

*Constructing Economic Science: The Invention of a Discipline 1850-1950.*

Keith Tribe.

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In 2002 "disenchanted and dismayed" with British higher education, Keith Tribe quit his job as Reader in Economics at Keele University. For the following decade Tribe earned his income as a translator, including taking on a major new translation of Max Weber's *Economy and Society* now published by Harvard University Press, and he channelled his gifts as educator to coaching amateur rowing. We should be thankful that in 2012 he reconsidered, moored the boats and got back to the books. Since then, Tribe has strung together occasional lecturing, research fellowships and visits and returned to research writing in force. The result has been the publication of a couple of edited collections, one textbook and two major single-author monographs: *The Economy of the Word* in 2017, and *Constructing Economic Science* in 2021, the latter is the subject of this review. Both monographs are achievements of the first order that deserve all the recognition that they are getting. They exhibit the history of economics at its best.

That *Constructing Economic Science* is a book out of time does not seem to be a hindrance. The initial idea dates some 30 years ago from a multi-author initiative to study the institutionalisation of political economy across nations (see Kadish and Tribe (1993)). The puzzle of institutionalisation animated the work of many in the 1980s and 1990s but there is no one writing on it today. To me it looks more like a debate abandoned than a debate resolved and I can't speak of the reasons for its fading. Historians of economics like A. W. Coats and sociologists of economics like Marion Fourcade wrote of economics as a profession and Andrew Abbott wrote of professions as disciplines. American economists also speak of themselves as

members of a profession. Tribe's starting point is to reject this frame; he wonders how can the story of economics be a story of professionalisation when there was no demand for economics graduates in Britain well into 1960s? Even if it is plausible to think of economics as a profession today, to project this concept back in time is to commit the teleological sin. For Tribe scientification, not professionalisation, was the key driver in shaping a public discourse (political economy) into an academic discipline (economics). The ideal of creating a science preceded by many decades economics as a career choice. To show this Tribe writes the history of economics as a history of higher education, enduring the drudgery of studying Universities' notices, newsletters, catalogues and calendars, to piece together degree diets, syllabi, lists of graduates and graduation statistics. True to his anti-teleological commitments he spends as much time probing degrees in commerce and related vocational training as he does looking at degrees and examinations in economics.

The central action of the book begins in chapter four and is bookended by two men: Alfred Marshall and Lionel Robbins. Marshall, Professor at the University of Cambridge, was responsible for the creation of the first degree in economics in the UK in 1903, the Economics Tripos. Tribe directs our attention to Marshall's pedagogy that is not evident in his famous textbook of 1890, *Principles of Economics*. Marshall understood higher learning in the tradition of the Mathematical Tripos at Cambridge of which he was a graduate. The practice was to coach students to use analytical tools in the face of real-world problems, ideally problems posed by the students. The best documented example of this pedagogy was Marshall's education of John Maynard Keynes. Contrary to the common view, the Marshall approach to teaching economics was not the one that triumphed. The codification of mainstream ("mainstay") economics was due to an equally ambitious but intellectually less formidable scholar,

Robbins of the London School of Economics. Robbins conceived of economic science as the study of the allocation of scarce resources to satisfy unlimited wants and uses, but more importantly that it should be conducted as an inquiry into universal principles, unaided and unqualified by empirical content. Robbins' success had little to do with his talents and everything to do with the standing of his employer. The LSE determined the economics curriculum of the University of London and that curriculum was the national and imperial model. Between the bookends are interacting and intersecting plots of sites that could have been, Oxford, Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, and alternative formulations of economics as a subject in vocational teaching, in commerce degrees, in the Politics, Philosophy, Economics (PPE) degree.

For all its merits, this is a book that should bear a health and safety advisory: in places it gives the reader a jolt and different people will be jolted at different moments. For me it happened in chapter eight on "historical economics." Tribe surmises that famed economic historian Arnold Toynbee was very nearly a hack, a middling student that never delivered on his grand ambitions and that was not widely read and that covered it up with rhetoric and charisma. William Ashley and William Cunningham fare little better, Tribe concludes that they were oblivious to their debts "to the principles of the very political economy that they thought to have displaced" (p. 224). Tribe can be brutal: Francis Edgeworth was obtuse and longwinded in writing and intellectually undecisive; Robbins was a young man in a hurry who oversold his knowledge of the German language and of continental scholarship. To my reading the only persons that come out unscathed are Marshall and his successor, Arthur Cecil Pigou. And yet, if Tribe is right and I think he is, these individual failings are inconsequential to the core story, the primary arbiter of whether an intellectual project would thrive or wilt were the conventions, practices and prestige of the

institutions that carried them. If so, why does Tribe take these jabs at the main characters, is it perhaps to add colour to the story or to quicken the pace of his readers? My best guess is that along the book Tribe is making a dozen of piercing interventions on the standard historiography of economics. Tribe wants historians of economics to abandon their peculiar version of intertextuality where the ideas of economics are read against the ideas of other economists, and so he topples the giants of the canon. Tribe wants to insert into the narratives material life, "routines of curriculum, finance, student numbers, and careers" that brings out "institutions [as] the independent variable" (p. 369). Readers might react in disbelief and offence at these plans for the history of economic ideas. Whether they accept it or not, I hope that the ultimate effect is to get readers to awake from their slumber, in which case we might decide that the jolts are therapeutic.

#### References

Kadish, A. & Tribe, K. (1993). Introduction: The supply and demand for economics in late Victorian Britain. In A. Kadish & K. Tribe (eds.), *The Market for Political Economy: The Advent of Economics in British University Culture, 1850-1905* (pp. 1-19). Routledge.

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