

Chapter 2

“Finding Out Is My Life”: Conversations with Ester Boserup in the 1990s

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Ester Boserup began an international career as a consultant and independent researcher when she was approximately 50 years old. She had previously spent more than two decades as a civil servant in the Danish administration in Copenhagen and with the United Nations in Geneva. Yet she had been conducting research in these administrative positions as well, and she did so until her last days. “Finding out is my life”, she used to say. What she found, and how she presented it, was often surprising. This was also the case with two publications that she produced after the age of 85: a short article on *Development Theory: An Analytical Framework and Selected Applications* (1996) and a booklet called *My Professional Life and Publications 1929–1998* (1999).

The article was remarkable in that it included a type of formal model building and a retrospective on the tradition of economic and social thinking. Neither issue was part of the common repertoire of Boserup’s writing. Indeed, she had been critical of the trend towards formalisation and model building in economics; she was more interested in the real world than in scholarly positions. The booklet came as a surprise as well because Boserup had been sceptical about autobiographies. She considered autobiography a difficult genre that often provided a biased and untrue picture of authors and their past activities. This might have been the reason Boserup restricted her own autobiography to her professional life, devising it as a sort of bibliography with comments and providing very little information about her private life.

Having been asked by a scholarly journal to write a portrait of Ester Boserup, I had the opportunity to conduct a long interview with her in her home in Ticino, Switzerland in October 1992. Afterwards, I visited her regularly until her death in September 1999. During that period, we conducted about a dozen extensive conversations. I usually took notes during or after the visits about her most important

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statements, and a few of these talks were tape-recorded.¹ In this article, I intend to provide an overview of Boserup's thinking in the 1990s. She was famous in the scientific community during the 1970s and 1980s, but less is known about the last decade of her life. It is interesting to see how she reconsidered her work and career during that period. Based on the conversations and the two remarkable publications of her last years, we can attempt to look at Boserup's work through her own eyes.²

2.1 Conversations

We began our first interview with the book *Population and Technological Change: A Study of Long-Term Trends* (1981), which Boserup used to call her “historical book”.³

I was a bit scared when I published that book. Now I will have all the historians checking up on me, I thought, but I am no historian after all. In my writing, I try to look at what people do in different fields and to find the mainstream. I cannot go into depth with everything. It is clear that one has to specialise. However, if everybody is specialising, it does not work either. Somebody should have the courage not to specialise and to look at how one can bring things together. That is what I have tried to do.

I have the feeling that people know how difficult and necessary it is to make connections. At least, I had very few reactions saying, ‘Ah, she does not know this and that’. Normally, people are eager to learn more about other things. However, popularisation is dangerous in my position. I was asked several times to write for a broad public, and I always declined in the recent decades. If I bring things together for scientific purposes, I should abstain from popularisation. Otherwise, people would say it is not serious. Thus, I write with footnotes and for scholars who have a standing in their field and can pass it on to others.

Later in the talk I asked Boserup about her *vita* and how her work related to it. “I can say one thing about that,” *she replied*: “If I have been controversial and if I write against Malthusianism and neoclassical economics implicitly and sometimes explicitly, it is most probably also because my career is different since I did not want to teach at university.” You did not want to make an academic career?

Only with research and not with teaching, and that was not possible in Copenhagen when I finished my study in economics in 1935. So I worked in the administration. It was very interesting and I learned a lot. Later I went into the United Nations and in development planning. Had I chosen a university career instead, I would have read all these books and said: ‘This is true, everybody says so.’ I would not have had the courage to say it is incorrect.

Could you please say something about Malthus and Boserup—they often come together in scientific discourse, don't they?

¹ For the portrait, see (Mathieu 1994). I subsequently published an obituary and an analytical essay: (Mathieu 2000, 2010).

² A review of Boserup's thinking from a different perspective is provided by Irene Tinker (Tinker 2004). A longer version of this paper was presented at Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, in March 2001 and is available on Tinker's homepage under the same title.

³ The following sections are based on a tape-recording of the interview conducted on October 16, 1992 in Brissago. In the first part, Boserup spoke German; afterwards, she switched to English. Most quotes have been copy-edited to some degree.

Yes, that is funny. In my first book on agricultural growth, there was a flap noting that I turned Malthus on his head. I did not say that; it was the publisher. A great advertisement, of course. In reality, I wrote very, very little about Malthus. Malthus said many things on many issues, and you always find a counter-example. I am not interested in old economists but in how things relate to each other today. Therefore, I also had to write against Malthusian currents since they are considered a sort of basic truth. It was a tremendously simplified theory: Malthus knew nothing about agriculture, people always died from hunger, and so on. That's why he only grasped a small corner of the total picture and blew it up. It is incorrect to say that I turned Malthus on his head. That would have been just another simplification.

Yet Boserup could also see positive aspects in Malthus: “At least he was interested in the real world,” she remarked when speaking about very formalised trends in modern economics. After hesitation in the 1960s, Boserup did not join the increasing reliance on mathematics in economics. Therefore, she found herself in a delicate position when someone presented a mathematical “Boserup model” and wanted a reaction from her, which happened several times. Some people said she should engage more in that discussion and take a stand on the proposals.

But you know, these people are mathematicians. If they want to call their models ‘Boserup models’, why should I be against it? I get a chance that others are becoming interested in what I have to say. I consider the theoretical presuppositions for the specific model, and often I cannot identify with them.

Because I am a historian and interested in cultural history, I asked Boserup about the role of culture in development research and whether she considered these aspects and factors.

Yes, in a few papers. It is certainly true that culture should be included. But it also depends on your subject. When I wrote the agricultural book in the 1960s, I decided to leave the women out for another occasion. You cannot put everything in one book, at least I can't. And I always felt that I have neglected two things: political science and the cultural dimension. You can't do everything. I started in economics and got into agriculture, which is already technology. And things simply become too complicated if you try to put everything into it. At one time, one day, perhaps, people can build a huge, beautiful model putting in all the sciences. However, the time has not come yet.

The talk lasted three hours or more, and on the following occasions, the conversations were of similar length and breadth. Boserup gave her opinion on a wide range of subjects: historical developments, authors and books from different disciplines, current trends in the economy and politics, and aspects of her life and work. Yet one point seems to me of special interest at this juncture as it provides a manifest reflection of her thinking in that period.

2.2 An Analytical Framework for Development Theory

In the summer of 1995, Boserup began to experiment with a diagram. At first, there was a small circle on a sheet of paper with some notions and names: Population, Technology, Mode of Production, Social Structure, Ricardo, Marx, Max Weber, and a fourth name I could not decipher because her handwriting had become very difficult

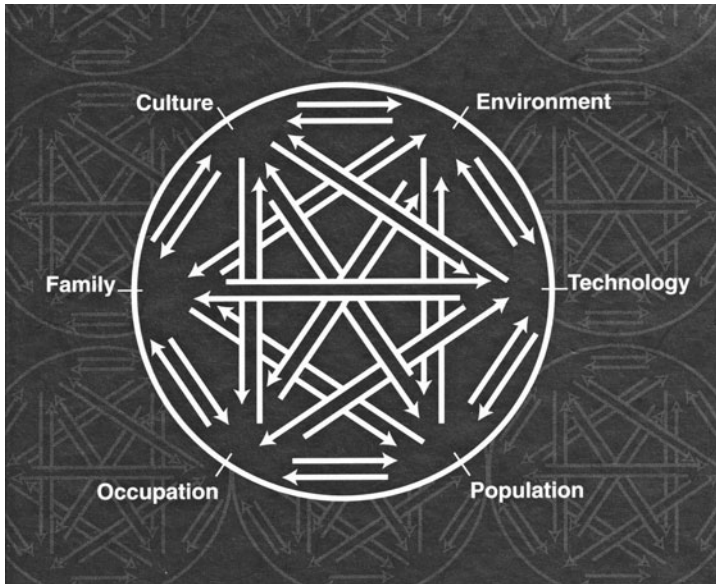


Fig. 2.1 Cover image of *My Professional Life and Publications 1929–1998*. (Boserup 1999)

to read (possibly Warren S. Thompson, the pioneer of the Demographic Transition). “I am just thinking a bit and playing around with ideas”, Boserup remarked when she saw my surprise. The experiment took form throughout different stages during the winter and became a note published in the September 1996 issue of the *Population and Development Review*. Its purpose was stated in the following words: “In this note, I suggest a framework for a concise interpretation of contending theories of development and for description of a variety of development processes. In doing so, my aim is to stimulate interdisciplinary discussion of development problems”.⁴

The diagram had become a circle with six notions (called “structures”) and a variety of arrows showing the interconnections between them and the direction of the impact. It was also a symbol of interdisciplinarity and was considered so important by Boserup that she let the publisher use it for the cover of her autobiography three years later (see Fig. 2.1). In that booklet, she summarised the 1990s under the heading “Boserup models” and stressed the long-term and dynamic feature of the idea: “By contrast to most formal economic models, which deal with short term analysis (i.e. a few years or less), my ‘informal’ model-building is concerned with long-term analysis, i.e. changes over decades or centuries”.⁵ Thus, the structures themselves were considered open to change.

⁴ (Boserup 1996, p. 505).

⁵ (Boserup 1999, p. 58).

It might be interesting to look at the article as a work in progress from the stage of intuition to the final publication.⁶ Let us start with the selection of the main notions or structures: initially, there were four of them (Population, Technology, Mode of Production, Social Structure), then five (Population, Technology, Structure, Culture, Environment), and finally six (Environment, Population, Technology, Occupation, Family, Culture). Thus, at the intermediate stage, the Mode of Production was dismissed, whereas Culture and Environment were included. Later, Structure no longer satisfied Boserup. She first divided it into Economic Structure and Family Structure and then changed these expressions to Occupation and Family.

A remarkable feature of this model for interdisciplinary discussion is the fact that it was not based on disciplines as a starting point but rather on the six domains or structures. As Boserup stressed in a personal letter, this was a conscious decision. Perhaps it was related to her special career outside academia with its disciplinary boundaries (see her own explanation for not being orthodox, quoted above). In the letter, she also reflected on where political science and economics would find their place in the diagram. She suggested that they did not belong to any structure or form a structure of their own but “sometimes” explained the working of the arrows.⁷

Of course, the choices made by Boserup also reflected her own work. The book on agricultural growth (1965), for example, was very much about population, technology, and environment, and her *Woman’s Role in Economic Development* (1970) addressed occupational and family structure. We could try to compare the six notions with the subjects of Boserup’s books and articles in detail. One result, however, seems to be clear from the onset: culture was marginal in her older studies and thus reflected a new issue in her thinking. It could even have been a principal impetus to begin the entire experiment. When I first saw the nascent circle diagram in July 1995, Boserup was reading an anthropological dissertation that friends had sent her from Denmark and was concerned about the static, holistic way in which the author used the concept of culture. She thought that this culturalist (if not racist) perspective could perhaps become influential. This was one motive for her to reconsider her own position and to integrate culture in a dynamic way.

2.3 Selected Applications

Following the analytical framework, the article presents “selected applications”. These applications are of two types: they refer to development theories and development processes. Again, during the making of the article, the chosen applications changed, and we can gain an idea of Boserup’s method of conceptual work by looking at the various stages of elaboration.⁸

⁶ The following sections are also based on personal letters with drafts from Ester Boserup in winter 1995/1996.

⁷ Letter of December 6, 1995.

⁸ For the sources to this section, see note 6.

The selected theoretical approaches began with four names (Ricardo, Marx, Max Weber, and an unknown), then enlarged to eight names, and ended up with six names: (1) Adam Smith, (2) Malthus, (3) Ricardo, (4) Marx, (5) Max Weber, and (6) Neo-Malthusians. From the intermediate to the last version, Boserup changed the name of Paul Ehrlich to the abstract “Neo-Malthusians”, omitted both the first approach of the Physiocrats and the last in the series, a “Generalised Boserup model” (we will examine that model in the following section). Characteristic of this choice is the inclusion of classical eighteenth and nineteenth century authors and thus the focus on well-known names.

Boserup explains that she did not choose well-known theories to present her view of them but rather to demonstrate the usefulness of the schematic representation. A small circle designates the “start of the dynamic process”, that is, the basic argument and first mover in the view of the described author. By means of the starting point and the arrangement of the arrows, one can immediately grasp the similarities and differences between these contending theories. In the sample, the differences clearly prevail, and the approaches do not utilise all of the domains or structures. They work with only three or four of them: for example, Adam Smith with population, technology, and occupation and Max Weber with culture, family, occupation, and population. Each author in the sample omits one to three of the structures in the circle.

The selection of development processes did not change significantly from the first to the last version of the article. It ultimately included six applications as well: (1) from hunting and gathering to crop production, (2) the autonomous village, (3) pastoralists and nobility in the Eastern hemisphere, (4) the process of urbanisation, (5) industrialisation in Western Europe, and (6) fertility decline and cultural change in Western Europe.⁹ According to Boserup, the selection focused on long-term population change, again to show the usefulness of the schematic representations: “My experience from my book on *Population and Technological Change* dictated the placement of some of the arrows, and the graphic representation helped me to discover structures and causal influences that I had hitherto overlooked”.¹⁰

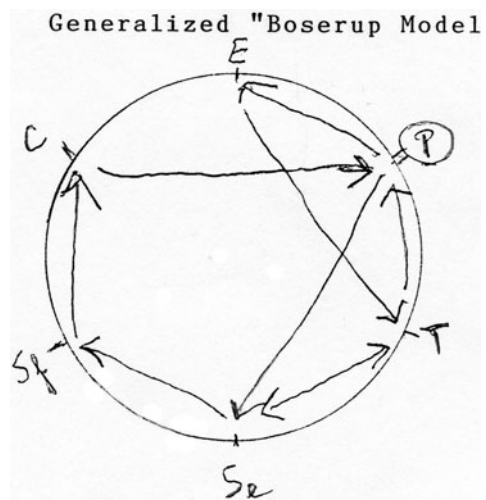
Taken together, Boserup adds, the models represent “what are usually considered the major stages in the development process”. In doing so, they portray “a process of gradual change, from full self-sufficiency of individuals and families to more and more elaborate occupational networks”.¹¹ In contrast to the sample of authors, who did not exhaustively cover the interdisciplinary circle, this second series of development models made full use of the six structures in each case. It seems plausible that Boserup used the graphic representation as a thinking tool to review and reorganise her earlier work. One indication of this can be seen in the fact that some placements

⁹ In a first version, for the sake of the immediate discussion, Boserup drafted a “tentative model” on “Urbanization in the Alps” relating to research I was conducting at that time. In a second version, she began with a model on the “Hunter-Gatherer”, which was also later dismissed.

¹⁰ (Boserup 1996, p. 510).

¹¹ (Boserup 1996, p. 511).

Fig. 2.2 Generalised “Boserup Model”: draft by Ester Boserup (January 1996). *E* environment, *P* population, *T* technology, *Se* economic structure (later: Occupation), *Sf* family structure, *C* culture. The small *circle* around *P* designates that Population is considered the first mover or “start of the dynamic process” in the model



of the arrows changed from one version to the other. In the first draft of the development models, fertility decline was characterised by not less than 14 arrows. For the publication, she reduced these to eight.

2.4 Boserup in Self-Perception

As mentioned above, in a draft version of the article, Boserup proposed a “Generalised Boserup model” that concluded the series of development theories. Later, she dropped this application for reasons that are unclear. Perhaps she wanted the paper to state her thoughts in a more neutral manner. Perhaps she was motivated by the growing certainty that the paper should have two series of applications, one for the theories and one for the processes. As she manifested her own view of long-term developments in the process series, she could omit the Generalised Boserup model in the theory series.¹² In the draft version, she commented on the model with one sentence: “The last ‘Boserup model’ shows how I personally see the crucial relations between all the structures in a ‘generalised’ model” (Fig. 2.2).

The arrows of the model are described in the draft as follows:

¹² The two types of application changed during the elaboration. Boserup began the diagram reflection with authors and notions (summer 1995); then, she focused on the authors (autumn 1995) and later on development processes (December 1995). In the next (much longer) draft, she combined the two series, with the processes first (January 1996). Afterwards, she reduced the number of applications and changed the order, putting the author series first (February 1996). This version was similar to the published article (September 1996). I base these observations on my notes and on her letters. There may have been some versions in between that I did not see.

P–E	More people, less area per person.
E–T	More frequent cropping in diminishing returns to labour and capital.
P–Se	Larger market, higher technology and productivity (like Adam Smith)
Se–T–Se	Dynamic changes in economic structure and productivity.
Se–Sf	Women working, children at school, motivation for few or no children.
Sf–C	Ideal of equality of the sexes.
T–P	Modern contraception, reduced marriage frequency, and low fertility.
C–P	Low status of family, frequency of divorce, declining population, except for immigration from less developed economies.

From a biographical perspective, the model shows the gradual enlargement of Boserup's arguments and her effort to integrate them into a single coherent pattern. The first two arrows correspond to the book on agrarian intensification (1965), and the next two are addressed in the 1981 book on population and technological change. The women and family issues of the other arrows reflect her gender studies, which resulted in her 1970 book on woman's role in economic development and in many subsequent articles.

The model is driven by population growth, which corresponds to the starting point of Boserup's international academic career. The first two arrows relate to the debate with Malthus and Ricardo, and the next integrate the Adam Smith argument on the positive effects of population growth for market formation, division of labour, and technological innovation. However, the drafted Generalised Boserup model also refers to the demographic transition in developed societies by integrating the effects of modern occupational structures and technology on family and population patterns.¹³

The reduction of long-term development processes to eight "crucial relations" between the selected structures is a very strong form of abstraction, and some would most likely judge it an excessive simplification. There is no absolute measure for what is a useful and enlightening reduction of complexity and what is an exaggerated and misleading form of selective perception; it all depends on the context. In this case, the generalisation grew out of reflection on a lifetime of work and a desire for coherence. Ultimately, Boserup did not consider it necessary to publish the generalised model in her article.

In that article, she put forward the importance of interdisciplinary discussion and the usefulness of the proposed basic framework for this debate. She stressed that the framework could be used for many purposes, in micro and macro studies, in historical and recent studies, in conceptual studies, and so on. Her selected applications were only meant to serve as examples. She warned readers that the formulation reflected her professional bias. According to Boserup, "this exercise is a means to develop a technique that can point up disagreement among disciplines and promote fruitful discussion".¹⁴

¹³ In the selected models of the development process, Boserup used population as prime mover in the first five stages and occupation in the last stage of fertility decline and cultural change in Western Europe (Boserup 1996, p. 510).

¹⁴ (Boserup 1996, pp. 506, 511).

Generally speaking, the framework article of 1996 and the intellectual autobiography of 1999 show clearly that Boserup saw herself in a position apart from the main currents of economics in the last decade of her life, when she had received considerable formal appreciation from the scholarly world. Between 1978 and 1985, she had been made Doctor honoris causa by three European and US universities, and in 1989, the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, DC elected her a Foreign Associate by an interdisciplinary vote. In her *Analytical Framework and Selected Applications*, Boserup’s non-conformist position is reflected in the wide range of historical periods and extra-economic factors included. In *My Professional Life and Publications*, the last chapter on the 1990s is mainly a critique of classical and recent economics. It points to the conflicts created by rapid technological change and the attempts of many groups and governments to prevent cultural change: “The importance of these problems for economic development is overlooked by economists, when they make the assumption that rational behavior is the rule whatever the circumstances.”¹⁵

This takes us back to the conversations in her home in Ticino and Boserup’s statement that she did not join the mathematical revolution in economics. The rejection of a high degree of formalisation and mathematisation, however, was not a rejection of theory. Boserup was interested in the current theoretical debates in economics, but this interest resulted from a desire to understand the real world and to find explanations for actual experience.

Of course, I was not unique. There are many people involved in practical development work sharing the same view, and when they write papers, they are not orthodox. Yes, I am certainly not orthodox. On the other side, we have economists retiring more and more to an ivory tower and making models, which are often unrealistic.¹⁶

2.5 Conclusion

Some years ago, Irene Tinker, in a well-informed and warm review of Boserup’s thinking, called the cover illustration of the intellectual autobiography with the circular diagram a “mantra” reflecting the stress on interdisciplinarity in the last period of her work.¹⁷ A mantra is a sound or a word that is often repeated and is considered capable of creating spiritual insight and transformation. It is certainly true that the circle diagram was a type of repetitive self-reflection. It helped Boserup hold her work together and place it in the scientific context of the end of the twentieth century, when the debate on interdisciplinarity reached new levels.

Yet, we should also consider that the “mantra” was the outcome of a systematic and serious intellectual process, as the drafts of its creation clearly show. Proposing such an informal model in a world of highly formal models was further proof of courage. With Boserup, interdisciplinarity was more than an academic battle cry; it

¹⁵ (Boserup 1999, p. 60).

¹⁶ Interview of October 16, 1992 (see note 3).

¹⁷ See note 2, internet version.

formed a life experience deeply linked to her way of “finding out”. The attempt to discover interconnections between different fields was an attempt to contribute to the explanation of real life, independent of academic boundaries. And the attempt to organise the interconnections in a circle diagram was an attempt to give it a coherent and unequivocal form. One could call it the most concentrated version of her legacy.

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