‘The book cannot stand on its own as an accurate portrait’

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When some time ago I gave Frank Stilwell a copy of my draft fifth chapter (‘Turmoil in the Cloisters’) for the *History of the Faculty of Economics at the University of Sydney* (Groenewegen 2009) his only comment was that there are various ways of writing up events of this nature. How right he was. I can now easily admit the truth of his proposition, having just read his version of events, *Political Economy Now*, produced at length with two of his colleagues, Gavan Butler and Evan Jones.

In the introduction to *Political Economy Now* (xvi: n.9) my history of the Faculty, (and Bruce Williams’ memoirs) are ‘advertised’ as being by ‘principals of this story [who] have spoken at length for themselves’, thereby absolving the authors of this volume ‘from laboriously setting out’ the positions of Groenewegen and Williams. Since Bruce Williams’ authoritative account, as the Vice-Chancellor at the time, is on the public record, and my own faculty history will have been well and truly published by the time this review appears, I am quite happy to endorse their advice of the necessity of comparison if a more accurate picture of the events is to be obtained.

As a starting point for this review, the term ‘political economy’ needs some discussion. There is a considerable sleight of hand in selecting a quote from Sir Henry Parkes’ *Empire* for the frontispiece of this book. This is intended to draw attention to a very long association between the University of Sydney and a publicly proclaimed need for political economy among its branches of study. But little is said about the considerable change in meaning of the term, ‘political economy’ since its first use in the seventeenth century. The interested reader can examine a survey of these various meanings of political economy by looking at my article on the subject for *The New Palgrave Dictionary* (1987, vol. III: 904–7), while Parkes’ association with early economics education at the University of Sydney is more accurately presented in the prelude to my faculty history (Groenewegen 2009: esp. xiii–xviii). The satisfactory provision of relevant historical background is, generally speaking, not a strong point of the book under review.

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The story of *Political Economy Now* is told over 12 chapters and an introduction. There is no index, but there is a chronology of principal events. The last, interesting to note, fails to mention my name, even if the text does so quite frequently when seeking to cast me as one of the major villains in this long saga. The first six chapters (pretty well half the book's contents) purport to give an historical account of the early decades of the dispute. The final six chapters present broader topics raised by the dispute, namely, 'What's wrong with Economics', 'Pedagogy and Power', 'Intellectual Suppression', 'Market Forces', 'Dissent and Legitimacy' and, the final chapter, 'Whither Political Economy'. The last chapter brings events right up to date — that is, up to early 2009 — and comments on the 2008 shift of the PE group to the Faculty of Arts.

In general, the book presents an uneven account of the subject matter. Some of its contents are rather dishonest, by virtue of the material they omit. Many examples of such omission can be given, but the following instances, in all of which I was personally involved, suffice to indicate their extent.

Take first the references to the spray-painting of slogans on residences of opponents of the PE movement, mentioned first on page 44, and a tactic in the 'struggle' later described as 'regrettable' and 'ill-considered' (p.159). This method of 'protest', blamed on unnamed 'political economy activists', is confined on these pages to the (then official University) Residence of Bruce Williams at Hunters Hill, and to Professor Simkin's Cremorne apartment. It fails to mention a similar, subsequent spray-painting of libellous slogans on the footpath and driveway of my house at Beecroft in March 1983, a period when the dispute had once again virulently erupted.

Secondly, in the context of the Joan Robinson visit and her public lectures at Sydney University (pp.33, 170–1), the authors fail to point out that Joan Robinson's R. C. Mills Lecture did not appear in print until 2004, when I published it as the seventh Mills Lecture in a collected edition of these memorial lectures. Whether this earlier non-publication was accidental, or by design, is difficult to say, given Simpson-Lee's strong dislike of Joan Robinson, dating back to his student days at Cambridge as (an unsuccessful) postgraduate student.²

Thirdly, and again in the context of my 1980 appointment to a chair, the authors concede that my teaching and research fully qualified me for this appointment, but imply that my 'public service' and referee's report were inferior (p.142). This comment ignores my substantial writings on public finance and taxation policy, including submissions to governments on these issues, while referee reports

² Moreover, in connection with my appointment to a chair and my intellectual position on the subject of Political Economy, the book fails to mention that my 1981 inaugural lecture was on the topic 'History and Political Economy: Smith, Marx and Marshall'. This lecture was specifically dedicated to Joan Robinson, who indicated she greatly liked it after reading the copy I had sent her.

for university positions, as is well known, are confidential to the selection committee. Further, in their brief reference (p.17) to a debate between Warren Hogan, Gavan Butler, Frank Stilwell, and myself, they fail to mention that my opening remarks specifically stated that there often are more than two positions in a 'great debate' and that, on important points, my position differed greatly from that of Warren Hogan, just as it did from those of Gavan Butler and Frank Stilwell.

Finally, when quoting my rather generous remarks on Simkin's teaching (p.7: n.12), they fail to point out these comments were part of my obituary notice for the *University News*, and hence quoted me out of context. I should explain here that I never experienced Simkin's teaching but that my remark reflected the praise and appreciation of that teaching I had heard from many honours students over the years. It was not meant to apply to his rather short-lived, second-year macro-economics teaching at Sydney. This, on all accounts, was woeful, and based on his textbook *Economics at Large: an advanced textbook in macroeconomics*, with its many misprints, particularly in the mathematics.³

In the context of teaching quality, I may also express some doubts, this time from personal experience, on the extravagant praise in this book for Ted Wheelwright as a teacher. When in 1960, my final year in the BEc degree course, I took two subjects (Economics IV and History of Economic Thought) in each of which Wheelwright was lecturing for a term, he then advised me (together with my fellow student Paddy McGuinness) not to attend his lectures since we both knew more about their subject matter than he did. Of course, we were required to attend his seminars for honours students. His History of Economic Thought seminar was based on Meek's terrible book, *Studies in the Labour Theory of Value*, a book, incidentally, which Meek himself by then had disowned, particularly for its disgusting, sycophantic praise of Stalin's views on the subject. Wheelwright's Economics IV seminar discussed leading critics of capitalism, with special reference to their analysis of the business cycle, in work by Veblen, Hobson, Schumpeter, Hilferding, Baran, Sweezy and, at my suggestion, Rosa Luxemburg, on some of whose work Wheelwright was not greatly informed. Neither seminar therefore provided a valuable learning experience, and left me with the opinion that Wheelwright was not a good teacher. He had an eloquent delivery in lectures, but their content demonstrated that he was not, generally speaking, on top of his subject.⁴ On a smaller scale, the authors create icons

3 Incidentally, in that very same year, he published his magnum opus, *The Traditional Trade of Asia*, a splendid economic history study.

4 However, when in 1961 I commenced research for my M.Ec thesis on Turgot's economics, Wheelwright did offer me the opportunity to give three lectures on Turgot in his first term History of Economic Thought class, a very valuable initial teaching experience.

from unsuccessful students. An example is the late Michael Brezniak, where the authors' praise of his qualities as a student does not at all match my experience of his performance in seminars and examinations.

The book also creates villains and monsters, among whom the 'principals', as explicitly identified in the book, have already been mentioned. Two other villains, now both deceased, are Dave Clark and Paddy McGuinness, labelled on at least two occasions as 'my journalist friends' to imply that in this matter they could be regarded as my stooges. Their so-called anti-PE 'campaign', in the columns of the *Australian Financial Review* and the *National Times* (pp.xiv: n.8; 80; 153–4) dwelt on the employment implications for students of the PE courses. In connection with Dave Clark, there is also a somewhat 'bizarre' footnote (p.172: n.4) on mutual charges of attempts at kidnapping Galbraith, after his public lecture in the Merewether Building. Elsewhere (pp.31–2), 'burly Dave Clark' in the company of Peter Groenewegen, are portrayed as trying 'to intimidate' Jock Collins' opening lecture on Marxist Economics in Economics I(P) by sitting 'conspicuously in the middle of the front row' of the lecture theatre. I emphasise in this context that Dave Clark and Paddy McGuinness were indeed long-term friends: the latter a friend from the start of my undergraduate days in 1957, and Dave Clark a good honours student and the first PhD student I had the pleasure to supervise from the late 1960s. I have to admit that (on the evidence presented on p.155 about the 'demonstrably good jobs' obtained by some PE graduates) their views about unemployment for such graduates may have been a trifle exaggerated. However, Darren Rodrigo's recollection (p.156) of a 'stack of job rejection letters' until Frank Stilwell came to the rescue, should be noted in this context, together with the unnamed occupants of Ross Gittens' many staff positions drawn from PE graduates (p.155). Whether PE students have extraordinary skills, as is also claimed on these pages, I find unproven, even if a small number of such graduates majoring in the PE courses were extremely good, critical, students.

In my faculty history, I briefly mention the costs and benefits of the political economy dispute. Here, costs, in my view, greatly outweighed the perceivable benefits. These costs include the high turnover of academic staff in the Department, particularly of some of the better and therefore more mobile staff, because they could not stand the long, often dreary, departmental meetings and the other disruptions to research and teaching the dispute so often generated. Secondly, the dispute considerably harmed the reputation of the Department in Australia, because it was seen, as in the 2001 biography of Richard Downing, for example, as 'the complete disintegration of the Faculty' (Brown 2001: 283). Thirdly, decisions about courses and degree structures, either 'made on the run', or 'by exhaustion', are frequently unsatisfactory, while fourthly, and perhaps most importantly, decisions about courses left to committees composed

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of academics outside the discipline concerned, are generally unable to achieve quality outcomes. The divisive nature of the dispute, which invariably sought to separate some aspects of economics from the domain of the discipline, produced imbalances in both sets of teaching programs. Benefits from the dispute, in my view, are far more difficult to identify. Such benefits may include the value of rethinking key elements of the subject, as many members of the Department were encouraged to do during the dispute. Moreover, students were given a wider array of subject matter for study, particularly through the optional courses from second year onwards, which were introduced at the time. Finally, teachers in the PE group ultimately benefited from gaining their own little departmental empire. However, the PE group cannot claim an extensive research flow to major international journals. A few quality graduates from among their students are probably the major benefit bestowed by the PE group and their courses, at the substantial cost of an enormous amount of turmoil and disruption.

To conclude this review, let me reiterate that much can be criticised in this study of the Political Economy dispute by three of its major protagonists. This has been demonstrated by sampling a few of its many omissions, and by pointing to its exaggerated praises of some of the participants (now deceased), and the often unsubstantiated claims about the PE program's merits. Nor, in the 'oral history' segment of the book, do the many brief testimonies from former students, satisfactorily substantiate these assertions. Moreover, the claim made for the book on its back cover — that it demonstrates the superior intellectual merits of the 'alternative courses' in economics — has, for this reader, not been satisfactorily carried out. Nor has the 'them' and 'us' approach of their perception of the dispute allowed them to concede the potential presence of a wide range of views in a subject as complex, as difficult and as important, as economics undoubtedly is.

For reasons already indicated, this book cannot stand on its own as an accurate portrait of this long dispute, still not satisfactorily resolved in some respects. The story of political economy at the University of Sydney, as told in this book, needs comparison with, and frequent correction from, other accounts. In particular, it needs the more critical approach to the evidence all too often missing in this book.

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