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978-0-521-29007-4 - Socialism, Capitalism and Economic Growth: Essays Presented to Maurice Dobb

Edited by C. H. Feinstein

Excerpt

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MAURICE DOBB

It is not easy to recall for how long Maurice Dobb has been a part of the intellectual universe of both Cambridge and the British left. I think I first heard of him in 1932 from an Oxford student, who talked (with the superiority of undergraduates over schoolboys) about that then extremely rare species, the socialist economist. There was G. D. H. Cole, of course, and Maurice Dobb, whom he described as a Marxist, an even rarer and indeed at the time virtually unique species in British academic life. I was a Marxist too, naturally, or thought I was. There was little enough to read on the subject in this country, other than the works of the founding fathers, for John Strachey had hardly yet begun his brief career as the cicerone of the far left. (He acknowledged his debt to Dobb's short and now forgotten *Introduction to Economics* handsomely.) Schoolboys like myself must have read Dobb simply because there were so few intellectual Marxists that we could hardly miss him. As I write, there lies before me, heavily marked, visibly re-read and inscribed with the date 1934, his Hogarth Press pamphlet *On Marxism Today*. In how many small discussion groups at school, in suburban back rooms, in the cafés of Parton and Houghton Streets, were its arguments used and re-used by boys of my generation? Probably at that time not in very many as yet, though I distinctly remember putting Trinity and Downing on my list of college preferences in the scholarship examination, the one because it contained F. R. Leavis, the other because it had at least some connection with Maurice Dobb.

The object of this otherwise irrelevant and presumptuous excursus into autobiography is to suggest not merely how long Dobb has been with us, but how unique his position was for a very considerable period. For several generations (as these are measured in the brief lives of students) he was not just the only Marxist economist in a British university of whom most people had heard, but virtually the only one known as a Communist to the wider world. After the 1930s he ceased to be quite so unusual a figure, but he ante-dated them. When young intellectuals began to turn towards Marxism in significant numbers, and for the first time in British history, he was already there to guide, to instruct, to provide the assurance which we, in spite of our ostensible readiness to dismiss the official authorities, badly needed. His very existence as a Marxist academic was itself an achievement. It is not easy to recall the Siberian climate in which the plant of intellectual Marxism then attempted to put out its feeble shoots in this country, the

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casual dismissal—so much more wounding than the impassioned polemics of the cold war era—with which our elders passed over Marx. If he was really so eminent a thinker, why then (I still recall the question of a Cambridge supervisor) were there no intellectually interesting contemporary Marxists to read? There were, though Cambridge, then as later an exaggerated example of avoidable Anglo-Saxon insularity, did not know them. Yet even by the criteria of the British educational system of the 1930s, there was Dobb, a trebly unusual figure. ‘The 1930s’ Paul Sweezy has remarked, ‘were not a period of substantial progress in Marxist economics.’ Britain was a country in which barely any significant native contribution to Marxist theory had ever been made. But Dobb’s was such a contribution, he was English, and he was a man who was at least marginally accepted as an academic.

Dobb’s isolation was in many ways characteristic of the situation of socialist, and *a fortiori* of Marxist, intellectuals until the 1930s. The traditional habitat of the progressive intellectuals in this country had been the radical wing of liberalism. The major intellectual effort of the left, which on the continent came from socialists, in Britain came from liberals. It was not a Hilferding, Luxemburg or Lenin who produced the British analysis of the imperialist phase of capitalism, but a J. A. Hobson; not a Jaurès who rewrote the history of the crucial phenomenon in national history—in our case the industrial revolution—‘from below’, but writers like J. L. and Barbara Hammond. Even the relatively few socialist intellectuals of the era from 1890 to 1914, which was everywhere else a golden age of Marxism, owed little to Marx. The first world war and the collapse of the Liberal Party produced a migration of radical intellectuals towards Labour, but neither their formation nor their new environment encouraged any great development of Marxism among them, at all events until the slump and the rise of Hitler. However, shortly before the war the first numerically significant groups of university socialists came into existence, largely under the initial auspices of the Fabians against whom they subsequently rose in revolt. The labour unrest of 1911–14, the war, and the inspiration of the October Revolution drove them to the left, and the profound and lively sense of class division and class struggle led them towards radical ideologies—revolutionary syndicalism and guild socialism—and thence to Marxism. It was a slender enough basis for the theory, though it was in this setting—notably in the summer schools of the Fabian (later Labour) Research Department—that Maurice Dobb made his ideological début.

‘Like Douglas Cole’ writes one of his seniors in this milieu, ‘the young Dobb was singularly good-looking, while less like a “spoiled darling” in his behaviour. He was (also like Cole) exceedingly well-dressed in those days.’ (Both the modesty and the touch of informal

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dandyism in the choice of shirts and ties have, as his friends know, survived the intervening decades.) He was probably a slightly unexpected figure even then, the product of a respectable Daily Mail-reading suburban family and of Charterhouse, a school not notably productive of revolutionary intellectuals, but to which he has always maintained the loyalty due from an Old Carthusian. Such patently bourgeois appearances were not usual. Dobb himself remembers his first attempt to join the small band of Cambridge University socialists, and being intensively interrogated by H. D. Dickinson (later Professor of Economics in Bristol), who was clearly under the impression that so spruce and conventional-looking a young man must be a provocateur. (There was some excuse for caution in those days, when the bullies of athletic conservatism were only too likely to break the rooms and heads of the unconforming minority.) Nor was Dobb at this stage the most extremist of Cambridge left-wingers. He did not in fact join the Communist Party until 1921. Yet he proved to be the most persistent of his contemporaries.

He had become a socialist in the last phase of the war, while waiting for the apparently inevitable call-up into the army, from which only the armistice of November 1918 saved him. The next year he entered Pembroke College as a historian and shocked the authorities by the decision to read economics, a subject for which the college was entirely unprepared, though J. M. Keynes advised it on how best to deal with this eccentric young man. There were then not many economists and considerably fewer socialists: Kingsley Martin, R. B. Braithwaite (now Professor of Philosophy at Cambridge), Dickinson, Kitto (later Professor of Classics at Bristol), the slightly senior Lancelot Hogben, the rather junior J. D. Bernal and one or two others. Socialist economists were even scarcer, though a few years later P. Sargant Florence (before his translation to Birmingham) presided over the economic left, and Keynes—this was the period of the ‘Economic Consequences’—advertised a sympathy for radical oppositionists. Dobb recalls his support against bitter attacks by other undergraduates at one of the meetings of the Political Economy Club, though the older man had little contact with the younger, and certainly neither sympathy with nor understanding of Marx. (However, he was later to commission Dobb’s small work on *Wages* for the Cambridge Economic Handbooks.) Nor had Dobb any sympathy for Keynes’ efforts. ‘Keynes is certainly,’ he wrote to a correspondent in 1925, ‘departing from the assumptions of orthodoxy sufficiently to be anti-*laissez-faire* (quite the fashion now in Camb.) to wish to displace anarchic by *controlled* economic operations—but with the class basis of the whole thing still untouched. If you told him that he is neglecting this, he will simply misunderstand you, or else say that

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you are introducing “sentimental” considerations which do not concern him & do not seem to him important.’

The postgraduate years at the London School of Economics (1922–24) gave Dobb a slightly less constricted political environment, but in 1924 he accepted the invitation to return—as we now know for good—to a teaching post in Cambridge, and to a situation which was probably as uncongenial for revolutionary intellectuals as any to be found in the 1920s. It was not merely that, as he wrote in a letter shortly after, ‘I find it rather distasteful teaching embryo exploiters how to exploit the workers in the most up-to-date and humane way.’ Cambridge lacked any significant minority of radical students, and any industrial working-class in the town. It did not have even Oxford’s traditional penchant for the wider world of national politics, or a permanent local headquarters for dissidents such as the G. D. H. Cole household provided. Its rebels were isolated, often even from each other. When the General Strike emptied the lecture-rooms, the young Marxist lecturer was left confronting a scattering of students who had refused to go strike-breaking. Yet as he himself recalls, he did not realize that they were on his side, that they were probably waiting for his words, and attacked them as blacklegs and reactionaries. After the General Strike what little movement of the left there was in Cambridge, collapsed entirely. For several years Dobb was virtually the only Communist in either university or city. Not until 1931 did a new generation of student Marxists begin to revive the left both in the town and among the undergraduates.

Inevitably, part of Dobb’s life therefore lay outside Cambridge: in London, in the Labour Research Department, or in the classes of the National Council of Labour Colleges, which was the main organization for Marxist education in the trade unions between the wars, and to which he gave up weekends and vacations. Much, and at times most, of his non-academic writing is to be found in the pages of its journal *Plebs*, of which he was *de facto* editor for some years. Dobb was and remains primarily a teacher and writer. Though a devoted and loyal member of the Communist Party almost since its foundation, neither his situation in Cambridge nor perhaps his personality and intellectual style qualified him markedly for the work of political organization and propaganda which absorbed most of the few intellectuals who threw in their lot with the Party before the 1930s. Conversely, though his gifts were appreciated—an old Communist recalls mentioning the young Dobb to Eugene Varga in Moscow as the ablest Marxist economist in Britain as early as 1922—before the 1930s there was not a great deal for a man of his kind to do in the Communist movement, except to take his share of the adult teaching which has always been so central an activity in the British labour movement. We may not regret that Dobb

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was thus left free to write *Capitalist Enterprise and Social Progress* (1925) and the pioneer study of *Russian Economic Development since the Revolution* (1927); probably the first work of its kind by a British economist. Curiously enough, it was written without a knowledge of the Russian language, which Dobb only acquired after the second world war; though of course he had the constant assistance of a translator.

Within Cambridge he soon came to occupy the characteristic position which he has retained ever since. Totally isolated as a Marxist in his faculty for so long, he did not initially suffer much discrimination, though the late King George V is reported to have expressed some anxiety about the presence of a bolshevik in an institution likely to educate royalty. The decision by Pembroke College to withdraw its economics undergraduates from his dangerous influence in 1928 was due to his divorce rather than to his Marxism, though there may well have been dons who (as in the case of Bertrand Russell) made no clear distinction between varieties of what they regarded as immorality. Thanks to the late D. H. Robertson, whose political sentiments had not yet been exacerbated by the rise of the Keynesians, he was soon attached to Trinity, though he did not actually become a Fellow of this (or any) college until after the second world war.

Economics students knew him as a devoted supervisor and lecturer, initially on any and every subject required by the syllabus—even, at one stage, Public Finance—later increasingly on the congenial topics of the history of economic thought and on social problems. They did not know, and could not appreciate, the immense care and trouble he brought to his teaching, which made him into the most painstaking and sympathetic of examiners. The undergraduate left, which developed in the 1930s, saw little of him in the ordinary course of events, partly because its activities were sharply distinct from those of the post-graduates and dons—the ones living, then as later, in an academic limbo, the others in a permanent world quite different from the rapidly revolving universe below them—partly because Dobb's punctilious refusal to use his position as a teacher for political purposes, tended to confine his contacts with the student Marxists to the extra-curricular. I remember him, most characteristically, at student summer schools during vacations, where he introduced us, with remarkable lucidity and a flattering assumption of intellectual equality, to the Marx of volumes 2 and 3 of *Capital* and of the *Theories on Surplus Value*. He probably taught us more about Marx' analysis on such occasions than we ever learned in an equally brief space of time before or since.

For post-graduates, colleagues and friends he became a less elusive figure, though, even after his final establishment in Neville's Court, Trinity, he still escaped to the rural isolation of Fulbourn and to his

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wife Barbara Nixon. In Cambridge his friends see him perhaps most typically sitting in an armchair, rosy-faced, still elegant in an informal but carefully colour-checked shirt and disclaiming, against all probability, any special competence on any subject under discussion, diffidently intervening in conversation, with a natural and deep-seated courtesy which once led a visiting foreigner to say that he had always heard about English gentlemen, but he had never met one until he met Maurice Dobb. Or else we think of him on those long discussion-laden walks through Backs, Fellows' Gardens or the woods near Fulbourn, which are so inseparable from the intellectual life of the older universities. Outside Cambridge we recognize the characteristic square handwriting, getting perhaps even more regular and legible as the years pass, with which he fills his pages. As time has passed the number of people who have thus come to know Dobb—few of them can have failed to become his friends—has grown larger. It is only natural that some of them have decided to commemorate in this volume his contribution to the science and the cause to which he has devoted his life.

His position among the economists was for a long time anomalous. A Marxist who could express himself fluently in the Marshallian idiom of his formal economic schooling was odd enough; so strange that this bilingualism has led even able observers to suggest sometimes, against all evidence, that he was not really a Marxist at all, but only a bolshevik among the neo-classicists. Moreover, British economists long found it difficult enough to grasp what Marx (and Dobb) were after, even though—thanks largely to Dobb—they were eventually to learn not to underestimate his analytical capacity as grossly as they had habitually done in the 1920s. The combined force of the Vienna–London and Cambridge schools made it difficult to accept the Marxist contention that a historical abstraction in economics was, at best, of strictly limited usefulness, and at worst, 'exclude(d) a large tract of economic territory which to any realistic view is of great importance for understanding the economic shape, and especially the larger movement of society',[†] risked narrowing an increasingly refined analysis to the vanishing point of tautology, and in practice presented the specific features of the capitalist mode of production as the universal requirements of rational economic activity. It even made it difficult, at some periods, to distinguish the Marxist approach clearly from the institutionalist or historicist one, associated with other minority trends in the subject. The argument that the methodology of the economics which became dominant in the half-century after the 1870s 'has tended to make economics essentially a

[†] Dobb's essay *On Some Tendencies in Modern Economic Theory* (reprinted in *On Economic Theory and Socialism*, London, 1955) is, with his *Political Economy and Capitalism* (London, 1937) the best guide to his thought in these matters.

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theory of exchange—a determinate theory of price relationships between things which appear on the market as objects of sale and purchase’ might be accepted. The contention that, ‘insofar as he introduces “sociological” factors as “data”, the economist justifies his method of handling them by the assumption that they are independently determined from an outside sphere, and that any interaction between that sphere and the circle of economic relations proper is too small to impugn the postulated independence of the latter’ might strike home. Yet an entire tradition of economic thought still reinforced resistance to the view that ‘it becomes increasingly doubtful whether any propositions of substantial importance can be made about exchange relations without introducing “social” or “institutional” data.’

Under these circumstances there was—perhaps until the 1950s—little enough contact between the writing of Dobb and his British colleagues. His first book was politely received, though so acute and usually unflattering a judge as Schumpeter later drew attention to its arguments. *Russian Economic Development* seemed to be of purely descriptive interest. It is doubtful whether any British economist in 1928 had so much as heard of the discussions on economic development in the U.S.S.R., which are in many ways the foundation of modern development economics, and even if he had, would have been prepared to make much of them for another twenty-five years. *Political Economy and Capitalism* was clearly a much more ‘relevant’ work, and both the power and tenacity of its critique of the then dominant subjective utility school and the defence of Marx as the logical successor to the classical political economists, could not be overlooked; at least by writers of a more recent generation. Nevertheless, its critique of the economic orthodoxy of the time ran parallel to the more influential Keynesian one, but hardly touched it except perhaps in the common rejection of both of theories whose refinement was bought at the cost of gross unrealism. Nor did either side make much effort to approach the other. The Keynesian pre-occupation with controlling economic fluctuations within the capitalist economy was one which Marxists in the 1930s were not likely to share, and conversely, Dobb’s argument, intellectually able as it unquestionably was, seemed quite remote from the practical policy questions which British economists, always potential Treasury advisers at heart, sought to influence.

As soon as academic interest shifted from the study of fluctuations to that of economic development and planning, the Marxists’ theoretical interests became much more obviously relevant. The trend of Dobb’s own writings in the post-war period encouraged this *rapprochement*. His *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (1946) helped to re-open the discussion on the origins of capitalist industrialization, which has increas-

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ingly occupied economic historians. The revised edition of *Soviet Economic Development Since 1917* (1948) did not perhaps appear at an ideal moment for the study of this subject, but both it and the articles periodically reviewing the processes of Soviet planning and the expert discussions to which these gave rise in the U.S.S.R., drew attention to problems which were now of concrete importance far beyond the frontiers of that country. Above all, Dobb's increasing interest in the economic development of pre-industrial countries, which found a first expression in the admirable Delhi lectures of 1951 (*Some Aspects of Economic Development 1951*) (1960) allowed him to combine the results of both his analysis of capitalist historical development and of the Soviet economy with considerable profit. This aspect of his work was carried forward with the influential essays of 1954 and 1956 on the choice of technique, and was further developed with the appearance in 1960 of *An Essay on Economic Growth and Planning*. Despite the modest title this is a study of considerable importance and shows very clearly Dobb's profound understanding of the central problems of economic growth. It was also fortunate that the great monument to that classical political economy which Dobb had so long championed was unveiled at a time when it was more likely to be appreciated than in earlier decades. Sraffa's and Dobb's great edition of Ricardo was finally published in 1951–55.

This is neither the time nor the place to attempt a critical assessment of Dobb's work, if only because it is as yet far from complete. Yet even if he were to write nothing more it would be difficult to find many other economists of the present time who could match Dobb's major studies with work of comparable quality and originality over such a wide range: from the broad historical sweep of the *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* through to the highly abstract economic theory of his analytical essay on economic growth. In any case the very existence of a volume such as this, and the range and quality of its contributors, provides at least a provisional clue to the respect in which he is today held in many countries, and the extent to which his fields of interest are also those of other workers who have drawn stimulation from his work, his friendship, his long and lonely championship of Marxism, or all of these. It contrasts—the point is worth making only incidentally, but it ought not to be omitted—with the modesty, indeed the marginality, of his position in the official academic world. There can be no doubt that his official career has suffered from his long association both with Marxism and the Communist Party, especially as his period of maximum literary output—roughly, the decade following the end of the second world war—coincided with the worst years of the ideological cold war. Perhaps Cambridge has less to reproach itself with in this

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respect than other academic institutions which could have at one time or another had or retained the services of a man whose intellectual distinction is beyond any doubt, and in 1959 he was one of a group of distinguished Cambridge economists (the others included Joan Robinson and Nicholas Kaldor) who were elected Readers in Economics. In any event, the stature and influence of a writer is rarely determined by the eminence of his official positions. This is particularly true in the case of a man like Maurice Dobb and a truer indication of the esteem and affection in which he is held in so many parts of the world may be seen in this testimony of those who have united to honour him on the occasion of his retirement.

E. J. HOBSBAWM

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PART I

PROBLEMS IN THE THEORY OF
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