OBITUARY

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The death of Joan Robinson at Cambridge on 5 August (just three months before her 80th birthday) has deprived the world of one of the great economic theorists and radical political economists of the twentieth century. At the same time, it suffered the loss of one of the very few women economists who had gained enormous international fame in this male dominated profession, even though she was never awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics she so fully deserved. As Thanos Skouras observed in a recently published essay on Joan Robinson's life and work, these two distinctions achieved during her half century career in economics constitute also "the great scandals of the economics profession". (Skouras, 1981, pp. 216-7.) Finally, the world lost an enthusiastic though occasionally uncritical champion of the socialist world, who argued strongly in support of a socialist road to economic development and vigorously campaigned against some of the more blatant injustices associated with capitalism ranging from unemployment to the arms race and the Viet Nam war. Fortunately, the world has not lost her as a profound teacher of economics and political economy: the enormous legacy of her published works ensures that her influence long survives her.

What does this legacy consist of? Although she wrote more than a dozen books commencing with her Economics of Imperfect Competition in 1933 — a book she rejected twenty years later because it was "a scholarly book" which did not provide "a suitable basis for an analysis of the problem of prices, production and distribution which present themselves in reality" — the best overview and appreciation of her lifetime work comes from a perusal followed by careful study of the five volumes of her collected economic papers published between 1951 and 1979 (their contents were recently reviewed and surveyed by Walsh and Gram, 1983). These range from her early essays on Euler's theorem and the problem of distribution, the meaning of perfect competition and rising supply price to her brilliant polemics in On Re-Reading Marx, her critical essays on capital theory spanning more than two decades, her constructive essays on growth and development, international trade theory and her concern with the practical problems of inflation, unemployment, the third world and the economics of socialism. They also include literary gems such as, to take but two examples, her undergraduate parody of Beauty and the beast and her mature advice to Indian students on the teaching of economics. Fortunately, these volumes are readily available (together with an index compiled by two of her students — both incidentally, Australians) and thereby facilitate an essential investment for the serious young political economist who wishes to gather her accumulated wisdom at leisure.

Joan Robinson was born on 31 October 1903 into an upper middle class English family of radical dissenters and social critics with a strong Cambridge University background (her paternal grandfather was F.D. Maurice, Christian socialist and Cambridge moral philosophy professor; her maternal grandfather, F.M. Marsh, was Professor of Surgery at Cambridge). She was educated at St. Paul's Girls' School and then at Girton College (Cambridge) from which she graduated with an upper second class honours in economics in 1925 ("a great disappointment"). In 1926 she married Austin Robinson (latter Sir Austin) one of her teachers of economics. After a brief stay in India, she joined the Faculty of Economics and Politics at Cambridge itself in 1931 in time to actively participate in two revolutions in economic theory which were then brewing there.

Although this first revolution made her international reputation with the publication of her 1933 book on Imperfect Competition (which won the accolade from Marshall's widow that it demonstrated women could write theory contrary to her husband's beliefs) this careful geometrical elaboration of some of the theoretical avenues opened up by Sraffa's 1926 article was quickly and totally overshadowed by what she later considered to be her far more important work of first aiding the birth of Keynes' General Theory between 1933 and 1936, then popularising it in her "children's guide" to the theory of employment of 1937 and finally critically defending and generalising it in most of her subsequent work. Her important contributions to the process now known as the Keynesian revolution can be appreciated from her notes and memoranda reproduced in volumes 13, 14 and 29 of the Keynes' Collected Works and from her 1937 Essays in the Theory of Employment which elaborated on a number of
points not made in Keynes' book, by more explicitly extending its argument to long period problems and problems of international trade.

Her subsequent generalisation of the General Theory proceeded along a route which broadened her economic education from that provided by Marshall's Principles and Keynes, partly through her early appreciation of the work of Hayek, and via him, of Marx, whose works she systematically studied in the 1940s "as a distraction from the war". This produced her highly critical but very instructive Essay on Marxian Economics of 1942 and a much greater interest in genuine dynamic problems of growth and history, as can be seen from her very perceptive review of Harrod's dynamic economics published in the Economic Journal in 1949 (reprinted in her papers, volume 1). In addition to Marx and Kalecki, her analysis of economic dynamics and the accumulation of capital indicated the need to come to grips with the difficult problems of capital theory which, at that stage, had reached its greatest heights in the Lectures of the Swedish economist Wicksell. Marshall, Wicksell, Kalecki and Keynes get major acknowledgements in her magnum opus of 1956, The Accumulation of Capital, which many consider to be her single most important contribution to economic theory. This work provided an important attempt at the integration of "macro- and micro-economics" whose artificial separation foisted upon the profession through, initially, the North American, but now almost universal neo-neo-classical synthesis, she abhorred. The book also demonstrated the inherent instability of capitalism shown by its inability to achieve stable long run economic growth without short period fluctuations in the absence of government intervention and planning. Questioning of the self-regulating properties of the capitalist system led to her most significant disputes with the high-priests of neoclassical theory at M.I.T. (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) in the famous Cambridge controversies on capital theory.

These disputes, which ended in intellectual victory for Cambridge (Eng.) as was admitted by Professor Samuelson of M.I.T. in his 1966 formal recantation in the reswitching symposium, did not achieve the real victory which Joan Robinson desired by the reconstruction of economic theory into a critical and useful political economy. She was fully aware that the logical invalidation of "wrong" theory was not sufficient for this purpose even though it was, of course, an essential prerequisite. As she complained ten years after the event, utilising Keynes' devastating quote from Ibsen's Wild Duck, as applied to Hayek in 1936, "mere logic will never prise a writer of his paradigm until he is ready to drop it himself". Three paragraphs after this comment (introduction to the second edition of her third volume of collected economic papers) she gave a more optimistic recipe for that reconstruction of political economy which she so much desired and of which realisation she sometimes despaired.

The function of the theory of effective demand, in a Marxian setting, is to provide an account of the realisation of surplus value, which Marx left rather vague. The theory of prices in Kalecki's version of the General Theory is more up-to-date than Keynes'. The monetary aspect is much more fully developed by Keynes, but there is a weak point in his treatment of it. He identifies the Stock Exchange value of the shares of a company with the value of its real productive assets. Thus, in some passages, he makes a fall in the level of interest rates stimulate investment by raising the value of equipment relatively to its cost of production, instead of merely by making finance cheaper relatively to expected profits. Connected with this is an ambiguity in the definition of the 'marginal efficiency of capital ....'

Kalecki's version of the General Theory, rather than Keynes', has been incorporated in the post-Keynesian tradition. The function of Sraffa's prelude to a critique is mainly negative—to knock out the marginal productivity theory and clear a space where a Marxian analysis of modern problems can grow up. There is plenty of work still to do.

The last paragraph of this quotation provides her real epitaph with its hope for the future reconstruction of political economy and the lines on which it is to proceed. This is more appropriate to her memory than the peculiar stories about her alleged disillusionment with economic theory published in an interview given prior to the stroke in February which ended her life six months later. She herself did not spare her labours in this endeavour, unsuccessful though she thought them to be in her last years when "pre-Keynesian-economics-after-Keynes" appeared triumphant in the western world as symbolised by the dole-queues of Thatcherism and Reagonomics. In her last published paper she wrote:

In spite of all we have learned and are continuing to learn on these questions, public education has fallen into a trough of reaction and the public is being misled with the hollow slogans of monetarism and the self-contradictory arguments of the so-called 'supply side' theories.

The first sentence of this quotation provides an opportunity for comparison with another great woman economist whose reputation she did much to rehabilitate. This was Rosa Luxemburg, for the English translation of whose major work she provided a most perceptive introduction in 1951 and the title of which she "borrowed" from her own major work on that subject published five years later. Although there are enormous differences in the lives and backgrounds of these two great women economists, they have a number of thins in common. They were both thinkers of tremendous honesty and independence of mind and reveal themselves as that "rarest of rare phenomena—Marxists critical of Karl Marx". (Stark, 1951, p. 11.) Both were also fighters for social progress, equity and an economic development geared to providing work and rising living standards for all. The serious study of political economy which her work continues to encourage is part of the road towards achieving such laudable objectives.

REFERENCES


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