

Economist Joan Robinson, 72, Is Full of Fight

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Soma Golden, *The New York Times*, March 23, 1976

Few economists of any generation manage to achieve a reputation for greatness in the rarefied world of economic theory, where deep and difficult questions are pondered about how economic systems actually work. But Joan V. Robinson, at 72, the aging queen mother of British economics, has done just that.



For nearly half a century, the professor emeritus from Cambridge University, England, has earned loud ap, plause from both her disciples and her critics. They agree that the sharp-tongued, eccentric professor is one of the greatest economic theorists of our time—and probably the greatest woman economist ever.

This month, the professor, on one of her rare visits to the United States, is lecturing at a half-dozen Eastern campuses, stirring both students and teachers with her provocative ideas, feisty spirit and vivid personal memories of some of the great moments In modern economic history.

Spurred Keynesian Revolution

As a young and budding Iconoclast, Professor Robinson was midwife at the birth of the Keynesian revolution during the 1930's in Cambridge. That revolution helped end the worldwide Depression by providing a theoretical justification for government deficit spending to increase employment—a heretical notion in the days of laissez-faire and balanced budget economics that prevailed during most of the slump.

The young academician was the lone woman in a small group of economists called the Cambridge Circus—that sipped tea at the university in the afternoons of the Depression while heatedly debating the early drafts of John Maynard Keynes's seminal work, “The General Theory,” published in 1936.

Today, she is one of the few who can say with any authority, “We had some trouble in getting Maynard to see what the point of his revolution really was.”

In her slacks, smock and Dr. Scholl's clogs, her elbows propped on the lectern and her deep-set blue eyes peering at her audience, Professor Robinson, in recent campus lectures and seminars, has sketched a grim picture of the evolution of orthodox economics and Western economies in the 40 years since “The General Theory.” Hers is a blend of the pessimism and frustration of whitehaired old age with the outrage and anger of youth.

Capitalism, she says, in a thin voice that forces her listeners to shift forward in their chairs, has proved to be a “cruel” and “bloody” system, in large part, because the American Keynesians—she calls them “Bastard Keynesians” as opposed to the Cambridge variety—have accepted only part of the master's message the part about deficit spending.

They have ignored, she says, Keynes's brooding worry about the instability of capitalism and the “anarchy of unplanned growth.” To American Keynesians, “what's profitable is right,” she lamented. “Government can only push business down the same track it's on. It can only ask for what business chooses to give.”

To Professor Robinson, a socialist and a philosophic Marxist, too, the complacency American economists feel with modern capitalism is an outrage. “Just look at the United States,” she said, in a rare interview at the University of Massachusetts campus at Amherst. “It's the great success story of capitalism and yet there is so much misery here. It's a very cruel system.”

She has, however, no blueprint to offer for a better world—although she does favor some form of incomes policy and planning.

The task of the economist, says the professor, is not to plan utopias, but to criticize reality. And modern capitalism, with its Crippling slumps and its heavy reliance on military spending, she thinks, provides an ample target.

“American economists who sing hymns to the system are not doing their job,” she said.

Even as age creeps up on the professor, occasionally fogging her memory and weakening her hearing, Professor Robinson is busily trying to fulfill her critical mission. It is clear from talks with leading academic economists here—the prime targets of her attack today—that they wish she would stop. Apparently, they are still bruised from the knockdown debate conducted in academic journals some 15 years ago between the two Cambridges — England and Massachusetts.

Professor Robinson claims victory in the debate, which pitted her against Paul A. Samuelson, a Nobel Prize winner, and Robert Solow, two heavyweights from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Most observers, however, say the debate was a draw.

The dispute revolved around the economic justification of profits in a theoretical capitalist system. Professor Robinson said there is no such justification. Profits—like wages, rents, and inflation—result from the constant tug-of-war between the classes that make up a society, she says.

The American Keynesians insist that profits, in theory at least, are justly earned, related somehow to the productivity of the capital goods involved.

Although the debate may sound esoteric to outsiders, it involved the very foundations of orthodox theory, raising questions about the economic justification for any given division of income among workers, bosses and landlords. To Professor Robinson, income shares depend on power and politics, not on economics. As a champion of the underdog, she would like to alter the distribution in favor of the weak and the poor.

On her trip this month, the professor was asked repeatedly about the “Cambridge Controversy.” Students, it seems, are still fascinated by the spectacle of the wily English eccentric battling the giants of American economics—and drawing a bit of blood.

But Professor Robinson now claims to have moved beyond the controversy and is fascinated increasingly by the problems of the Third World and the prospects for China, which she has visited seven times since the 1950's. “A person hasn't lived till he's seen China,” she said, in one of her few positive comments.

In her lifestyle, as in her economic opinions, the professor is distinctly individualistic. She is a trim vegetarian, who walks some 10 miles a weekend, and is wedded to her woolen sox and wooden shoes—even in the snow.

Although she is usually preoccupied with economic theory, she recalls with much joy the less rigorous side of her relationship with the late Lord Keynes. In addition to theory, Keynes was deeply involved with the so-called Bloomsbury Group, a collection of avant guard thinkers and artists that dominated British intellectual life in the first 30 years of the century.

Professor Robinson describes herself as “very much on the outer fringe of the Bloomsbury group — but I used to meet with them occasionally.” She also shared Keynes's love of ballet.

She attributes her fighting spirit in part, at least, to her training in Keynes's Cambridge Circus. “We didn't have that live and let live sort of behavior that seems appropriate on American campuses,” she recalls proudly.

But her love of combat also reflects a personal heritage. Joan Violet Maurice was born near London on October 31, 1903, and grew up, said one associate, in a “family of dissenting aristocrats.” Her father, a major general in the British army, was stripped of his rank for criticizing World War I policy. And an earlier forebear, a bishop, was rapped on his knuckles by the establishment for stepping out of line.

The rebel blood runs thick. When not attacking the American Keynesians, Professor Robinson cannot resist hurling thunderbolts in other directions. Some targets get short shift, such as Milton Friedman, the conservative professor from the University of Chicago, who blames most of the nation's economic woes on government policy.

“I think his ideas are absolutely dotty,” she said in reply to a student's query at Barnard College in New York City.

For an intellectual giant, like Karl Marx, however, the professor has more time. Her 1942 book on Marxian economics predictably outraged the orthodoxy of the Left by judging Marx's famed labor theory of value to be “irrelevant.”

Asked if she is a Marxist. Professor Robinson replied that “everybody has learned a great deal from Marx. His diagnosis of capitalism is the only one that makes any sense.”

She scorns what she calls “pious Marxists,” who cannot accept any criticism of their master. “I'm not that kind of a Marxist,” she said. But she left unclear what kind she is.

Her theoretical work, too, is highly individualistic. Not just because of what it says —but also how. At a time when economic theory has become highly mathematical, she refuses to use equations. “I don't know math,” she quips, “so I am obliged to think.”

She is also obliged to write. And her many books are alive with metaphors. A theory she dislikes is “a slippery eel.” And economists, stripped of their orthodoxy, she writes “are floundering about like ducks who have alighted on a pond and found it frozen over.”

The main reason for the floundering, she says, is that economists in this country particularly still have an ideological bias toward the free market—which she describes as theoretical concept that does not really exist.

Because of this professional bias, she is gloomy about the chances for a lasting economic recovery in the West. She turns aside requests for her policy prescription and snaps: “The problem has developed beyond the point of talking about simple remedies. Keynes

didn't do that either. It was the Bastard Keynesians who tried to simplify things.”

Exactly what the great Lord Keynes thought about the future of modern capitalism is, however, a murky matter. In the interview, his apostle stressed that Keynes was deeply concerned with “the inherent instability of capitalism.” But in the last chapter of “The General Theory,” she said, he “gave in to his very strong anti-Stalinist feelings and wrote in a sort of mollifying way about the likely survival of capitalism.”

In essence, she concedes, “this was Keynes himself enunciating the Bastard Keynesian doctrine.” Clearly this side of Keynes frustrates her. “We, the younger chaps working with him, were to his left,” she remarked.

In part, it is precisely her femaleness that sets this professor aside from the others at the pinnacle of her profession. Many women in her mixed audiences recently said they looked to the aging professor for insight into the difficult problems of mixing wifedom (her husband E. A. G. Robinson is also a noted Cambridge economist —though not as noted as she), motherhood (“I'm a granny,” she said proudly) and professorhood.

Sylvia A. Hewlett, an assistant professor at Barnard who once studied under Professor Robinson at Cambridge, says admiringly, “Joan has never been a manipulative woman. She will never, as a matter of principal, use her charm to deal with men.”,

Says Professor Robinson of her career: “I suffered from my opinions, not from my sex.’

A recent journal article by Professor Samuelson praised his British critic for a dazzling array of theoretical work on imperfect competition, Keynesian theory, international trade theory, Marxian economics, growth theory, economic philosophy, “and much more.” The list, said the American Keynesian, “is impressive as the devil.”

But Professor Robinson, whose most controversial ideas are not given wide dissemination on most American campuses, seems unconvinced by such elaborate praise. “I make very sharp criticisms,” she said, “and instead of trying to meet the issue, they just say, ‘Oh, she's so clever’ and go on with the show.”