



## A W ('Bob') Coats

Bob Coats, who died on April 8th this year, described himself as an 'economist watcher'. His work was interdisciplinary, his career having been spent moving between economics and history departments, and whose writing took insights not only from those disciplines but also from sociology and the philosophy of science. His extensive oeuvre was published in journals as diverse as the *Journal of Political Economy*, *Economic Journal*, *Journal of Law and Economics* and *American Economic Review* as well as *Economic History Review*, *History of Political Economy*, and *Past and Present*. His research and writings (many of which can be found in his *British and American Economic Essays*, Routledge 1992, 1993 and an as-yet unpublished third volume) proved agenda-setting in three distinct areas: the history of American economics, studies of professionalization of economics, and the relation of economic ideas to policy.

Born in 1924, Bob was a member of the generation whose undergraduate studies were interrupted by being called up to serve with the RAF during the second world war, graduating at Exeter in 1948. He made an early decision to specialise in the history of economic thought, the turning point coming when he won a scholarship to study in the United States, where after a year at Pittsburgh he completed his PhD at Johns Hopkins under Fritz Machlup on methodological controversies in American economics. After this training in a series of economics departments, he returned to Britain to take up a position as Assistant Lecturer in Economic and Social History in the History Department at the University of Nottingham. Apart from a brief move to the new University of York in 1963-4, and visiting appointments in the United States, he remained at Nottingham till he took early retirement in 1982, the last eighteen years being spent as head of the Department of Economic and Social History. He then spent almost a decade at Duke University. Here, though in an economics department and working on the history of economics, he taught American economic history. He also held visiting positions in Australia, Canada, Israel and Brazil.

After moving to Nottingham, he became involved in debates over eighteenth-century mercantilism and the English Poor Laws, the unifying question being the relation between economics and policy. He continued to write on these and other topics in British and American economic history, but in the 1960s — taking up the themes of his thesis work, as in his article on Veblen in the 1954 *JPE* — he published a pioneering series of articles on American economics, drawing in particular on the archives of the American Economic Association (AEA) and the papers of R T Ely, the first AEA President. These were remarkable because it was a time when few scholars took early American economics seriously, usually dismissing its ideas and approaches as being derivative of European economics and so of little interest. Bob's analysis presented the late

nineteenth and early twentieth century American economists in their own terms, opening the way for investigations by a generation of younger scholars in the 1980s and 1990s who consciously referred back to his path-breaking studies. He also explored the institutions of the profession, not just the AEA but also the early years of the Royal Economic Society (the latter jointly with his wife, Sonia), the American Political Economy Club, academic freedom in the USA and Britain, the emergence of the LSE as a rival to Cambridge, the role of scholarly journals and the role of authority in the two countries' economics professions. Far from the dry descriptions that these topics sometimes provoke, Bob's accounts of institutions and professionalization bristled with people and economic ideas and developed themes that he later revisited.

In the late 1960s, two developments were important for the development of Bob's career, one institutional, the other intellectual. The first was the beginnings of moves, on both sides of the Atlantic, to establish a visible institutional presence for the history of economic thought. He gave his support to Bob Black and Donald Winch, in the inaugural History of Economic Thought conference, held at the University of Sussex in 1968, and the *History of Economic Thought Newsletter*, both of which are still in existence. Bob was also a significant figure behind the volume, *Economists' Papers, 1750-1950. A Guide to Archive and Other Manuscript Sources for the History of British and Irish Economic Thought* (edited by Paul Sturges) that forms the basis for the online resource that is currently being developed. In parallel with these British developments was the setting up, at Duke University, of the journal *History of Political Economy* and the founding, in 1973, of the History of Economics Society. Bob became heavily involved in both. He was a founding member of the *HOPE* editorial board (eventually acting as referee on 340 papers and becoming one of its Associate Editors) and it was he who wrote a reflection on the journal's first decade. In 1985, he became the first non-US President of the History of Economics Society.

The second significant development was the taking seriously by economists and historians of economics of the philosophy of science developed by Thomas Kuhn and Imre Lakatos. Bob wrote one of the first appraisals of the relevance of Kuhn's structure of scientific revolutions for economics (apparently Kuhn's work was brought to his attention by Ronald Coase) and then produced seminal work on economics and psychology drawing on Lakatos's methodology of scientific research programmes. This was not the beginning of his interest in methodology (that went back to Pittsburgh in 1950) but it marked his involvement in a community of economists, historians and philosophers exploring the field more systematically than had previously been the case. It was a prelude for his participation in the debate over the so-called 'crisis in economics' in the mid-1970s.

For the rest of his career he retained an active interest in methodology, his concern with the sociology of economics meshing well both with his interest in professionalisation and with the rise of interest in the rhetoric of economics in the 1980s.

The 1970s marked the beginning of Bob's involvement in a series of collaborative projects, reflecting his belief that historians of economics should engage in much more joint work. He was editor, with Bob Black and Craufurd Goodwin, of a volume on *The Marginal Revolution in Economics*, which combined studies influenced by philosophy of science, with more traditional text and archive-based historical research. But the first of what were Bob's most distinctive projects was that on economists in government. He flagged this as an important research agenda at an Economic History conference in 1974, published as an article in *HOPE* four years later, and brought together the international team that produced *Economists in Government: An International Comparative Study* (1981). His own research, on Britain, was funded by the SSRC and involved access to confidential government papers and interviews with officials and the subsequent comparative study was supported by the Ford Foundation. As with Bob's other work in this field, his interest in institutional structures and forms gave frame to his broader questions about how economic ideas are transformed into policies in the context of the structures of authority and the contingencies of politics.

In the following decades Bob was the entrepreneur behind other international comparative studies that followed up these themes of political economy and economic ideas: *The Role of Economists in International Agencies* (1986); *The Post-1945 Internationalization of Economics* (1997); and *The Development of Economics in Western Europe* (2000). All three projects were ones where he engaged in extensive preparation, cajoling and persuading contributors to write the type of piece he wanted, and paying much attention to detail. For the Internationalization of Economics project, for example, he spent hours debating whether the developments he was concerned with should be conceived as 'internationalization' or 'Americanization', and he urged contributors to develop quantitative indicators of the changes that we were describing. The volume has become a landmark exploration of the relationship between twentieth century American economic power and the transference of professionalized 'American' economics around the world, a testament not only to his persuasive powers as editor/entrepreneur and his high standards of scholarship, but to his own long-standing commitment to investigate the relationship between economic ideas and what might well be labelled the political economy of economics.

Bob attributed his unconventional approach to economics, and his disrespect for disciplinary boundaries, to an education that allowed him to read widely, at the expense of a more systematic training in economics (he has said that it was to remedy the deficiencies of his economics education that he turned to the study of the history of economics). Yet among his economic history colleagues he could be consid-

ered an economic theorist. From his early work on Thorstein Veblen he has an interest in unorthodox approaches to economics, which he never lost. However, the attraction of unorthodox economics was probably due, as much as anything, to a rebelliousness against any rigid system of authority, and was tempered by his over-riding interest in the sociology of knowledge, which caused him to view unorthodox economists as well as their more orthodox colleagues from the perspective of an outsider.

Unusually for a historian, Bob did not focus on writing books, but on journal articles and collaborative projects that resulted in edited volumes. This was no accident. He favoured interdisciplinary work and interaction with colleagues and friends was central to the way he worked. Given his enthusiasm and eagerness to engage in discussion, it was rare to come away from a conversation with him without some new idea. His charm meant that interest could easily be translated into a rash promise to write something. He was a wonderful 'reader' of draft papers, sometimes returning your manuscript the immediately following day, not only heavily annotated, but with pages of handwritten critique and further thoughts. Yet his tone meant that such readings were always positive experiences and many younger scholars were drawn into the professional network by Bob's academic inclusiveness. Though illness caused him to slow down considerably in the last years of his life, these characteristics never disappeared, his commitment to understanding economics and the economics profession remaining to the end.

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