

*At a Meeting of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences on May 6, 2014, the following Minute was placed upon the records.*

## DAVID SAUL LANDES

Born: April 29, 1924  
Died: August 17, 2013

David Saul Landes was among the finest economic historians of his age. He tackled the most important subject of his field: why some nations are poor whereas others are rich. His many volumes and papers, taken as a whole, form an ever-widening arc, from the specific to the general, from the national to the global. Toward the end of his career he returned to the specific, bringing the arc full circle. Interweaving the grand sweep of his work is the Landes notion that cultural distinctions temper economic and technical changes.

The scholarly work begins with a 1949 article on the entrepreneur and the French economy. Why French firms were smaller, more family-oriented, and less capitalized than the British, German, and American was, to Landes, due to the longer history of aristocracy in France. “Ideas once formed are as powerful as the strongest material forces.” He spent parts of the next decade on *Bankers and Pashas* (1958), his Ph.D. dissertation and first book, a story of international finance between French bankers and the Egyptian government during the 1860s. International finance allowed the Egyptian economy to ride high on the economic wave from the cotton famine induced by the American Civil War. But Landes’s account is less a tale of the cold calculus of French bankers than it is of personalities and greed. The carnival of credit that ensued would have been hilarious if not for the history of economic pain and bitterness that followed. The work, which began as part of Landes’s quest to understand the entrepreneur in French economic development, expanded the intellectual arc that is his legacy.

Landes’s greatest achievement, *The Unbound Prometheus* (1969), was begun in 1954, when he was asked to write a chapter on technological change and European industrial development for the *Cambridge Economic History of Europe*. He was soon involved in the “seamless web of the historian’s history,” and the enormous chapter became a book. Europe, and later much of the world, broke free of Malthusian economic constraints through a series of critical technological innovations that became known as the “industrial revolution.” But only with continuing advances in productivity, not just the accumulation of physical capital, could economic growth be sustained. Why Hercules unbound Prometheus in the eighteenth century and why in Europe is answered by Landes by “the will to mastery, the rational approach to problems that we call the scientific method, the competition for wealth and power. Nothing—not pride, nor honour, nor authority, nor credulity—could stand in the way of these new values.” The scholarly expanse of Landes had greatly widened, but the importance of cultural superiority remained.

One technological change stood out to Landes, who was an expert in horology and an avid collector of clocks and watches. *Revolution in Time* (1983) concerns that history and how these, often overlooked, innovations transformed the rhythms of daily life and the broader economy of commerce. Time pieces magnified the productivity gains of the industrial technologies described in *Unbound* through the better scheduling of goods, mail, railroads, the military and workers, whose time was no longer their own.

His most widely cited volume, *Wealth and Poverty of Nations* (1998), expands the arc to include the entire globe and ponders the question: Why the West before the rest? Landes's answer begins with geography. Europe has a temperate climate, but so does China. Climate was a necessary but not sufficient condition for sustained technological change. Europe, not China, is crisscrossed by mountains giving rise to political and social fragmentation. Europe, as Landes notes, did not have all of its eggs in one basket. Its competing systems produced political and social institutions that were ultimately conducive to sustained economic growth and they gave rise to people who embraced and accepted novelty unhampered by tradition. Europe was endowed with a distinctive culture, not just the Gulf Stream. His final book, *Dynasties* (2006), takes his intellectual legacy back full circle to families and entrepreneurs. But the families of this work are internationally dispersed including the Toyodas, Schlumbergers, Fords, Barings, and Agnellis.

Landes's books, like the watches and clocks that fascinated him, are brilliantly crafted with vivid, eloquent, and fluent prose. He wrote of the time pieces, "I was smitten—caught by the combination of mechanical ingenuity, craftsmanship, artistry, and elegance." Readers are equally smitten by Landes's books. In a field that has increasingly eschewed the narrative, Landes kept it center stage. *Unbound Prometheus* has been the starting point for economic historians and undergraduate history students for almost a half century.

David Landes was born in New York City in 1924. He was a prodigy who skipped so many grades that he received his A.B. from City College in 1942, after which he enrolled at Harvard to do a Ph.D. in History. He received an M.A. in 1943 but then enlisted and served in the U.S. Signal Corps. He later returned to graduate work at Harvard, was a Junior Fellow from 1950 to 1953, and received his Ph.D. in History in 1953. He married in 1944 Sonia Tarnopol, whom he had met when he was 15 years old. Sonia predeceased him by four months after 69 years of a marriage that was, to those who knew them, a loving and warm relationship between equals.

David Landes taught at Columbia University and then at Berkeley until 1964, when he joined the Harvard History Department. He moved to the Economics Department in 1977. He retired in 1997 as Coolidge Professor of History and Professor of Economics. Landes was active in many causes and programs at Harvard. He took over as the chair of the Committee on Degrees in Social Studies in 1981 and remained in that position until

1993. He became a senior fellow in the Society of Fellows in 1987. He was dedicated to issues concerning Judaism and Israel and was active in Harvard's Hillel.

David Landes was a historian among economists and an economist among historians—a rare crossover and an exceptional scholar in the world of ideas.

Respectfully submitted,

Benjamin Friedman  
Henry Rosovsky  
Claudia Goldin, Chair