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Carolina Alves & Danielle Guizzo

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When economic theory meets policy: Barbara Wootton and the creation of the British welfare state

Carolina Alves  and Danielle Guizzo 

ABSTRACT

This article investigates Barbara Wootton's contributions to the discussion and implementation of a welfare system in Britain. It draws both from her theoretical work and her engagement in the public debate, including her interactions with William Beveridge and his welfare plan for post-war Britain. An assessment of Wootton's published and unpublished works allows for correlating her views on economic theory and policy with the role of the state. We claim that Wootton's critique of economic theory and her understanding of reality provided a sound foundation for her policy-making prescriptions, which contributed to a more interventionist perspective of Britain's welfare state.

KEYWORDS

Barbara Wootton; welfare state; social policy; economic methodology; neoclassical economics

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B22; B31; B41

1. Introduction

Barbara Wootton, Baroness Wootton of Abinger (1897–1988), was a leading name in the areas of Sociology and Criminology. Her seminal works on prison systems, juvenile criminality and drug dependence awarded her a distinctive role in British social policy, being the first woman to sit in the House of Lords. Wootton's works remain as one of the most important contributions to 20th century British social policy (Oakley 2011).

Her cutting-edge pieces ranged from questioning Labour's social democratic argument on economic and social planning during the Interwar period to addressing the internationalist argument for a federal polity and the defence of women's rights (Jacobs 2007). However, despite having completed the Economics Tripos in Cambridge in 1919, where Wootton was the first woman¹ to ever to achieve a first-class mark in Part II with special distinction (but barred as a woman for being awarded a degree), it is striking that her contributions to economic theory, methodology and policy have been

CONTACT Danielle Guizzo  danielle.guizzo@bristol.ac.uk  School of Economics, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK; Carolina Alves  cca30@cam.ac.uk  Girton College, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK.

This article has been republished with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

¹ In 1908 Lynda Grier (principal of Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, from 1921 to 1945 and president of Section F of the British Association in 1925) and Eva Spelman (later Hubback, Wootton's successor as principal of Morley College for Working Men and Women in 1927) achieved firsts on Part II of the Economics Tripos, ranking ahead of any of the male candidates. However, a first-class mark with special distinction had never been awarded to a woman before Wootton.

ignored by economists. This article fills this gap, whilst introducing some of Wootton's works to historians of economics.

An archival investigation of Wootton's published and unpublished material between 1940 and 1985 (books, articles, manuscripts, correspondence and interviews) combined with an assessment of her *Lament for Economics* (hereafter *Lament*) written in 1938 sheds light on a what we call a "Woottonian system of thought", which embeds theory within economic practice – a view highly criticised by her contemporaries.

Our argument follows the discussion posed by Dimand and Hardeen (2003, 23) about Wootton's critique of "the narrowness and abstraction of Neoclassical orthodoxy" and "her vision of a broader more realistic social economics", which let her to propose a different form of economics ("social economics"), one that shows a commitment to empirical research and observation. Some of Wootton's contributions, as laid out in *The Social Foundations of Wages Policy* [1955] (1962), *Some Aspects of the Social Structure of England and Wales* (1940a), and *Incomes Policy: An Inquest and a Proposal* (1974), reflect her view and commitment to a socially relevant economics discipline (Dimand and Hardeen 2003). We develop this investigation further by examining Wootton's attempt to apply this vision of social economics in the discussion and the implementation of a welfare system in Britain.

While analysing Wootton's dissatisfaction with economics, which made her to become a self-defined "renegade economist" (Oakley 2011), we demonstrate how her contributions to the study of economic methodology and theorising offer a reconsideration of how economists link theory and practice. Wootton fiercely criticised the so-called neoclassical economics for being an abstract science unable to deal with real-world problems, while in her view economics should be concerned with improving people's daily living conditions in a real and tangible way.

We claim that Wootton's critique of economics as a hypothetico-deductive science and her stand for economics as a science whose concerns should be about improving life conditions provided a sound foundation for her policy-making prescriptions, which resulted in a more interventionist perspective on Britain's welfare state. Specifically, Wootton's discussions about social policy in the 1940s invite a reconsideration of the necessity of state intervention, in which the welfare state plays an active role in ensuring social betterment and tackling poverty and inequality.

The paper hence offers a reading of Wootton's works through the "lens of practice" (Stapleford 2017) that is, exploring how her system of ideas and her methodological critique to the state of economics addressed practical policy issues and recommendations that contributed to the implementation of Britain's welfare state in the 1940s. Such discussion contributes to current discussion on the role of economists as "experts" in policymaking, which has consistently been questioned (Hirschman and Berman 2014).

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 focuses on Wootton's *Lament for Economics* (1938) and reconstructs her insights on economic methodology, deservedly placing her among the leading thinkers debating economic methodology in the 1930s and addressing the foundations of the Woottonian system of thought. Section 3 offers a historical background to the implementation of the welfare state in the UK, demonstrating how the debate stood at that time and place. Section 4 then sheds light on the

connections between William Beveridge and Barbara Wootton, exploring how they contributed to the debate over the creation and working of the welfare state, and how it represented an opportunity to reconsider economic theorising and policy to achieve social betterment. Lastly, some concluding remarks on the topic are presented.

2. Economics and the “apple-pie” world: a closer look into Wootton’s *Lament for Economics*

If all the world were apple-pie
 And all the sea were ink,
 And all the trees were bread and cheese
 What should we do for drink?
 (Wootton 1938, 31)

Between 1870 and 1890, debates on economic methodology gravitated around the dispute between the hypothetico-deductive method of classical economists and the inductively-oriented approach led by the historical school. This dispute is commonly known as the *Methodenstreit* (see *inter alia* Deane 1983). Such controversy gave economics both its positive-normative distinction, and (a few decades later) the definition of the discipline as a relationship between given ends and scarce means. The former has its roots in John Neville Keynes’ (1891) *The Scope and Method of Political Economy*, and the latter in Lionel Robbins’ (1932) *An Essay on The Nature and Significance of Economic Science* (hereafter *Essay*).

Robbins’ *Essay* paved the way for a decade where economic methodology would be widely questioned, with debates embedded in a period where two different ways of doing economics were presented through institutionalism and neoclassical economics, and mathematised theory was rapidly developing. Most of the literature would directly engage with Robbins, expanding, for example, on “economic theory versus empirical analysis; how economic theory is to be conceived; and the role of ethics in economics” (Backhouse and Medema 2009, 807).

Barbara Wootton was among the group of intellectuals who were challenging Robbins’ propositions and definition of economics. She was also pulled into the debate when economics had been suffering from accusations of lack of purpose and unrealism, following the Great Depression and the move towards the fragmentation and professionalisation of economics (Backhouse and Fontaine 2010; Trautwein 2017): “economics is *no use*”, “intelligible to the plain man”, “economists cannot agree”, “economists ignore reality” (Wootton 1938, 15, 19, 22, 31). By the end of her quest, she had engaged with leading names of her time, such as John Neville Keynes, John Maynard Keynes, Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich Hayek and Sir John Hicks.

Wootton’s (1938) *Lament for Economics* (hereafter *Lament*) represented her debut as a methodologist. With an analogy to a nursery poem that assumes the world as an apple pie, she stresses how economists complacently ignore reality: “they show a lamentable ineptitude; if and when they do condescend to notice the complex world in which we actually live, in making useful, or indeed even consistent, prepositions about it” (Wootton 1938, 31). Economics, in her view, became the study of “imaginary worlds” which “certainly call for the exercise of much ingenuity” (Wootton 1938, 31), as if the fantasy of an apple pie would be real. Wootton carefully laid down the

practical sterility in contemporary economic theory at the time – mainly attributed to Marshall and Robbins’ definitions – while offering a new proposal for economics and discussing a series of issues related to the efficiency of market adjustments in real world contexts (Wootton 1938, 108).

Unfortunately, *Lament* also represented the end of Wootton’s interest in formally exploring economics as a tool to improve society (Dimand and Hardeen 2003; Jacobs 2007), potentially stimulated by her disappointment of how economics was being shaped by her peers at the time (see also King 2004). For instance, a seminal discussion led by Harrod’s (1938) on the “Scope and Method of Economics” enthusiastically stresses some of the new theories and methods in economics, including promising advances in data availability and statistical analysis, while dismissing some of the criticisms addressed to discipline at that time, including Wootton’s *Lament*, which for him represented an “unappetising programme for the future development of economics” (384).

Indeed, Wootton’s critique has a particular starting point, i.e., that economics should be useful and concerned with social betterment. This concern might certainly be beyond any intellectual argument and dependent on a particular system of values, but, for her, the study of economics should not be “undertaken in a spirit of indifference to its practical utility as a means of improving conditions of human life” (Wootton 1938, 16).

Wootton seemed puzzled by the fact that instead of making useful and consistent propositions about the world, economists preferred to spend “too much time” examining a form of society that “does not exist outside the sphere of their own, rather quaint, imaginations”, or “the apple-pie world” (Wootton 1938, 31). This is very much the result of core conventions adopted in the discipline and its very own definition of economics. A closer look into the latter shows that, within the traditional English economic theory² in Wootton’s time, one could define economics theory as the study of the market process in a particular sense, i.e., the mutual interactions of demand and supply, and price (value), where equilibrium and competitive markets are of central importance. Equilibrium, then, is the “stock-pattern key” to unlock the door to every theoretical problem in the market so that economists’ inquiries are dependent upon this postulate (Wootton 1938, 38–39), which becomes the new *raison d’être* of economics.

Perhaps more importantly in Wootton’s critique is how Robbins’ definition of economics represents the “nail in the coffin” for the future of the discipline. Insofar as the Robbinsian conception deals with the influence of scarcity and human behaviour, it becomes an analytical definition (Backhouse and Medema 2009) that allows for regularities and the homogeneity of the market economy. It is the scientificity brought by Robbins wrapped in the idea of equilibrium and generalisations about human behaviour that, for Wootton, represented an unnatural marriage that kept economics from being useful.

² Among others, Wootton engaged with Alfred Marshall’s (1920) *Principles of Economics* and Philip Wicksteed’s (1933) *Common Sense of Political Economy* and used the work of Arthur Cecil Pigou’s (1927) *Industrial Fluctuations*, Friedrich Hayek’s (1931) *Prices and Productions*, and John Maynard Keynes’ (1936) *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* as examples.

The fact that economists treated all market processes as having a certain objectivity comparable to the regularities of the natural world, so that changes in the market can be predictable and show uniformity – and not be subjected to “arbitrary caprice” – was a fundamental flaw for Wootton (1938, 49). “Human volition” (Wootton 1938, 49) does not allow for a coherent theory where a certain independence of status is needed. This is why, for these economists, certain implied assumptions about human behaviour are needed, where all individuals attempt to behave economically, i.e., doing “their best to make the means go as far as possible in fulfilment of the said uses”, so that the movements in the market are the outcome of this behaviour. Then, economists set themselves the task to modify the theory to meet cases when people do not behave accordingly, but rather as exceptional cases departing from the norm that gives the entire discussion a coherent unity (Wootton 1938, 50–51).

Such a peculiar conception of the market, in Wootton’s view, is reinforced by differentiating what is pertinent, or belongs to the market from whatever happens outside of its domain. This narrowing of economics also represents a loss of its scope and applicability. For example, rather than identifying and understanding the patterns of supply/demand or technical conditions of production, the economist’s main role would be limited to given factors and ready assumptions.

Such an approach directly echoes Robbins’ focus on means and argument that “economics is completely neutral between ends”, taking production as a given factor, as it is not in the interest of economics the study of processes, or the “history of the social construction of the means” (Robbins 1932, 24 and 33).

This ideal market also involves a certain disregard for the intricacy of the network of relations between one market and another. “Technical problems” (Wootton 1938, 63) can be solved in isolation and then results compounded without loss of usefulness, but the same it is not possible for economic problems. These are interconnected. Moreover, the economic structure is indivisible, making the “isolation of particular problems or factors almost impossible to achieve except at the cost of grave departure from reality” (Wootton 1938, 64). The sacrifice of realism impedes us to see that economic situations are unique, which for Wootton made them intractable to generalisations. Two options emerge in this context, either testing a range of hypotheses to try to cover all this complexity, which becomes a time-consuming task of analytical economists, or safely impounding all potentially disturbing factors “in the prison of *ceteris paribus* – other things remaining equal” (Wootton 1938, 71). Both are not ideal for “practical men”, such as policymakers.

With her attention towards prompt solutions of actual problems, Wootton (1938, 108) saw the insistence on the nature of markets as “formidable obstacles in the way of prompt and complete analysis”. This, in turn, raises the question about the desired status of economics as a science, which can be seen as a second stage of her critique to economics. Despite applied/empirical economic studies corroborating pure theory or economic phenomena guiding some of the hypotheses elaborated, economics still neglects one of the most basic and distinguishing characteristics of scientific work, i.e., how phenomena were observed in the first place, and the existing biases and judgement of the observer. The separation between theory and observation gives, on one side, authors of statistical studies, and on the other side, “carefully segregated”, the *a priori*

deductive theorists. Consequently, for Wootton we have a market analysis that is based upon a broad general view of the principles governing human behaviour in an actual market situation and “the theorist’s pages are spattered with” hypotheses where close observation is respected, but not necessarily required (Wootton 1938, 114).

The claim of scientific status fits well with the unwillingness that economists have in accepting the normative aspect of the discipline. Yet, for a field that aims at studying the human behaviour in the allocation of scarce means between alternative uses, it seems impossible to avoid references to an underlying norm. Economists might deny the normative aspect of their work, but they are in effect committed to approval of the principle in which they agree upon some norm against which the economic merits of different action may be assessed (Wootton 1938, 137).

Such criticism reveals Wootton’s scepticism towards the scientification of economics, questioning how economists provide normative judgements of reality. For her (Wootton 1938, 137), they assume individuals with *rational* and *commendable* behaviours whose efforts are primarily directed to reach equilibrium and optimality that are only applicable under the assumption of scarcity. To put differently, this normative judgement includes the condition of equilibrium, what Wootton (1938, 139) called “the economist’s norm”, or the condition in which equi-marginal returns are realised, and competing ends are somehow measured against one another. The main issue, in Wootton’s view, is to “assume” equilibrium as a normative judgement on itself, forcing economic theory and its subsequent analysis to reach it as a single, desirable end. The solution to convert the alternative ends of a social group into comparable terms is the market mechanism, with the reductions “of desires, needs, hopes and aspiration of millions to a common denominator in monetary terms” and the “ingenious” invention of pricing (Wootton 1938, 143). In this sense, for Wootton, the concept of equilibrium itself “both makes economics activity intelligible, and, by the same process, exposes it to normative judgements” (Wootton 1938, 137).

It follows that the equi-marginal aspect of the economist’s norm excludes a definition of social satisfaction that is not associated with “maximum *personal* satisfaction” produced by the demand and supply equilibrium and price in the market (Wootton 1938, 164, original highlight). Thus, in this framework, there is no room for collective decision-making. Here, economics offered the foundations to provide a critique to planned economies, which for Wootton rather resembled a normative defence of the validity of the market mechanism and a justification for capitalism.³ Economics promotes policies that guaranteed the operation of competitive markets at the same time it discourages economists from endorsing measures that involved any aspects regarding regulation, redistribution or any form of intervention that could change the “natural” course of markets and diverged from the socially optimum level of well-being (Waller 2019).

The combination of two fundamental theses, namely, the nature of the markets and the inappropriateness of economics in calling itself a science, captures Wootton’s critique of economics and structured the Woottonian system of thought. Her *Lament* explores the gaps and contractions between economic theory and practice; the

³ This discussion reflects Barbara Wootton’s engagement with both Ludwig von Mises’ (1936) *Socialism* and the *Collectivist Economics Planning* (1935), edited by Friedrich Hayek.

confinement of economic theory to market analysis; and the convoluted relationship between normative and positive economics within market equilibrium analysis.

It can be argued indeed that Wootton did not overlook the *radical apriorism* of the Robbinsian conception of economics (Blaug 1962), which refers to Robbins reasserting the primacy of deductive reasoning with the laws of economic being both universal and logically correct, ruling out the study of institutions and the discussion of the processes of production once seen in John Neville Keynes' definition. She rather seemed to have pushed for a return to a broad definition of economics where, going back to the historical-inductivists position, a scientific approach and relevant economic theorising should include careful observation of economic phenomena and the study of institutions and production (Waller 2019). In this sense, her critique also reinforces the tensions and difficulty in conciliating institutionalism with neoclassical economic theory, leaving little room for complementarities between these two approaches (Kaufman 2007).

We also see Wootton following the steps of critics such as Dobb (1933, 589–590), who eschewed Robbins for his emphasis on the purely formal character of economic theory without “seizing the full implications” of his definition, such as exempting economics from any concern with norms and ends, as it is a theory of equilibrium. In this sense, she was directly challenging one of the aspects of the “new consensus” that emerged after the *Methodenstreit*, namely, the idea that “basic postulates of the discipline were value free” and objectively given by the industrial and organisational conditions of modern society” (Deane 1983, 4). Wootton revealed that, many decades later, economics was still struggling with a similar issue that classical political economists were accused of, namely, “devising amoral (if not immoral) theories involving implicit presumptions in favour of a laissez-faire stance in economics policy” (Deane 1983, 3).

Indeed, when referring to “amoral” and “moral” theories, Wootton (1934) suggests that the attribution of “acquisitiveness”, or the essential characteristics of the economic man are manifestations of “a highly commendable principle of rational action” (Wootton 1934, 53) and can be found in socialist as well as capitalist countries. For her, obeying to this idea of “getting the best result you can out of whatever activities you take” (Wootton 1934, 53) is morally and universally applauded. Proof of such principle, for her, is how economics students are taught this since their early undergraduate days: “in a world where life is short and opportunity limited, to compare alternative courses, and to seek always to choose that which for least cost will put you furthest on the road you wish to travel – which is to act economically – is also to act wisely” (Wootton 1934, 54).

Overall, a walk throughout Wootton's critique suggests a radical take on how economics should be conceived and done. Besides pointing out the flaws in market analysis and choices, the Woottonian system of thought contributes to the understanding of how economics neglected institutions and processes of production. While recommending ways to move forward, she argued that the purpose of economics is to assist in solving social problems, which also implies a rejection of Robbins' limiting vision of economic science: “if anything of substantial utility is to come out of economist's work, he must be allowed to poke his nose into questions of the quality of social ends, and of the means by which these are formulated” (Wootton 1938, 261). Among other things,

she thought that economics should (1) study existing social issues and trends; (2) enquire into the nature of social ends in modern communities, and the means of formulating these; (3) research into the technical problems with the satisfaction of social ends; and (4) attempt to devise plans for social betterment (Wootton 1938, 267–268).

Perhaps even less known to historians of economics is how Wootton's radical and pertinent critique of economics can also be connected to a set of policy prescriptions. In 1943, following the notoriety of Beveridge's (1942) report, Wootton was invited to be part of the "brains trust" for Beveridge's (1943) *Full Employment in a Free Society* inquiry, together with Thomas Balogh, Nicholas Kaldor, Michal Kalecki, Joan Robinson and E. F. Schumacher.

We claim Wootton's attempt to move economists away from a market normative economics provided a sound foundation for policy-making prescriptions that resulted in a more interventionist perspective on Britain's welfare state at the beginning of the 1940s. The next section outlines the implementation of that system in the UK, later connecting it to the Woottonian view on the topic.

3. A growing concern with welfare: from the Beveridge report to Beveridge's "brains trust"

The case of Britain's welfare state provides a useful background to lay out how Wootton engaged in public debate and had the chance to expose and clarify her views on theorising in economics. This section addresses some of the core elements behind the planning and implementation of Britain's welfare state, emphasising the main changes that occurred in the country's economic history that allowed for such system to emerge.

During the Second World War, the British government published a series of reports stating the need for changes in welfare provision, fuelling a widespread desire for social reconstruction in the post-war period. The post-war Western welfare state model was unique in the sense that it combined three grand systems of capitalism, democracy and social security (Briggs 1961). Rather than a mere set of policies, the welfare state actually represents as a complex system of social organisation historically embedded in the 1940s (Feinstein 1990; Harris 2004; Fraser 2009).

A governmental effort began to identify existing cracks in the old Liberal reforms initiated in the early 20th century (Boyer 2019), which by then included free-school meals (1906), old-age pensions (1908) and national insurance (1911). Such effort led to the creation of a 1937 *Report on the British Social Services* by the Political and Economic Planning group (a nongovernmental body), and four years later, Beveridge chaired the Inter-departmental Committee on Social Insurance and Allied Services and reported the situation, which resulted in the 1942 *Beveridge Report*.

The Beveridge Report represents a particular historical moment that embodies the post-war-Keynesian governmentality. Such moment reflects the main changes in economic theory with the rise of Keynes's ideas, as well as the new political economy of power that brought the population's welfare to the centre of political discussions in a context of shortcomings of capitalism. For instance, for Owen (1943), there was a political and social evolution on the way the British government understood the issues of

population's welfare and care, thereby classifying the rise of the *Beveridge Report* as a state response to fight inequality and instability.

The *Report* assumed the coordination of three core pillars: children's allowances, comprehensive health and rehabilitation service, and full-employment policy as a broad proposal that provided income security (Beveridge Report 1942, n. 410–443). Its greatest innovation in comparison to old schemes involved the principle of universal eligibility was that it covered all British citizens, not just the working class, financed through a flat-rate contribution. For historians of economic policy (Lowe 1999), there is, to some extent, a consensus that the plan was considered to be revolutionary at that time, inasmuch as it drastically changed perceptions in Whitehall and Westminster of what was politically possible and necessary.

The White papers that followed the Beveridge Plan ("Employment Policy" and "National Health Service") can be considered a measure of its success, also shedding light on a new governmental rationale. They demonstrate a change on the way that policymakers conceive economic problems and reality, where the government is prepared to take action "at the earliest possible stage to arrest a threatened slump", as under modern conditions and a complex industrial society, trade depression does not automatically "bring its own corrective" and any process of self-recovery is "likely to be extremely prolonged and to be accompanied by widespread distress" (Minister of Reconstruction 1944, 16).

A less-publicised side of the *Beveridge Report* is the immediate events that followed its official publication in 1942. The report triggered a need for further explorations on the issue of full employment in the context of social security (Harris 1997). The Minister of Production, Olivier Lyttleton suggested to the War Cabinet that Beveridge should be commissioned to follow up his 1942 report. However, Lyttleton suggestion was not acted upon – the government was advised against Lyttleton's proposal by economist Lionel Robbins, on the ground that Beveridge was not a genuine expert on the unemployment question (PRO 1943a, CAB 66/3, "Social Security", note by the Min. of Production, 13 Jan 1943) and (PRO 1943b, CAB 123/43, Lionel Robbins to Sir John Anderson, 14 Jan 1943).⁴

Unable to secure governmental support for such endeavour, Beveridge accepted an offer from a group of progressive businessmen to finance such inquiry out of private funds (Harris 1997). To assist him, Beveridge gathered together a small "technical committee" ("Employment Investigation" group or a "brains trust") that consisted, among various scholars, prominent economists: Thomas Balogh, Nicholas Kaldor, Michal Kalecki, Joan Robinson, E. F. Schumacher and Barbara Wootton.

Following such formal connection between Wootton and Beveridge, this article now presents Wootton's views on the welfare state, connecting her policy plans as part of her methodological critique of economics.

⁴ Robbins' comments could be interpreted with some irony here. Beveridge had written *Unemployment: A Problem of Industry* (1909), and his doctoral dissertation became Part II of *Unemployment: A Problem of Industry, 1909 and 1930* (1930) – with Lionel Robbins acting first as his research assistant, then as nominal supervisor of the dissertation, and finally as one of the examiners. Beveridge then gave six broadcast talks published as *Causes and Cures of Unemployment* (1931), chaired the Unemployment Insurance Statutory Committee, and published an "Analysis of Unemployment" in three issues of *Economica* (of which Robbins was an editor) in 1936–1937.

4. A Woottonian plan? Economics, welfare and social betterment

It is no coincidence that the discussions that followed the publication of the *Beveridge Report* acquired a passionate tone, particularly amongst economists (see Dimand 1999). One element, however, that remains underexplored by historians of economics is how Barbara Wootton saw the institution of the welfare state and its underlying discussions, which follows her association with the Labour Party's plans for social justice (Jacobs 2007). Indeed, she was a pivotal character in shaping Beveridge's views on welfare and his understanding of employment policies, which included changing his view on Keynes's employment theory (Oakley 2011) during the 1940s. How these elements relate back to her view of economics and her methodological motives of economic analysis is to be laid out by the present section.

Among the members of the Employment Investigation group set up in 1943, Harris (1997) suggests that Wootton was perhaps the closest to Beveridge himself. Like Beveridge, considered by many an empiricist (Dimand 1999) who was concerned about concrete issues (Wootton 1955), Wootton also treated pure economic theorising with suspicion and emphasised the need for macroeconomic policy to be supplemented with empirical studies and administrative controls (Harris 1997; Beveridge 1943b). Wootton often complained that economics was of no use for being unintelligible to all, except a small minority of specialists that ignore reality and often serves as apologists for capitalism (King 2004).

A closer investigation into some of Wootton's published and unpublished papers between 1940 and 1985 confirms this view, also revealing useful interpretations of the mechanics and implementation of a welfare system in Britain. Wootton saw the welfare state not simply as social and biological necessity for the people in the sense of providing minimum living standards (Wootton 1940b), but also as an opportunity to reconsider economic theorising and the policies that emerge from such, particularly those that go against the common good. Specifically, when discussing the dangers of dualisms in politics (Capitalism vs. Socialism), Wootton clearly stated how this actually distracts individuals from real discussions, namely, how to ensure collective wellbeing, human freedoms and minimum provisions (Wootton 1942). Her position directly echoes the 1938s *Lament* and her critique of the emphasis of the supremacy of the market as a foundational principle of economic theorising, given its unrealistic distribution of resources via the price mechanism, the tendency of equilibrium to be reached, and an antagonistic predisposition against the idea of planned economy.

On the contrary, we ought to overcome such meaningless debates and be as concrete as possible in our ends, drawing up a list of specific objectives that must take place in a reconstruction programme for the war. For Wootton (1942), these should include ensuring personal freedoms; providing minimum nutritional, housing, educational and leisure standards; and limit the expansion of economic inequality. An emphasis on *collective social ends* rather than *individual ends*, or even the necessary *means* to achieve such ends summarises Wootton's methodological critique on the problems of economic theory. *Contra* Robbins (1932) and Harrod (1938), who offer a more positive take on the scope and usefulness of economics, Wootton remains sceptical: economics has transformed itself into an individualistic, impractical and unhelpful body of knowledge. Later in an article discussing the impact of the Beveridge plan for *The Political*

Quarterly, she defends the need for designing desirable policies with methods and theories that are fit for purpose, rather than “pleasing the scientist”:

The future of civilisation (...) does not depend on a change of heart or greater moral fervour, but upon the application to social and political problems of the scientific method which has accomplished such marvels in other fields. That method implies patient and accurate observation of the facts, and choice of means, not for the satisfaction which their use gives to the user, but for the likelihood that they will, in fact, promote the ends in view (Wootton 1943a, 55)

In Wootton’s eyes, we do not lack knowledge nor the mere willingness to change, but a political commitment that change is possible, supported by economic ideas that meet the proposed ends. An example is the potential situation of Britain’s empire after the war. When questioning if the British still need their empire for national sovereignty, Wootton (1941) shows disbelief in Britain’s insistence in maintaining its international position as a leading creditor country, while its population is far from enjoying the benefits of a “good life” and are suffering from deprivations and poverty. She criticised the reluctance of British policymakers to implement a more generous allowance (benefits) system financed by taxation: “why not make up our minds that we will guarantee a physically necessary minimum to everybody and put a limit to our inequalities?” (Wootton 1940b).

She sees in Keynes’s “heterodox” approach at the time (Wootton 1963, 182) an opportunity for change; more specifically, his theories of investment and employment, as well as his active support for the affordability of a more generous welfare system (Wootton 1940b, 1943b, 1946c). In the aftermath of the Second World War, Wootton (1943b) sees Keynes’s “spend-for-employment policy” and his acceptance of unbalanced budgets as key elements to show the necessity of planning that followed post-war reconstruction.

Thus, her support for the implementation of Beveridge’s (1942) report is not unexpected. She also emphasised the drastic and much needed change it represented to British social policy. Even though Bismarckian Germany and New Zealand had already proposed comprehensive welfare systems, the idea of universal eligibility was new for British standards, which was the key element of Beveridge’s proposals (Wootton 1946a). Further, Wootton reported a radical change in the social understanding of poverty pre-Beveridge, following others in the view that the war had changed the public comprehension about the problem of poverty (as raised earlier in Section 3). This gave a new meaning to the very phrase “social security”, changing its negative conception within different classes in British society (Wootton 1943b).

For Wootton, in modern capitalist economies, income-distribution and capital accumulation appeared to be contradictory and impossible to be reached together as an ultimate social goal within a capitalist mode of production. This echoes her critique in the *Lament* that there is a mere “distortion” in the market’s interpretation of maximum satisfaction “whatever there is not an approximately equal income-distribution” (Wootton 1938, 194). In her view, the very idea of market distortion is in fact to admit that the market is fundamentally flawed as the main principle of social organisation, or “that the market neither does, nor can, give sound guidance in any economic system that relies upon the profit motive to keep going” (Wootton 1938, 194).

In this sense, it seems that for Wootton, the nature of the term “welfare” state can be found in both capitalism itself and in the experience of the war. The latter led her to argue that despite challenging to the views on market superiority, this nature was actually quite recent. It emerged with the Labour Party and with Archbishop William Temple (Wootton 1963) in the early 1940s and quickly enjoyed significance and success due to a new social meaning of “social security”, translated into two core pillars. First, the immense reduction in the risk of unemployment and insecurity, as it proposes to address a structure that covers medical care, child allowances, widowhood support, national insurance, unemployment insurance, sickness benefits and old age pensions. Second, the administrative simplicity and universalism proposed by the state, which facilitated access to benefits and provides support to all citizens from cradle to grave (Wootton 1963, 1980).

Crucial here is Wootton’s emphasis on the duty of the state to provide protection, as raised by Beveridge in his 1942 report. Specifically, she advocated how benefits should be sufficient in amount and duration, going against the premise that the public supply of provisions would stimulate people not to work or earn enough (Wootton 1944). Wootton also resorts to surveys and statistical reports to reiterate that the question is not about affordability – as it will be financed by the people themselves – but about distribution. She says:

For there is nothing in the Report which would cause the whole output of the country to be reduced: it is a plan for distributing what we have amongst ourselves in a particular way, not for subtracting from (or adding to) what there is to distribute. (...) The sensible question to ask is, therefore, not can we afford the Beveridge Plan, but who loses and who gains by the changed distribution of the pudding which the plan suggests. (...) It is a plan for making our shares in the pudding less unequal than they are at present (Wootton 1944, 10–11)

Together with the duty of the state follows a pivotal point related to how the implementation of practical welfare policies would require some state planning to be fully achieved. Years before, in her book *Plan or No Plan* (1934), she discussed the advantages and disadvantages of planned and unplanned economies, offering a systematic comparison between capitalism and socialism beyond its usual mystique. However, it was in a debate with Hayek some years later in 1946, that Wootton’s views on planning and freedom became clearer and pushed forward the integration of Keynesian ideas with the progressive political mood that came to dominate Britain at the close of the Second World War, building an important bridge for the public discourse (Oakley 2011).

In a conversation on the implications and perils of economic planning in her 1946b’s *Economic Planning: Serfdom or Freedom?*, Wootton called for the naivety of Hayek’s claim that the road to planning is inevitably the road to slavery and established once again her practical view of how economic policy should be pragmatic – “the very fallacy in all this business in the simple confusion of ‘must’ with ‘may’. (...) Whatever it *will* happen is another question” (Wootton 1946b, 255, original highlight). She argues along similar same lines in her 1938s *Lament* when pointing out that the criticism of non-market economies found in the 1935s *Collectivist Economics Planning* edited by Friedrich Hayek is “a criticism of contrast – of contrast between what is proposed and

what is” (Wootton 1946b, 159). In her view, demonstrated in Section 2, the hostility towards planned economy goes hand in hand with an implicit defence of the validity of market mechanisms and an advocacy of the normative merits of the market.

For Wootton, it is unthinkable to consider real policies and to assume planning as being inconsistent with the fundamental principle of democracy for two main reasons, which crystallise her political-methodological view. First, that we do not have empirical grounds for such conclusion, particularly because, in the real world, people are interested in concrete “freedoms” (civil, cultural, economic and political), rather than a hazy picture of “Freedom”. Second, because economic policy should be separated off from the game of party politics and translate themselves into physical betterment (Oakley 2011): “good political principles must spell real changes in the real lives of real people: otherwise they are dust and ashes” (Wootton 1944, 1).

Despite Wootton’s belief in economic planning and her defence of the Beveridge Plan, she was not blind to flaws and potential criticisms of the welfare state, particularly in its practice. Rather than simply advocating a blind implementation of a welfare system, she often highlighted *why* it was necessary to tackle poverty and inequality and improve the population’s wellbeing, further underpinning the importance of continuous revision and updates in the system for it to remain efficient to its ends, always supported by surveys, statistics and concrete information. After all, for her it was impossible to speculate without empirical data (Oakley 2011).

She acknowledged that the purpose of a comprehensive social security system is to provide protection on a prescribed minimum level against certain contingencies (Wootton 1944, 1953) rather than a utopian change, and also claimed the plan still had many questions still untouched. For instance:

How are we to ensure that the best use is made of the resources of this and other countries? What about our relations with the rest of the world, and international organisation generally? What are fair and workable principles on which to regulate payment for the various jobs that have got to be done by someone? How far is employment for all compatible with the individual’s freedom to choose at what and where he will work? (Wootton 1944, 14)

Some of those questions were answered by Wootton herself as being from a lack of political and general conviction in the welfare state system, rather than knowledge. In her view, Beveridge’s recommendations that emerged from its initial report were in fact politically agreed measures that the Coalition Government gave a “very mild blessing” when they were published, blaming the Labour Government for “whatever difficulties and annoyances have emerged from the actual laws” (Wootton 1949, 101). This view was not presented only by Wootton, but by other scholars at the time, including J. M. Keynes himself when claiming that the British welfare state was not the ultimate goal, but a first step towards social improvements and minimum collective support (2013[1943]). For Wootton, this contributed the perpetuation and maintenance of poverty in British society (Wootton 1956, 1963), as the welfare system should have been strengthened and combined with other programmes to reduce structural inequality.

Wootton connected some of the problems of the welfare state with how unequal power relations exist and endure in the labour market: first, pay and remuneration

needed to be considered side by side with welfare policies, as collective bargaining and equal pay played a crucial role in tackling inequality and poverty, including differences in gendered professions (Wootton 1961). Second, the implementation of a welfare system in Britain caused the misimpression that poverty had been eradicated, and hence disappeared from the catalogues of social and economic investigations (Wootton 1963), when the causes for inequalities within capitalism has much wider and deeper causes.

Regardless of these issues, one cannot claim that Wootton saw the welfare state as entirely problematic. Rather, in her eyes it should be seen as a first step to better and more comprehensive social policies that would eradicate social distress and provide collective betterment (Wootton 1938; 1985). Amidst the rise of neoliberal policies in the 1980s and the attack on welfare state systems, which translated into cuts in social services, she reiterates that such systems should be working towards providing a universal basic benefit for all, from cradle to grave.

She criticised the government's desperate attempt to save money, launching an attack on what she called "the Giant Parsimony" (Wootton 1983, 287). For her, the very existence of the welfare state was due to the fact that people had signally failed to provide welfare provision for themselves through market forces and charitable means, so it is unthinkable that the welfare state should be allowed to wither away, at least in the short run (Wootton 1983). After all, even though in capitalism it is assumed that individuals will manage to provide an income for themselves and their dependants, it is a fact of experience that capitalist countries demonstrate a highly unequal distribution of income.

Even though governments may not be responsible for these initial levels of inequality, Wootton was convinced that they could certainly modify these trends. Then, on what concerns long run objectives, she underpinned the importance of rethinking social insurance based on individual contributions, as it lends higher weight to workers, and proposing more radical proposals in the sense of ensuring poverty is eradicated above all. She was not against, for example, utopian proposals, such as the usage of technology to abolish work (Wootton 1985), but she rather preferred to focus on the usage of tools to abolish poverty and ensure comfort, food, clothing, as well as safeguarding the common good.

One possibility, in her view, was to adopt a universal standard of civilised living which makes a regular welfare payment to every citizen (Wootton 1985), resembling contemporary debates on universal basic income (UBI) (see Van Parijs and Vanderborght 2017). Unlike some UBI advocates, however, she did not defend the removal, or even replacement of the welfare state by uniformed payments – on the contrary, such task should be done with a well-grounded system of public provisions that takes active steps to establish minimum living standards (Wootton 1985).

5. Concluding remarks

Barbara Wootton's acclaimed contributions to social policy are still unknown by historians of economics, particularly on what concerns her contributions to the methodology of economics, and the debates on the British welfare state in the post-war. This article

offered an exploration of Wootton's views on welfare policies by drawing from her engagement in the public debate and her interactions with William Beveridge on the topic, making her an important pillar to 20th century British social policy.

In particular, our article suggests that her forgotten contributions to economic methodology provide a timely reconsideration of the connections between theory and practice in economics. Wootton, who took economics by training, was significantly dissatisfied with the state of economic theorising, as it lacked real-world contributions and was nothing more than a detached, decadent science that was more worried about feeding its own internal logic than improving the conditions of the population. She was very discontented with four core issues in the economics discipline. First, that economists' concerns lie only within positive economics; second, a neutrality and further neglect towards the content and quality of human ends; third, the obsession for individual maximisation of well-being, which oddly enough can lead to a social optimum; and fourth, a believe that there is an optimal distribution of resources within the market.

In stark opposition to these – and challenging Lionel Robbins' definition of economics – Wootton argued that it is the role of the economist to deal with the improvement of the population's wellbeing. Economics should not take ends merely as a given; rather, it should care about the quality of ends and consider individual satisfaction *via-a-vis* social satisfaction. In this sense, she also exposed the unacknowledged bias towards the market as the best form of social organisation, which becomes a strong theoretical argument against planned economies and interventionist policies on the market to deal with rising poverty and inequality. Wootton's understanding of the welfare state therefore did not resemble any modern idea of a public sector being governed by the same principles and axioms as that of the market, or ideas around providing insurance against potential individual risks. This makes her an outlier in the history of economics, which tends to approach the role of the government “as a response to the forces of self-interest” (Medema 2003, 228–229)

By the time Wootton was invited by Beveridge to be part of the Employment Investigation Group in 1943 and to assess economic issues that arose with the publication of the Beveridge Report, she had already claimed that Robbins “discourages this type of inquiry as not scientific” for distinguishing economic science from political economy, but she believed the ultimate objective of economic inquiry should be the “amelioration of the conditions of human life” (Wootton 1938, 308). Curiously, Beveridge's “brains trust” was created in reaction to the decision by the War Cabinet to not commission him to follow up his 1942 report – a decision that came after a letter sent by Robbins to the government.

Once a member of this group, and amidst the blooming of Keynesian policy-making in the 1940s, Wootton neither withheld her views, nor missed the opportunity to reconsider the connections between theory and practice in economics. Contributing to the *zeitgeist* of her time, she passionately argued in favour of public responsibility for providing medical care, child allowances, widowhood support, national insurance, unemployment insurance, sickness benefits and old age pensions. Rather than falling onto conceptual and/or technical limitations of implementing such system, such as budgetary or moral issues, she did not settle for mild policy interventions. On the contrary, Wootton kept pushing for more radical proposals to ensure poverty was eradicated at the same time British society could enjoy a collective betterment.

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ORCID

Carolina Alves  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6016-6262>

Danielle Guizzo  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1629-8062>

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