

THE END OF AN ERA

Joan Robinson (1903-83) and Piero Sraffa (1898-1983)

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The death of Joan Robinson on August 5th and of Piero Sraffa on September 3rd 1983, marks the end of an era in Cambridge economics and, indeed, in economics itself. Both were associated with major upheavals in economic theory in the 20th century; both made major contributions, not only through their devastating criticism of orthodoxy but also by providing solid foundations for alternative, more fruitful approaches in economic theory. Their contributions are related to those of four other great economists - Ricardo, Marx, Marshall, and Keynes. In addition, Kalecki was an important influence on Joan Robinson and Maurice Dobb was an indispensable collaborator of Piero Sraffa's. Of their other contemporaries, Richard Kahn as critic and guide was essential to Joan Robinson and Kahn himself mentions Sraffa as his oldest friend.

Joan Robinson's first major work, The Economics of Imperfect Competition (1933), was inspired by Sraffa's "pregnant suggestion" in his 1926 Economic Journal paper, 'The laws of returns under competitive conditions'. His introductions to the great Sraffa-Dobb edition of Ricardo's works and correspondence provided a vital clue for the structure of her magnum opus, The Accumulation of Capital (1956). Though they eventually were to differ over what was the most damaging central criticism of the marginal productivity theory of value and distribution - Sraffa found it in the reswitching and capital reversing results, Joan Robinson in her general methodological critique - between them they played outstanding roles in undermining the logical foundations of the original neo-classicals' answers to classical questions concerning the origin of profits in capitalist economies. (The latter's descendents responded by changing the questions.) Again, their attitudes to Marx differed. Piero Sraffa saw his task, at least in part, as that of tidying up some unfinished

or incoherent parts of Marx's schema while accepting it overall. This task is an aspect of the positive contributions of Production of Commodities (1960), his "magnificent" rehabilitation of classical economics, as the late Ronald Meek called it. Joan Robinson was a sympathetic critic of Marx, absorbing the positive aspects of his methods and insights while refusing necessarily to reach his results by the paths which Marx himself had followed. She was extremely impatient with those who considered that this was necessary, a set which did not include Piero Sraffa.

Again, though Joan Robinson ended up preferring Kalecki's path to the principal results of the General Theory, not least because it came from Marx's schemes of reproduction, she was very much in sympathy with what she deemed to be the revolutionary nature of the method and theory in the General Theory itself. Sraffa was more sceptical. Possibly he was a little disturbed by the use which Keynes made of his (Sraffa's) construct of own rates of interest in Chapter 17 of the General Theory. Sraffa employed the construct in order internally to criticise the argument of Hayek's Prices and Production rather than to provide a positive theory of the workings of competitive capitalism. Overall, of course, he and Keynes were extremely close; each had respect and affection for the other and they were also linked through their mutual love of the chase in collecting and reading rare books.

Perhaps I may be forgiven if I close on a more personal note? I first met them both in 1955 when I came as a research student to King's. Piero Sraffa looked after the research students and Joan Robinson attended our weekly seminars, attracted, we liked to think, as much by the ideas in our papers as by the chocolate biscuits which we had for tea. In those days Piero Sraffa was a rather withdrawn figure (he was still recovering from the effects of a serious fall in the early 1950's). We regarded him with awe but also with affection. He could ask the most disconcerting questions. Joan Robinson, too, kept us on our toes, treating us as equals, able to take the cut and thrust of Cambridge debate, a flattering but not

always accurate presumption. She also took a kindly interest in our progress and our problems. In the 1960's when Sraffa had delivered himself of Production of Commodities he was a more mellow figure - or perhaps I was older. In any event, because Vincent Massaro and I were writing on Production of Commodities, I got to know Sraffa better and to realise that the whiskies with which I had fortified myself in order to prepare for discussions with him were in fact redundant. And, in later years, he was kindness itself to the young scholars visiting Cambridge whom I took to meet him in his rooms in Nevile's Court in Trinity near the Wren library. All this is not to say that there were not occasional re-runs of the kettle suddenly on the boil described by Austin Robinson [1977,29]. I can still see Piero Sraffa arching his splendid eyebrows and hear his strident tones when, as I reproached him for retracting two months later his previous agreement with an argument of mine, he shouted : "I am not the Pope, I am not infallible", a comment rich in irony when his lifetime of unswerving hostility to the Church of Rome is considered.

I have written elsewhere about my admiration for Joan Robnison's work. I admired and loved its creator more. Joan was a very human person, capable of great love, anger and dislike, not always fair but always honest, as harsh on herself as on those she criticised, often overbearing, yet possessed of sensitivity, self knowledge and genuine warmth. Her upbringing and her class made it difficult for her to be the democrat she desperately would have liked to have been. She fought tenaciously for the causes she believed in - she loathed racism, sexism, war, for example - and she was an extraordinarily loyal friend. Recently, though old and ill, she forced herself to do a stint at a United States university in order to show solidarity with a black economist whom she considered had been unfairly treated by being denied tenure at another university. She gave her Tanner Lectures in Utah on the arms race, again while recovering from a serious illness and having been advised by her doctor not to fly. Nevertheless, at the age of 77, she felt that this issue was the most pressing facing us, so she got herself up on the details in order to give the lectures. So it is easy to forgive her tendency

to stereotype certain nationalities or groups - Americans or Marxists, for examples - for, after all, she was the principal loser by denying herself the give and take of dialogue that she otherwise would have had, and usually did.

Joan Robinson and Piero Sraffa were persons of great intelligence, courage and integrity. Both possessed a civilised wit, examples of which are to be found in their writings, and, even more, in the anecdotes which their friends affectionately relate. Their deaths mark the end of an era in the profession but it is the sense of personal loss which is uppermost in the minds of those who knew them well and loved them unreservedly.

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References:

Robinson, Austin (1977), "Keynes and his Cambridge Colleagues", in Don Patinkin and J.Clark Leith (eds.), Keynes, Cambridge and the General Theory (London: Macmillan).

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