intégration régionale » in *Économie Appliquée*. T. XIX, N. 3-4, Paris, 1966, ISMEA.

<sup>3</sup> M. Byé and G. Destanne de Bernis. *Relations économiques internationales*. Paris, 1987, Dalloz, 5<sup>th</sup> edition.

<sup>4</sup> GRREC. *Crise et régulation*. Recueil de textes, 1979-1983. Grenoble, 1983, Université Pierre Mendès France y GRREC. *Crise et Régulation*. Recueil de textes 1983-1989. Grenoble, 1991, Université Pierre Mendès University, France.

<sup>5</sup> G. De Bernis. "Sur quelques concepts nécessaires à la théorie de la régulation", *Économies et Sociétés*, Série Théories de la régulation, T. XIX, n. 1, Grenoble, 1985 (janvier), ISMEA, y G. De Bernis. "Les contradictions des relations financières internationales dans la crise", *Économies et Sociétés*, Série Théories de la régulation, T. XX, n. 3, Grenoble, 1988 (May), ISMEA.

<sup>6</sup> G. de Bernis. *El capitalismo contemporáneo*. Mexico, 1988, Editorial Nuestro Tiempo.

Within this context, the pure theory of international trade and several of its variants and developments are debated, as is international monetary theory. Only then does De Bernis proceed towards developing an alternative construction: the regulation theory applied to international economic relations. In this part of the text, once the historical bases have been established, De Bernis proposes his theoretical contribution to international economic relationships. The central concepts are regulation, productive systems, crisis and stability in the process of accumulation.

The two volumes of *Crise et Regulation* are the result of the collective work and debate of the research group created by De Bernis toward the end of the seventies in the Université de Grenoble. The texts compiled in these two volumes exhibit the results of research on substantial themes of economic theory in which there is a systematic debate over the fundamental proposals of orthodox theory. Some of the results of this group's research is compiled in the series on the regulation theory in the journal *Économies et sociétés*, published by the ISMEA. The book on contemporary capitalism published in Mexico includes a text that proffers a readers guide for the understanding of the regulation of capitalist economies to the extent of the theory's developed at the time<sup>7</sup>. Another chapter examines the theoretical proposal of regulation, discussing the theory of general economic equilibrium and proposing an alternative hypothesis: regulation<sup>8</sup>.

De Bernis was one of the founders of what has come to be known as the French regulation school, which is often associated with the names Michel Aglietta and Robert Boyer. Regulation theory sprouted from a creative reading of the crisis of the seventies, and represents one of the most original contributions - together with financial postkeynesianism and the long wave theory -, for the understanding of the "great crises" of capitalism.

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<sup>7</sup> G. De Bernis. "Guía de lectura", in *El Capitalismo Contemporáneo*, Mexico, 1988, Nuestro Tiempo Editors, pp. 17-80

<sup>8</sup> De Bernis presented an initial version of the text at the Institute of Economics in the Academy of Sciences in Hungary in January of 1977. De Bernis published in 1977 "Régulation ou équilibre dans l'analyse économique", in *L'idée de régulation dans les sciences*, edited by G. Gadoffre, A. Lichnerowicz and F. Perroux, Paris, 1977, Maloine, pp. 85-101. The book is the result of presentations at the Collège de France.

Unlike Aglietta and Boyer, who highlight the role of the creation and adaptation of institutions in the regulation of capitalism in the face of its contradictions, De Bernis, without omitting their importance in the long term evolution of this system, placed emphasis on the objective contradictions of the mode of capitalist production, and in the concrete forms that these assumed within the development of capitalism in each of its phases. In particular, De Bernis placed at the center of his theory the two laws of profit analyzed by K. Marx, which are the motors of capitalist accumulation: the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall and the distribution of the rate of profit, or the tendency toward the formation of an average rate of profit. For him (at the risk of simplifying to an extreme such a rich line of thought in this brief note), regulation can be understood as the effective articulation of these two laws of profit, which although distinct and presented separately in Marx's *Capital*, obey a singular process governed by the law of benefit maximization. When the articulation of these two laws was effective, which is to say, when the countertendencies to the lowering of the rate of profit and the formation of the average rate of profit operated in an adequate way, the system – according to De Bernis-, was regulated and the reproduction of capital flowed in a stable fashion. To the contrary, when the effectiveness of these countertendencies diminished, the average rate of profit lowered, and a ferocious competition unfolded between capitalists, which caused the system of the distribution of surplus value as a function of average rates of profits to break down. In this moment, the *mode of regulation* ceased to function and a “great crisis” unfolded, a process of uncertain duration and resolution, which implied the destruction and restructuring of the productive systems in force at the time.

We are indebted to De Bernis for the proposal that “the great crises”, independent of their specific differences, transit through two overarching phases: in the first inflationary phase the predominant tendency is for national productive systems to expand internationally, and in the second deflationary and protectionist phase, the ravages of the

crisis push national states to withdraw into themselves<sup>9</sup>. The reality of capitalism during the last four decades has validated the richness of his intuition. The last years of the sixties and the decade of the seventies are examples of the predominance of the tendencies towards inflation and international economic projection, while the eighties – with the external debt crisis as the point of inflection -, represent the beginning of a deflationary era (much different from that which was manifested during the depression of the thirties), that has led to the financialization of the economy and its growing instability, as has been manifested by diverse financial crises of systemic proportions in the so called emerging countries during the nineties, finally culminating in the dotcom crisis of 2000- 2001 and the current global crisis, which originated in the banking and credit system of the United States in 2007. Regarding the external debt crisis of 1982, De Bernis wrote what was, perhaps, his last academically important work, a brilliant text<sup>10</sup> that analyzes the origin of the external debt crisis of the peripheral countries, the impossibility of these countries to pay their debt, and the crisis's role in the transition towards financial globalization and financial systems that no are longer based on bank credit, but rather on securitized financial systems, based on the issue of debt obligations.

In terms of the global crisis that now envelops Europe, De Bernis anticipated in 1987 the difficulties that the European Union is currently undergoing. He was, in effect, a eurosceptic. He considered that the Euro, unlike other strong currencies of developed countries (dollar, pound or yen) was not supported by a national productive system or much less a State. The then European Economic Community (EEC) did not constitute a productive system, but rather an integration of national productive systems decided upon by transnational corporations and the governments of the region. Given its European leadership, the process of integration was from birth dominated by Germany, the

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<sup>9</sup> G. de Bernis. “Guía de lectura” in *El capitalismo contemporáneo*. Ob. Cit. p. 68-75.

<sup>10</sup> G. de Bernis. « De l'urgence de abandonner la dette de périphéries» *Économies et Sociétés* N. 37, Paris, 2000, ISMEA. A translation can be found in Gregorio Vidal and Arturo Guillén. “De la urgencia a abandonar las deudas de las periferias in *Repensar la teoría del desarrollo en un contexto de globalización*. Homenaje a Celso Furtado. Buenos Aires, 2007, CLACSO

potential regional leader. As stated by Gérard:

“(…) The Europe of six, nine, ten countries (even twelve) does not constitute a productive system. Of course we can all describe the productive apparatuses of the different countries under the general title of a European productive system. But this is just a formal exercise. We cannot reduce the expression of the productive system to the juxtaposition of a certain number of productive capacities (…) The idea of a productive system poses the notion of coherence, a sectorial coherence that is autonomous in the determination of income, and the existence of adjustment procedures between productive structures and consumption.”<sup>11</sup>

And in another work, De Bernis highlighted the forces behind European integration:

There are no – he affirmed- firms from Europe that choose to work at the level of the EEC, nor are there important fusions of capital from firms originating in the countries of the EEC (…) States have no other reasons beyond ideological ones to transfer to Europe a part of their powers. And given that they have behaved in this way, there was no enforcement tied to the realization of a European productive system (…) The EEC is a regrouping of countries of unequal dimensions and power”.<sup>12</sup>

In other words, the difficulties that Europe is exhibiting in the current crisis are not new, but rather reveal the original problems of the EU. If a European productive system does not exist, as De Bernis posed, there cannot be a European currency worthy of this name. In a monetary-credit production economy such as modern capitalism, productive systems and currencies cannot exist separately, given that they are part of the same structure. The Euro is the new name for expressing the dominance of the strongest countries, starting with Germany as the potential leader of the group.

In line with his third world vocation, Gérard de Bernis always maintained a relationship with the academic world of Mexico and Latin America. He was in Mexico for the first time in 1977, invited by Ángel de la Vega, the then coordinator of the Economics Faculty’s posgraduate program at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de

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<sup>11</sup> G. de Bernis. *El capitalismo contemporaneo*. Ob. cit. p. 262.

<sup>12</sup> G. de Bernis and M. Byé. *Relations Économiques Internationales* Ob cit. p. 1199.

México (UNAM). During the first half of the eighties, through the initiative of Arturo Guillén, De Bernis was present, together with other outstanding national and international academics, in two important colloquiums, organized by the Institute of Economic Research (Instituto de Investigaciones Económicas) of the UNAM, which planted the seeds for the two collective books<sup>13</sup>. In subsequent years, Gérard de Bernis's academic relationship with Mexico was maintained through the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana Iztapalapa, and specifically through various of Gregorio Vidal's proposals. In 1993, the ISMEA, in conjunction with the Economics Department of the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana Iztapalapa and the Economics Faculty of the Universidad de Guadalajara (UdeG), organized the International Colloquium "For an alternative policy: a world with jobs for all" at the UdeG in Primavera, Jalisco. Once again, an ample group of academics participated. The document presented by De Bernis is without a doubt of great relevance for the present day<sup>14</sup>, as it discusses the problematic of employment for everyone without resorting to the argument that paid work is offers the only route to its solution. He considers the problem of technological advance and the need to maintain systematic job creating programs and foresees the advance of deflation as a part of the crisis's doing. In this context, high levels of unemployment will become present in developed economies, and these will even be compatible with a certain level of economic growth.

Towards the middle of the nineties and in subsequent years, thanks to the initiative of Gregorio Vidal, then director of the division of social sciences and humanities at our current academic center, Gérard de Bernis participated in numerous academic activities. Of particular importance amongst these was a seminar focused on the crisis and Latin America's situation, in which Gérard de Bernis was the principle speaker. In these years

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<sup>13</sup> A. Aguilar, P. Boccara and G. de Bernis et al. *Naturaleza de la actual crisis*. Mexico, 1986 and G. de Bernis, B. Fine, A. Guillén et al. *La fase actual del capitalismo*, Mexico, 1985, Editorial Nuestro Tiempo.

<sup>14</sup> The text was once again published: G. De Bernis. "for an alternative policy: work for all in all parts of the world", in *Ola Financiera*, Classics section, num. 4. Mexico, 2009, Instituto de Investigaciones Económicas y Facultad de Economía, UNAM, pp. 191-206.

the 38<sup>th</sup> number of the Revista Iztapalapa was published with the general theme of economics and development, including a text of De Bernis that deals with the experiences of several developing countries under the dual premise of accumulation and durable development<sup>15</sup>. En 1998, Gérard de Bernis received the prize for the best article published in the Mexican journal *Problemas del Desarrollo*. His text was titled “¿Se puede pensar en una periodización del pensamiento económico? <<Can we think of a periodization of economic thought? >>”, and like in other publications, the author debates substantial elements of economic theory. De Bernis states: “the impossibility of theory to maintain its indifference in the face of reality, suggests the need for further reflection on the real fundamentals of the evolution of theory”<sup>16</sup>. Based on other research that has demonstrated that the history of economic thought is not linear, De Bernis discusses the relationship between the alternation between periods of stability and instability in capitalists’ economies and the evolution of economic thought. Regulation is once again a central concept in his analysis.

However, perhaps the most important legacy that De Bernis left us was his initiative to create the *Red Eurolatinoamericana de Estudios del Desarrollo Celso Furtado*<sup>17</sup> ([www.redcelsofurtado.edu.mx](http://www.redcelsofurtado.edu.mx)). The Celso Furtado network was established as a product of a meeting of an ample group of academics from Latin America and Europe in Paris in February of 1998. Institutionally, it is the fruit of the collaboration of the UNAM’s Instituto de Investigaciones Económicas (at the time under the directorship of Alicia Girón), the economics department of the UAM-Iztapalapa and the ISMEA. In this reunion, Gérard de Bernis dwelled on the notable absence of development studies in the academic programs of the developing world, but also on the growing lack of study in

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<sup>15</sup> G. De Bernis, “Desarrollo durable y acumulación: ¿Son concluyentes las experiencias del sur?”, in *Iztapalapa, Revista de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades*, year 16, num. 38, Mexico, 1996, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana Iztapalapa, pp. 91-128.

<sup>16</sup> G. De Bernis. “¿Se puede pensar en una periodización del pensamiento económico?”, *Revista Problemas del Desarrollo*, vol. 28, num. 110, Mexico, 1997 (July-September), Instituto de Investigaciones Económicas, UNAM, pp. 43-85.

<sup>17</sup> The Celso Furtado Eurolatinamerican network of development studies.

this area in developed countries. At the time, many had accepted the idea that globalization and the triumph of the markets solved the problem of optimal resource allocation. Furthermore, this belief meant that economic development ceased to be a theme relevant to economics. Such notions constituted a line of thinking far removed from the dynamics of international economics and the processes of change that were underway at the time in developing countries. More recent changes in the world economy underlined the fact that development is a project and that its realization is the task for certain social forces.

Upon the request of De Bernis, the Network took the name of Celso Furtado, the renowned Brazilian economist, with whom Gérard maintained a long standing friendship and academic relationship. Both had been students of Maurice Byé. Furtado was in France at the end of the forties for his doctoral studies and his dissertation was directed by Byé. Furtado was present at the mentioned meeting and from then on until his death, participated in the network's academic program. The Red Celso Furtado created a vehicle for scholarly exchange between European and Latin American academics on issues related to the problems of development that has continued to focus on the ongoing processes of change in Latin America and the evolution of the global crisis itself.

Upon hearing the news of Gérard de Bernis's death, Theotonio Dos Santos stated that it was "a great loss for contemporary economic thought". In the message sent by Gérard's closest colleague to notify us of his passing, Rolande Borrelly suggested that the best that those of us who knew him and were enriched by his teachings can do, is "to conserve his memory and keep his thinking alive".

*México, Distrito Federal, December of 2010.*