

Review of Keith Tribe’s *Constructing Economic Science: The Invention of a Discipline 1850–1950*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2022, xiv + 425 pp.

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Keith Tribe presents his book, *Constructing Economic Science*, as a continuation of the project to study the institutionalization of political economy initiated by Istvan Hont in the 1980s. That institutionalization entails several related but different ‘institutions’: research journals, academic departments, professional conferences, methodologies, and the training of graduate students, among others. Tribe suggests that we should not ask how a pre-existing economics became institutionalized, but instead: “How ‘modern economic thinking’ became embedded in institutional sites, [into] the way in which the creation of the modern university shaped and validated what counted as ‘modern economic thinking’” (9). Therefore, his new book seeks to analyze how different modern university settings in England, which emerged around 1900 shaped economic education, and how this, in turn, influenced the character of modern economics.

To simplify, the motivating problem of the book is how economics 101 became a principles of economics course, and how the fact that it became a principles course has influenced the discipline. I think it is fair to say that Tribe, although he has this ambition, never gets to the second part of this dynamic. He connects his book to other studies of the mathematization of the discipline, but he does not provide an analysis of the way in which the economics curriculum has influenced economics as a discipline. What he does instead is investigate why the contemporary economics curriculum looks the way it does. This itself is a very important question: recent student initiatives, such as the *CORE Project* and *Rethinking Economics*, have critiqued and challenged undergraduate economic education, and attempts at reform have in the past frequently ran into institutional barriers.¹ Tribe does not mention these recent conflicts, but he does argue that the version of economics which dominates university education harms students. He suggests that most of them would be better

¹ See <https://www.core-econ.org> and <https://www.rethinkeconomics.org>.

served by an economic training more closely related to vocational training and practical economic knowledge. He is at pains to demonstrate that, especially in the first half of the twentieth century, the innovations in the economics curriculum developed by Alfred Marshall at Cambridge and Lionel Robbins at the LSE were not developed with the students in mind, but instead used to promote their personal conceptions of what economic knowledge was. His institutional histories of these two universities, which take up the bulk of the book, are contrasted with Oxford to illustrate how a separate discipline of economics and an associated bachelor's degree could only develop when the right academic preconditions were present.

As in his earlier work, Tribe has produced an alternative history which challenges dominant historical narratives. In the introduction he repeats his dislike of histories which reason back from the present to explain how we got here, without considering that things could very well have turned out differently. But this time around it is clear that Tribe is also quite motivated to illustrate the origins of what he perceives to be the ills of the present:

My own account of this “discipline” treats it as an increasingly arcane body of knowledge whose adepts required years of university training in order to be able to speak with any authority on whatever was deemed to fall within their field of expertise. [...] This contradictory quality of economic knowledge—as a special kind of knowledge requiring no legitimation other than a mastery of its techniques, hence self-validating and solipsistic—is a product of the institutional structures within which it is deployed. (18)

His critical perspective is sharpened by the fact that Tribe has worked for years as independent scholar with only tangential relationships to ‘the academy’. The genealogy of the modern economics curriculum that the book provides could thus be read as a belated complement to the infamous surveys that Arjo Klammer and David Colander conducted with economic graduate students at elite institutions which demonstrated that they valued econometric techniques and mathematical skills far more than knowledge and understanding of the ‘real’ economy (Colander and Klammer 1987).

Tribe distinguishes three key features of education: the exam, the content of the courses, and the form of instruction. Let us look at these in turn. The restructuring of the exam, the tripos at Cambridge by Alfred Marshall, is the subject of the second part of the book. During the nineteenth century Cambridge examined its students on the Moral Sciences

Tripos which was a broad exam which included ethics and other social sciences. Marshall managed to convince his contemporaries of the necessity of a separate Tripos for Economics and Political Science which was first implemented in 1905. Tribe situates this within a broader shift within in British academia away from the classical Humboldtian university in which the ideal of *Bildung* was central and (moral) philosophy enjoyed most prestige, to the modern university model in which disciplines became increasingly separated, and where there was more space for applied sciences such as engineering.

The curriculum which Marshall developed, as part of the new three years honors program in economics at Cambridge, was not yet focused on principles. Economic and general history dominated the program, and although there were three courses on economic principles, students would also take at least two courses each on employment, taxation, and politics and law. Tribe demonstrates that while both Jevons and Marshall wrote an important theoretical treatise they were equally interested in industrial statistics and more applied subjects.

The real revolution in the curriculum, suggests Tribe, came with Lionel Robbins at the LSE. This institution had been a modern 'university' from the start and its economics degree was initially tightly integrated with training in commerce. In his earlier work Tribe (1995) has analyzed how Germany pioneered a modern business administration degree around 1900 and in this book he similarly draws attention to commercial degrees which he regards as a more desirable alternative to a narrow economics degree. It is Robbins who sought to break economics free from history, ethics, and commercial education, along the lines he laid out in his programmatic *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science* (1932).

It is not hard to see that Tribe has little sympathy for Robbins' project. He minimizes the originality of Robbins' *Essay* by suggesting that he had only limited knowledge of the German language, although the footnotes of his essay suggest otherwise. The essay is typically read as a bridge between the English political economy and contemporary Austrian economics, but Tribe argues it relies on syntheses of Austrian economics of around the turn of the century. Along the way he lets slip several snarky remarks about the new economics of the Austrians and Lionel Robbins. For instance: "There was a strong tendency by the 1930s for LSE economists to presume that reality ought to conform to theory" (195). Whereas Marshall had still been able to combine his principles with a broad and

extensive knowledge of the real economy, Tribe suggests that this was untrue of those at the LSE. It would take us too far astray to correct this image systematically, but I think that Tribe paints a rather one-sided picture of the LSE here. Hayek, for instance, was hired based on a lecture-series on monetary *history* and one of the most famous products of the LSE in the 1930s was Ronald Coase who throughout his career combined his law and economics with an intimate analysis of real-world problems.

The final feature of education is the form of instruction. On this aspect it is harder to discern a clear historical development in Tribe's history. He observes that England did not develop graduate education until the final quarter of the twentieth century, which is a significant difference with Germany where it developed a century earlier, as well as the United States which imitated, with about a twenty-five-year delay, the German system. This meant that teaching in England remained oriented toward undergraduates, but how this impacted economics as a discipline is not clearly worked out. In his discussions of Marshall and Robbins he critically evaluates the novelty of their economic work but pays insufficient attention to the fact that both were great synthesizers, and therefore ideal economic communicators, which could also be a reason they thrived in a context of undergraduate teaching. Robbins might not have followed the developments in mathematical economics closely, or read the latest publications in German, but his *Essay* nonetheless became the founding statement of neoclassical economics, and his lectures on the history of economic thought became a classic in the field. What they might have lacked in originality they more than made up for in their breadth of vision and ability to integrate.

Tribe demonstrates, nonetheless, how strong, and distinctive the project of Robbins was. He quotes the LSE professor:

Surely it is better to push ahead with our analysis, embrace technicality with open arms if technicality will help us, and come to be so frequently right that we acquire the respect now given without question to the practitioners of the natural sciences. (340)

This reinforces the idea that there is a radical break between the knowledge that economics students, or graduates, have, and that of the public, and hence Robbins completely abandons the ideal of a public education or emancipation through economic teaching. It also illustrates that economists suffered from physics envy in more than one way. They did not merely seek to emulate the techniques of physicists, but also

sought the status as an independent field within the modern university, like physics had acquired. Understood this way, it differentiates Robbins' project significantly from that of Hayek, who not much later started working on his critique of scientism, which criticized precisely the type of ambitions which Robbins had laid out.

Tribe places so much emphasis on Robbins' ambitions because he is interested in what he calls the 'scientization' of economics, a development known in Germany as *Verwissenschaftlichung*. For Tribe it captures the fact that economics was increasingly cut off from more practical knowledge such as taught in business programs, from historical knowledge, and from ethics. His analysis of the reception of Robbins' program demonstrates that his contemporaries understood well how radical the demarcation was that Robbins sought to draw.

A key feature of the book is its English focus, and Tribe's fresh look at the crucial decades around 1900 illustrate the richness of the English historical literature on this subject. Tribe can draw on John Maloney's work on Marshall and the professionalization of economics, Gerard Koot's study of the historical economists, Bob Coats' work on professionalization, Alon Kadish' oeuvre on the history of Oxford, as well as excellent biographies of the key figures in the book. It provides the book with a lively and polemic character.

But I could not help wonder how the history of economics education in England fitted into broader European and global developments. Chapter nine has an excellent comparison of commercial education in France, Germany, and the United States, later contrasted with Britain. But to what extent the developments toward an insulated economics are mirrored beyond England is unexplored. A few rushed paragraphs toward the end are supposed to make clear how the developments at Cambridge and the LSE paved the way for modern undergraduate teaching in the United States. But Tribe does not connect his work on the quickly expanding literature on the influence on Samuelson, or the different nature of undergraduate *and* graduate teaching across the pond (Giraud 2018). He claims to be interested in an institutional history but his deep dives into the curriculum and examination at the LSE and Cambridge England are in no way matched by an analysis of how secondary universities in Britain or comparable institutions abroad did or did not copy the English innovations.

Previous studies have suggested that the internationalization of economics education has had the effect of contributing to the focus on prin-

ciples rather than institutional and historical differences (Frey and Eichenberger 1993). In the subsequent special issue of *Kyklos* (Frey and Frey 1995) around the study of Frey and Eichenberger, Alan Peacock even spoke of a professional ‘*Gleichschaltung*’, in which national differences and idiosyncrasies had to make way for postwar economics U.S. style. But Tribe spends no time on these later institutional changes.

He situates his own work within the context of a broader history of higher education, a subject which he emphasizes repeatedly deserves more attention. It might be for a lack of similar studies, but I would have loved to know how the developments within economics compare to those in other (social) sciences. Inevitably the story that he tells attributes significant agency and novelty to Marshall and Robbins. But if it is indeed true that the proper question is how the modern university shaped disciplinary knowledge, rather than merely a question of how economics was institutionalized, we must know to what extent the developments which Marshall and Robbins initiated were shaped by their environment, rather than their ambitions. Tribe is fond of emphasizing the contingency of the developments and a casual glance at contemporary sociology and political science programs suggest that textbooks do not dominate teaching in these fields in the same way they do in economics, but the book is unfortunately silent on developments in these fields during the same period that economics became a separate science. If the modern university was indeed so crucial in shaping modern economics, would this not be similarly true in neighboring social science fields?

The principal issue with the book I have is, however, that it suggests that Robbins’ project succeeded. Tribe’s argument that the LSE overtook Cambridge as the most influential institution for the development of the discipline ignores a certain Mister Keynes and his disciples who did not only believed to have the upper hand over the LSE in the debate over the causes and solutions for the Great Depression, but who represented what I believe to be a development which became at least as important: the policy-side of modern economics and education. The institutionalization of economics in Britain is most distinct from that in Germany and the United States because it was not driven by policy concerns. The reform-oriented *Verein für Sozialpolitik* founded in 1873 was from the outset the most important professional association of economists in Germany. Its leading figures such as Gustav von Schmoller sought to transform economics into a historical-empirical science which was directly useful for economic policy. It was imitated in many countries including the United

States where the founders of the American Economic Association were reform-oriented progressives.

A similar organization did not emerge in Great Britain, which is itself an interesting historical contingency. But it should not blind us to the fact that modern economics played a key role in shaping interventionist policy as well as the position of scientific expertise within the state (Dekker 2021). It is true that economics disconnected itself from commerce and business administration, but it reconnected itself to a broader program of social engineering through the state. Tribe suggests in the final paragraph of the book that by the 1970s:

The future upon which Alfred Marshall had set his eyes in 1885—where numbers of young men with “cool heads and warm hearts” might go forth into public and private employment to make good use of their knowledge—had still not arrived. (373–374)

This conveniently ignores the enormous expansion of administrative agencies, policy-oriented centers of economic expertise, and of course real-world interventions that states on both sides of the Iron Curtain engaged in, not just domestically, but also abroad in extensive development programs (Arndt 1987). Economists were not only instrumental in the creation of these institutions, but also found employment in them. These organizations created a steady demand for the new type of economists which graduated from schools such as the LSE, where a lot of modern welfare economics was pioneered and where William Beveridge authored his famous report that laid the groundwork for the modern welfare state. This government demand for economists was partly ‘induced’, but it did much to legitimize the new discipline of economics working on policy questions in the name of ‘the general interest’. If they might serve as ideal types, I would suggest that postwar economics was closer to Keynes’ Cambridge than to Robbins’ LSE.

That does not take away from the originality of the historical perspective that Tribe has brought to bear on the institutionalization of economics and the way it has been taught. The project initiated by Istvan Hont derived its power from the fact that it was designed as a collaborative project which would facilitate international comparisons. Tribe has provided an original analysis of the history of English economics education, which now cries out for similar studies in other countries.

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