

Martin Shubik, Economist and Game Theory Pioneer, Dies at 92

By Sam Roberts

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Martin Shubik, an economist whose prescient visions of a computerized world and pioneering applications of game theory to everyday life enlivened what has been described as the dismal science, died on Aug. 22 at his home in Branford, Conn. He was 92.

The cause was complications of inclusion body myositis, an inflammatory muscle disease, his daughter, Claire Shubik-Richards, said.

Professor Shubik, the son of Jewish immigrants from Europe, was born in New York, raised in England and evacuated to Canada before the Blitz in 1940.

He earned a doctorate at Princeton, where he immersed himself in an intellectual caldron of professors and fellow fledgling mathematicians including Oskar Morgenstern, Albert William Tucker, Thomas Whitin and John Nash, the future Nobel laureate, with whom he shared a dormitory suite.

Although he considered himself a social scientist and a “micro-microeconomist,” Professor Shubik, who taught at the Yale School of Management, disdained purely theoretical analysis and was nothing if not practical. (He applied to Princeton instead of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he said, mainly because the application was much shorter.)

As early as the mid-1960s, he was predicting that “computing machines” would become standard in homes and schools by 1990 and that “society would fall to bits of its own weight” without them.

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He warned, however, that the computers ultimately would be in human hands, and that the people responsible for them had better be not merely smart but also nice.

Professor Shubik published hundreds of research papers, delving into subjects including terrorism, football, nuclear strategy, antitrust and the demographics of inclusion body myositis, the disease from which he suffered (in a paper he wrote with his son-in-law, Seth Richards-Shubik, also an economics professor).

In the mid-1970s, he and Albert Madansky of the University of Chicago conducted a blind taste test to determine which of four Manhattan delicatessens produced the best sandwiches.

When self-appointed deli mavens critiqued his methodology and stodgy economists chided his flippancy, Professor Shubik wrote that his research represented “a modest attempt to preserve for the annals, before it became too late, a record of the Great American Vanishing Species known as the Pastrami and the Corned Beef Sannawiches.” He also issued a warning: “Run, my friend — do not walk, for time is short and the world is about to be buried in bran flakes.” (In fact, all four of the delis the professors tested are now defunct.)

With Lloyd S. Shapley, a Nobel-winning economist, Professor Shubik developed an index to measure the power wielded by coalitions within groups ranging from shareholders to legislatures.

At Princeton, they, John Nash and another mathematician were among the creators of an economic strategy game, “So Long Sucker,” in which four players can make, and renege on, agreements with one another.

Professor Shubik also invented the mathematical model for “Dollar Auction,” a game that illustrates “escalation of commitment” because while the winner collects the bill, the second-highest bidder loses whatever he bid.

Martin Shubik was born on March 24, 1926, in Manhattan to Joseph Shubik, who was born in Russia and was in New York working for a Scottish flax and linen company, and Sara (Soloveyichik) Shubik.

Two years after Martin was born, the family returned to England, where he was raised until the onslaught of German air raids, when he, his mother and his sister were sent to join relatives in Canada. He finished high school there.

He did well in algebra but poorly in geometry. (“I see well in many dimensions as long as the dimensions are around two,” he said in an interview last year with the Institute for Operations Research and the Management Sciences.)

He served in the Royal Canadian Navy as a lieutenant, graduated in 1947 from the University of Toronto with a bachelor’s degree in mathematics and earned a master’s in political economy there after writing his thesis on the Incas’ use of knotted strings for accounting and inventory.

He stumbled into game theory as a specialty after he was required in college to review a book and randomly chose “The Theory of Games and Economic Behavior,” by John von Neumann and Morgenstern.

After earning his doctorate at Princeton, he worked as a consultant for General Electric and for IBM, whose thinking about research scientists he later described to The New York Times: “Well, these are like giant pandas in a zoo. You don’t really quite know what a giant panda is, but you sure as hell know (1) you paid a lot of money for it, and (2) other people want it; therefore it is valuable and therefore it’s got to be well fed.”

In 1963 he joined the faculty at Yale, where he became professor of mathematical institutional economics in the School of Management. He became an emeritus professor in 2007.

In addition to his daughter, he is survived by his wife, Julie (Kahn) Shubik; two grandchildren; and his sister, Irene Shubik, a television producer. His brother, Philippe, a cancer researcher, died in 2004.

While he was an expert on computer modeling and wrote or contributed to a dozen books, including “The Aggressive Conservative Investor” (2008), Professor Shubik explained in 1981 that it was impossible to predict any relationship between the economy and the stock market. Still, he netted several million dollars by investing more than 90 percent of his assets in stocks.

In so-called war games, too, he believed that variables and alternatives left the conclusions open to human analysis. “It’s a question of comparative Rasputinology,” he said in 1978, “a question of which czar listens to which Rasputin.”

What Professor Shubik predicted confidently was that scientific knowledge would continue to expand exponentially, and while he was willing to cede questions like whether God exists to cosmology and theology, he said the answer might lie at a boundary within the reach of forthcoming technology.

“I’m not worried about the answer,” he said. “I’m worried about the journey.”

Correction: September 1, 2018

An earlier version of this obituary misspelled the surname of a Nobel-winning economist with whom Professor Shubik collaborated. He was Lloyd S. Shapley, not Shapely.