Mr. Boulding and the Americans

Kenneth Boulding’s Atlantic crossing on the SS Laconia en route to the University of Chicago had at least one unintended effect on his time in America. By happenstance, Professor Joseph A. Schumpeter from Harvard University was traveling on the same ship. Since the trip took nine days they became well acquainted. Boulding had a copy of his Oxford thesis, which Schumpeter took the time to read and they discussed at length. That thesis was lost at some point, which Boulding suggested was of no great loss to the profession. Schumpeter convinced Boulding to visit him at Harvard while he was in the United States. On his way to Chicago, Boulding traveled through New York and westward through Indiana. He was surprised by the forested landscape of America since his impression of the country came largely from cowboy movies.

The University of Chicago was an exciting place to be at this time, and a natural fit for Boulding. He wrote to a friend that Chicago was “Jam with Nuts on It” (Kerman, 1974, p. 236). He felt right at home in America and loved it immediately. His diverse childhood in Liverpool conditioned him to be accepting of people from all backgrounds and appreciate their different viewpoints. He also appreciated the fact that in America no one cared who his grandfathers and great-grandfathers were, but rather who he was. America was a place where one’s ability trumped one’s lineage. There was still a class system, but it was very different from the one he grew up with. Interestingly, he said that the University of Chicago had many elements of Oxford’s architecture. He wrote to his mother, “There are bits of Oxford lying all around the place” (E. Boulding, 1984a, p. 88). Boulding wrote many letters about his time in America and all of them gave a positive, happy picture of his life (very different from his letters while at Oxford). The only disagreement he seemed to find with Chicago was over the weather, which he called “abominable.” He also writes about how the talk of gangsters at this time was overblown by the media because he never saw anything resembling the Chicago Mob while he was there.
Boulding’s advisor at Chicago was Jacob Viner, who “flipped through [his thesis] and said, ‘Oxford, no footnotes’” (Boulding, 1989b, p. 371). Viner then tried to convince Boulding to take a PhD at Chicago. After he explained the requirements (courses, exams, etc.), Boulding decided he would rather spend the next two years on his terms—reading, studying, and writing what he wanted rather than what the university wanted him to learn. The restricting structure of American graduate school was different from what he was used to. After all, his one year of graduate study at Oxford required him to meet with his advisor every couple of weeks (with little influence other than a good cup of tea) and the rest of the time was spent studying what Boulding wanted. This independent research philosophy is still common for Oxford today. He wrote to his Oxford friend (Fred Watts), “Many more quarters of the stuff that passes for education (Hee Haw) in this place would reduce my mental capacities to nil.” His real criticism was that the American system encouraged people to learn limited information only to pass exams and not retain the material learned. In today’s vernacular, we would say it is the difference between surface learning and deep learning.

This does not mean Boulding did not understand the value of having a degree associated with his name. In 1939, he applied for an MA from Oxford, which only required waiting several years after graduation and submitting a fee, which Boulding did and got his masters. The doctorate degree at Oxford was similar, only it did require a thesis (of sorts). No clear requirements for the degree existed. The degree decision was rather arbitrary. The contribution (thesis) had to be original and have an influence on the learning of science; and at least one-year had to have passed before it could be submitted for a degree. Whoever the judges decided should get a doctorate got a doctorate—simple as that. So, in 1943, Boulding submitted his book *Economic Analysis* along with £10 to Oxford University. But, in January 1944, he heard his application was denied.

Boulding took classes and was heavily engaged at Chicago. He probably learned more by adopting his Oxford-style education to the Chicago structure. There were a group of graduate students who held a seminar, where each week they read and discussed Keynes’s work, which Boulding very much enjoyed. He also remembers learning a great deal from Henry Schultz about econometrics and who arguably had a lasting impact on Boulding’s view of statistics. Boulding writes,

Those were the days when it took a whole afternoon to work out regression and correlation coefficients on what we still call ‘adding machines.’ I remember Professor Schultz coming around us,