



**Æconomia**

History, Methodology, Philosophy

12-4 | 2022

Varia

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### Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/oeconomia/13530>

DOI: 10.4000/oeconomia.13530

ISSN: 2269-8450

### Publisher

Association Æconomia

### Printed version

Date of publication: 1 December 2022

Number of pages: 801-805

ISSN: 2113-5207

Brought to you by Bibliothèque cantonale et universitaire Lausanne



UNIL | Université de Lausanne

### Electronic reference

Harro Maas, "Keith Tribe, *Constructing Economic Science: The Invention of a Discipline 1850-1950*", *Æconomia* [Online], 12-4 | 2022, Online since 01 December 2022, connection on 07 February 2023.

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/oeconomia/13530> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/oeconomia.13530>

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## Comptes rendus / *Reviews*

### Keith Tribe, *Constructing Economic Science: The Invention of a Discipline 1850-1950*

New York: Oxford University Press,  
2022, 456 Pages, 978-019049174-1

Harro Maas\*

In *Constructing Economic Science: The Invention of a Discipline 1850-1950* Keith Tribe takes us on a journey to show the transformation of economic discourse that turned a public discourse on things economic into a discipline with a separate curriculum and a technical vocabulary which was no longer accessible to the (literate) public at large. He does so not through the sequence of ideas of great economists, but by promising the reader a '*Krimi*' that leads through a history of the institutional changes that Tribe situates largely in Britain, juxtaposing the developments in Cambridge with those at LSE, and highlighting the intellectual and institutional roles of Alfred Marshall and Lionel Robbins, and, I would add, William Ashley. The cut-off point, 1950, is somewhat arbitrary, but points to the developments after the Second World War, when the premier sites of economics were no longer to be found in Britain, but in the United-States.

Tribe tells this story in four dense, extremely well-written and well-documented parts, divided over thirteen chapters. The first part 'From Public Knowledge to Institutional Discourse' starts from Tribe's involvement in a large-scale project that was led by the late Istvan Hont halfway through the 1980s on the history of the institutionalization of economics as an academic discipline. This branched out from a history of the first chairs in political economy to a history of professionalization and national styles of institutionalization, associated with the historical work of Bob Coats, William Barber, Massimo Augello and

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Marco Guidi amongst others, and with Marion Fourcade's contribution from the sociological side. Tribe uses Fourcade's work in particular to argue that the idea of national styles in economics may lead to stereotypes that do not fit the historical record and do not do justice to how political economy was actually practiced. Tribe then moves to a discussion that sets up these two different issues, that is the transformation of the discursive practices of economists, and the transformation of its institutional setting, for the up-following two chapters, and in fact for the rest of the book. In these two chapters Tribe provides the reader with a prelude to the development of British economics curricula and labor market prospects of those who sat for the exams and an overview of the change from general purpose journals (such as the *Fortnightly Review*) to dedicated disciplinary journals (such as the *Economic Journal*), which are both part of the kind of development Bob Coats captured as the professionalization of the discipline.

Tribe compares the transformation of the institutional setting of the British universities, Oxbridge in particular, against developments in Germany and the United States, and to a lesser extent France. While these countries, in different forms, managed to find some sort of combination of advanced learning and vocational training in the service of business and industry, Oxbridge was seriously lagging behind as it offered a liberal education still importantly attached to and dependent on its relation to the Anglican Church, and for its teaching highly dependent on its Tripos system that favored the classics (Oxford) or an increasingly fossilized form of mathematics (Cambridge). University College London, founded in 1826 as London University by a group of intellectuals, politicians, and men of business amongst whom Henry Brougham, Jeremy Bentham, and James Mill, was open to all religious denominations and offered a distinctly more modern and diverse education, though not in the order of rigor that could be found in Germany and France. Tribe situates the sparse attention to political economy in this Victorian educational landscape against the venues in which political economy was discussed to show that economic discourse should be seen as part of the Victorian landscape of journalism and clubs around Pall Mall and St-James Square, not as a separate academic discipline.

This nineteenth century history of the university teaching in an international comparative perspective are explained in more detail in later chapters when Tribe zooms in on the development of commercial curricula in the United States, Germany, and France, and in newly established universities in Britain, such as Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds, and Liverpool. For this reader, these chapters read as further context for the main thesis of the book, developed in its parts II, III and IV. Tribe convincingly argues that Cambridge offered the institutional possibilities to develop a separate economics degree, while this was impossible in Oxford, but that it was at LSE that economics managed

to acquire a distinctly separate, and enduring, disciplinary identity. This outcome was not just the result of institutional factors, but also of the personalities, theoretical priors and teaching styles of the three protagonists followed by Tribe through the book, Alfred Marshall, William Ashley, and Lionel Robbins. Institutional and personal factors both matter, and one of the major accomplishments of the book is how Tribe manages to strike a balance between both. In a sequence of fascinating chapters, we learn about Marshall's persistence in the creation of an honors degree that would separate economics from the existing Moral Science Tripos, Ashley's resistance at Oxford towards an economics degree that would separate economics from history and politics, and Robbins's efforts to purify economics at LSE from any relation to commerce and business administration. Tribe links these efforts to the very different ways in which Marshall, Ashley, and Robbins conceived of the relation of economic analysis to economic reality and politics, and its consequences for their approaches to teaching. For Marshall, 'thinking like an economist' was a mindset that needs years of practice. For Ashley, there is no such thing as an economic way of thinking separate from history. And for Robbins, economics is an academic discipline with its own technical vocabulary that needs to be acquired and that separates the economist from the layman.

Tribe contrasts in particular whatever might be meant with 'Marshallian economics' with Robbins's very different style of teaching. While Marshall tried to forge the link with economics' practicality (which is not exactly the same as its vocational aspect), Robbins severed the link between economics as an academic endeavor and its vocational and political aspect (if there were any). Tribe admirably manages to guide the reader through an overwhelming richness of sources to show how the honors degree in economics was established at Cambridge in 1903, the PPE degree at Oxford, and the BSc in economics at LSE. Little came from Marshall's hope for the practical usefulness of the honors degree (which attracted only few students) in contrast with the extremely successful PPE degree which in terms of practicality did just what Marshall had hoped for in Cambridge. Not incidentally, Oxford, not Cambridge, became the main supplier of the higher administrators, MP's, and Prime Ministers in Britain. But even though LSE's BSc degree in economics forged its disciplinary identity, it was quickly outcompeted by the way of teaching economics at colleges and universities in the United States.

These chapters, of which the above can only give a glimpse, left this reader with two burning questions, one pertaining to Marshall, the other to the book's project at large. First, Tribe's chapters on Marshall, which read like a book in a book, nicely deconstruct any prior a historian of economics might have about the meaning of 'Marshallian economics'. The mixture of the teaching curriculum, the changes Marshall proposed, and the resulting composition of syllabi and courses for the

honors in economics effectively downplay the importance of Marshall's *Principles* as its premier analytical toolbox. Tribe argues that the fixation of historians of economics on the *Principles* was reinforced by the subsequent versions of the book which lost much of the economic history of the first edition, and by the variorum edition which does not help the reader to follow the development of Marshall's intentions.

Marshall was clear about the fact that the work of the economist was not that of the historian, even though his last two published books *Industry and Trade* (1919) and *Money, Interest and Commerce* (1923) clearly moved closer to economic history. But Marshall considered that the economist in contrast with the historian needed, as Tribe rightly notes, contemporary facts and an analytical vision on these facts that economic historians were lacking. But just what this meant in practice, how Marshall combined analytical vision with the concrete facts of history in his teaching, remains opaque, also in Tribe's account. Tribe tells us that Marshall used 'tools' to teach this combination of facts and vision, but just what these tools were if they were not the tools of his *Principles*, remains in the dark. Pigou's analytical style of teaching (and writing) provides more clarity, but it is a stretch to think of Pigou's analytical approach to practical questions as a proxy for Marshall's own ways of working and teaching. Surprisingly, Tribe's intriguing and pertinent questioning of the meaning of 'Marshallian economics' thus does not get a clear answer, not even in relation to Marshall's most important student, John Maynard Keynes.

I experienced a similar surprise when I came to the last two substantial chapters of the book which deal with Robbins and the economics degree at the LSE. Robbins, of course not on his own, managed to get a separate undergraduate degree in economics, and successfully separated economics from other social disciplines with his famous definition of economics as the science of rational choice under constraints. Former LSE students moved to other universities and departments to spread the gospel, and it was this science that outcompeted Marshallian economics. Tribe provides the reader with a far subtler story than this, but it still comes somewhat as a surprise to read that in fact Robbins's vision of the discipline was as unsuccessful as Marshall's. With the rise of mass university teaching in economics in the United States, it was *that* vision of the discipline, and that kind of teaching, let's call it Samuelson's *Economics*, which carried the day. Or as Tribe concludes his book; "the diverse landscape of US higher education provided a very much larger, and more flexible, foundation for the developing discipline of economics than existed in Britain. Today the basic LSE textbooks for teaching micro- and macroeconomics are all American" (374).

As with every good *Krimi*, this solution comes only at the end of the book. But it puzzled this reader and made him wonder about the whole book's endeavor. Yes, the book provides the most detailed account of

the development of political economy from a public discourse to an academic discipline, with academic standards and infrastructure *in Britain*, and yes, the book also provides many valuable excursions to the invention of this discipline in other countries. But just from following the clues in the book, I could not have foreseen who committed the crime, even though any historian of economics, or any economist or social scientist for that matter, would have blind-guessed that the discipline of economics was not invented in Britain, but in the United States. *That* story must be the subject of another crime-scene with a different plot, and one can only hope a historian of economics will take up the challenge to tell that story with the same level of detail and care with which Tribe infused his history of the coming of age of economics in Britain.

In his concluding remarks, Tribe muses on how a greater emphasis on the role of institutions in the formation of disciplinary economics should encourage historians of economics to shift their focus from the study of the major works of major economists to variables that some historians and sociologists of economics have already encroached, but not always to the level of detail that helps us to see where and how an individual's biography can fruitfully inform institutional histories and vice versa. *Constructing Economic Science: The Invention of a Discipline 1850-1950*, a work of long gestation, provides a premier example of such a study. Tribe's book is a worthy recipient of the best book prize of the European Society for the History of Economic Thought (2022) and will be a work of reference on the formation of economics as an academic discipline for years to come.