



MAURICE HERBERT DOBB

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1900–1976

THE death of Maurice Dobb, on 17 August 1976, has robbed the world of economics of an outstanding and well-loved scholar, who over a period of fifty years established and maintained his position as one of the most eminent Marxist economists in the world. These fifty years were spent almost entirely at Cambridge, where his scholarship, integrity, and great international reputation were eventually recognized by his appointment to a Readership in 1959. To the very many students and colleagues whom he so unstintingly helped and inspired over the years, Cambridge will never seem quite the same again.

Maurice Herbert Dobb was born on 24 July 1900, the son of Walter Herbert Dobb and Elsie Annie Moir, of London. He was educated at Charterhouse—an establishment not particularly noted for its output of Marxist intellectuals—and remained a loyal Carthusian to the end of his life. Having become a socialist in the last stages of the war (partly no doubt under the inspiration of the October Revolution in Russia), and saved from the call-up by the armistice of November 1918, he entered Pembroke College, Cambridge, as an Exhibitioner in 1919 in order to read economics. In those days economics was still a rather unfashionable subject, and socialism was a rather unusual creed for a young man of impeccable upbringing and appearance to profess. Dobb himself (as reported by Professor Hobsbawm) used to recall with amusement ‘his first attempt to join the small band of Cambridge University socialists, and being intensively interrogated by H. D. Dickinson (later Professor of Economics at Bristol), who was clearly under the impression that so spruce and conventional-looking a young man must be a provocateur’. A socialist economist—and particularly one who had the temerity to call himself a Marxist—was indeed a *rara avis* in the immediate post-war Cambridge scene.

Having taken a First in both parts of the Economics Tripos, Dobb went on to spend two postgraduate years at the London School of Economics, reading for his Ph.D. under Edwin Cannan. He then accepted an invitation to come back to a University lectureship at Cambridge, where he was to teach for the remainder of his career. Thanks to the efforts of the late

Professor D. H. Robertson he eventually became attached to Trinity, but for reasons which may not have been unconnected with his political views, it was not until 1948 that he was actually elected to a Fellowship at this (or any) college.

Dobb had joined the Communist Party in 1921, and was to remain a loyal, though conspicuously undogmatic, member of that organization to the end of his life. To a man of his political convictions, and great integrity, the atmosphere at Cambridge in the 1920s must have seemed incredibly uncongenial. He wrote in a letter about that time that he was finding it rather distasteful 'teaching embryo exploiters how to exploit the workers in the most up-to-date and humane way'. And one can imagine how this distastefulness must in Dobb's eyes have been exacerbated by the absence of any really significant group of radical students in the University, by the lack of any industrial working class to speak of in the town, and, after the General Strike, by the virtual collapse of even that miniscule left-wing movement which had previously existed. It was not until the stormy period of the 1930s that the Cambridge left was resuscitated, and Dobb's political isolation somewhat diminished.

It was during the 1920s, however, that the foundations of Dobb's future work as a scholar were laid by the publication of two important books—*Capitalist Enterprise and Social Progress* in 1925, and *Russian Economic Development Since the Revolution* in 1928. These two books did not constitute the whole of his output in this period, of course: there were also several journal articles; there was the first edition of what was to become a very popular textbook on *Wages* (commissioned by Keynes for the Cambridge Economic Handbooks series); and last, but in Dobb's eyes certainly not least, there were several outline courses on economic topics written for left-wing educational organizations like the Labour Research Department. But it was the two books—and particularly *Capitalist Enterprise and Social Progress*—which most clearly manifested Dobb's scholastic ability and foreshadowed the remarkable work which was soon to come.

Re-reading *Capitalist Enterprise and Social Progress* today, more than half a century after its first appearance, one is struck above all by the way in which the three parts into which the book is divided ('Analytical', 'Historical', and 'Applied') faithfully reflect the three major fields which Dobb was later to make his own—first, economic analysis (with particular reference to its history and methodology); second, economic history (particularly the history of capitalism); and third, the practical problems

of economic planning under socialism. One is also struck by the appearance, in this very early work, of certain concepts and distinctions which were destined to become the motifs of much of his later work: the concept of profit as the fruit of an 'institutional' monopoly limiting the supply of entrepreneurs, for example, and the distinction between 'uncertainty' in the normally accepted economic sense and 'uncertainty' in the sense of the ignorance of each individual entrepreneur (under competitive capitalism) as to the actions and intentions of his rivals. Finally, one is struck by the extent to which this book provides evidence of the fact—sometimes forgotten or misinterpreted by Dobb's critics—that he was in fact brought up not only in the Marxist but also in the Marshallian and Pigouvian traditions. His ability to translate Marxian ideas into non-Marxian language, and his belief that one *ought* so to translate them if one wanted to make Marxism accessible to academic audiences in the West, are both very clearly indicated in his first book. And the particular field in which his interest in the problems of economic planning under socialism was mainly to be displayed was indicated with equal clarity in his second book, *Russian Economic Development Since the Revolution*—a pioneer study which was to be only the first of a long series of writings by Dobb dealing specifically with the Soviet economy.

In the 1930s Dobb's political isolation was lessened greatly as a result of the explosion of left-wing ideas among intellectuals, and he soon became one of the best-known members of a group of Cambridge Marxists whose influence both inside and outside the University was out of all proportion to its size. His strong sense of duty and hatred of all kinds of privilege, which always overcame his appreciation of the social benefits of the division of labour, led him to share in the more mundane activities of this group on the same basis as everyone else: contemporaries recall how he served on anti-fascist committees, licked stamps and sealed envelopes, knocked on doors, and took part in demonstrations. He was one of the handful of Cambridge dons who in 1932 marched out to Girton to meet the north-eastern contingent of hunger marchers. But his main political work was, as always, in the educational field: he became widely known and respected in left-wing circles as a lecturer, and he published a large number of popular pamphlets on Marxism, the U.S.S.R., and the economics of socialism.

In the official academic world, however, he still remained a somewhat lonely and isolated figure—almost, one might say, on

the periphery of academic life. This was not due to any failure on his part to contribute to academic publications, or to produce scholarly books: on the contrary, he published in the 1930s a very large number of articles and reviews in academic journals, and also produced what may well come to be recognized as his most original and impressive book, *Political Economy and Capitalism* (1937).

This book deserves much more than passing mention. Marked by the same careful scholarship and close argument which characterized all his work, *Political Economy and Capitalism* was the first really *creative* contribution to Marxist economics ever to appear, at any rate in the English-speaking world. Although some of its leading ideas had been anticipated in a much shorter work which Dobb had published a few years earlier (*An Introduction to Economics*, 1932), it is from the appearance of *Political Economy and Capitalism* that future historians of economic thought will probably date the emergence of Marxist economics as a really serious academic discipline in this country. In this book, Dobb discussed in turn the requirements of a theory of value in economics; the nature of classical political economy (with particular reference to its relation to Marxist economics); the theory of economic crises; the basic trends and tendencies of modern (non-Marxist) economics; imperialism; and the question of the operation of economic laws in a socialist economy. This wide range of subjects was discussed from a point of view which was unmistakably Marxist: the book is at the same time a powerful defence of Marx as the logical successor and developer of the tradition of classical political economy, and a penetrating Marxian critique of the then predominant subjectivist or 'marginal utility' school in economic theory. But this defence and critique are conducted with such depth, perception, originality, and sheer charm that one would have imagined that nobody—not even one whose political views were opposed to Dobb's—could possibly have overlooked or underestimated the book.

Nevertheless, it is probably true to say that at that time its impact was still felt predominantly in left-wing circles. In how many libraries of ageing left-wing scholars, I wonder, are there to be found treasured and heavily underlined copies of Dobb's *Introduction to Economics* and *Political Economy and Capitalism*, from which so many of us in so many different countries learned for the first time not only what intellectual Marxism was, not only what economics was (or could be), but also what real scholarship

was? In more orthodox circles, however, its impact was very much less, and the amount of intellectual excitement which it generated was minimal. The whole tradition of orthodox economic thought was then permeated with the notion that the introduction of 'social' or 'institutional' data into economic theory, as an integral factor in the explanation of prices and incomes, was essentially political rather than scientific. And when this introduction was performed by an immensely civilized person like Dobb, who possessed to the full the uncomfortable ability to translate Marxian ideas into Marshallian language, the instinctive tendency of orthodoxy to resist this invasion from an alien world was naturally heightened. In addition, as Professor Hobsbawm has perceptively noted, Dobb's critique of economic orthodoxy at this time

ran parallel to the more influential Keynesian one, but hardly touched it except in the common rejection by 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 preoccupation 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.

The years of the Second World War brought for Dobb various new strains: a doubled teaching load, intensified political activity (particularly after the U.S.S.R. became an ally), A.R.P. and Home Guard duties, and so on. But there was no interruption in the flow of journal articles, reviews, and popular books and pamphlets from his pen. Many of these, as one would expect, were concerned with aspects of life in the U.S.S.R.; but there were others on different subjects, notably a splendid and very influential essay on *Marx as an Economist* which first appeared in 1943. Nor did Dobb, always an indefatigable worker, allow all this to interfere too seriously with his long-term research—a fact which was abundantly evidenced by the appearance, in the years immediately after the end of the war, of two new and important books.

One of these, *Soviet Economic Development Since 1917* (published in 1948), was in effect a revised and enlarged edition of his *Russian Economic Development Since the Revolution*, which as we have seen had appeared in 1928. The other book, however—*Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (1946)—although it certainly had its

germ in what Dobb with characteristic modesty now called 'some jejune chapters of twenty years ago about the origins of capitalist enterprise' (i.e. his *Capitalist Enterprise and Social Progress*), was essentially the product of new thinking and research. It is possibly upon this book—as well as, perhaps, upon his *Political Economy and Capitalism*—that Dobb's reputation as a scholar will finally rest. In it he employed his great theoretical ability and historical flair in order to throw light on certain crucial problems relating to the economic development of Western capitalism. The book was motivated, as Dobb put it in his preface, 'by the obstinate belief that economic analysis only makes sense and can only bear fruit if it is joined to a study of historical development, and that the economist concerned with present-day problems has certain questions of his own to put to historical data'. In these *Studies*—which were based on an exhaustive analysis of the then extant secondary sources—Dobb showed a degree of insight and originality which commanded the respect even of those who disagreed fundamentally with the Marxian view of history which he deployed as a tool throughout the book. In particular, his account of the transition from feudalism to capitalism raised very sharply certain controversial issues which have ever since been the subject of intense debate. Among Marxists, the stimulation afforded by Dobb's book was reflected almost immediately in a well-known international discussion of these issues early in the 1950s—a discussion which is still proceeding today, as witness the appearance in 1976 of a reprint of the original contributions to this discussion together with a number of more recent essays relating to it. Among non-Marxists the effect was less immediately and directly felt, but felt it eventually was: there must today be few economic historians who are prepared to deny at any rate the *relevance* of the problems in this field which Dobb was one of the very first scholars to raise.

In the 1950s, however, the changes which took place in the political climate were hardly conducive to a more widespread acceptance of Dobb's ideas. They also rendered his political life at Cambridge much less comfortable: in the middle and late 1950s support for the Communist Party at the University dwindled considerably; and Dobb once remarked at this time that it was quite disconcerting walking in the streets of central Cambridge because so many ex-Communists crossed to the other side when they saw him coming. Although he rarely showed any outward sign of discomfiture, and continued to give

his usual constant and quiet encouragement to the young graduates in his Party branch, he must have felt this temporary return to the semi-isolation of the 1920s very keenly indeed. So far as his writing was concerned, however, the only visible sign of this was a decline in his output of *popular* books and pamphlets; and this was much more than compensated for by an appreciable increase in the flow of journal articles, many of which were of very high quality. A collection of some of these articles of the 1950s, together with a number of earlier ones, appeared in 1955 under the title *On Economic Theory and Socialism*. In the 1950s, too, there was published the monumental edition of the works and correspondence of David Ricardo, edited by Piero Sraffa with the active assistance and collaboration (since 1948) of Dobb.

But so far as the development of Dobb's thought was concerned, the 1950s were above all marked by his increasing concern with the problems of the economic development of pre-industrial economies—a field in which he was able fruitfully to combine (and extend) the results of his analyses both of the development of Western capitalism and of the Soviet economy. The first major products of this concern were the three lectures on *Some Aspects of Economic Development* which he gave at the Delhi School of Economics when he went there as Visiting Professor for a short period in 1950–1. Quite a few of his journal articles in the 1950s were also devoted to this subject, and in 1960 he published what was probably his most important contribution in the field—the short but classic volume which he modestly entitled *An Essay on Economic Growth and Planning*. In this book he discussed with great technical skill and profound analytical understanding the central problems of investment choice in a planned, developing economy. The argument is very tight indeed, and owes little (except by way of general 'philosophical' inspiration) to the work of Marx. One of the main points which Dobb makes, to put it in his own words, is that correct decisions by a central planning authority about the choice of techniques in the consumer goods and investment sectors 'may contribute much more to human welfare than could the most perfect micro-economic adjustment, of which the market (if it worked like the textbooks, at least, and there were no income-inequalities) is admittedly more fitted in most cases to take care'. Strategy, in other words, is more important than tactics in this sphere; and it is therefore to the delineation of the principles which ought to govern the correct strategy that Dobb turns his main attention in this seminal book.



It is of course the Maurice Dobb of the 1960s and early 1970s that most of us will best remember. His economics students will remember him as an immensely careful, painstaking, and sympathetic supervisor and lecturer. His friends will remember him most typically—if I may quote from Professor Hobsbawm again—

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.

Few who knew him at any stage in his life, even if they came to disagree with him politically, could ever have lost their great respect and affection for him.

The last fifteen years of Dobb's life were marked by an increasing recognition of his achievements which must have done much to compensate for the long years which he had been obliged to spend on the borders of the academic wilderness. His retirement from his Cambridge Readership was marked by a *Festschrift* (*Socialism, Capitalism and Economic Growth*, 1967) to which an extremely distinguished array of economists contributed. He was awarded an honorary doctorate at the University of Prague in 1964; and another at the University of Leicester in 1972. (The latter occasion he shortly afterwards described in a letter to me as a 'bright day' which was 'not only very pleasant but also rather overwhelming—a little like one's first party as a child'.) And the award of his British Academy Fellowship in 1971 also meant a great deal to him.

But the last fifteen years of his life were also—and perhaps even more importantly—marked by an intensification of his intellectual activity which, viewed in retrospect, is really quite extraordinary. I am thinking here not so much of his second collection of essays (*Capitalism, Development and Planning*, 1967), although that is impressive enough, but more particularly of his *Welfare Economics and the Economics of Socialism* (1969) and *Theories of Value and Distribution Since Adam Smith* (1973). In the first of these two books he attempted, as he put it, to sort out the wheat from the chaff in the modern theory of welfare economics, rejecting at the same time both the uncritical admiration dis-

played towards this branch of theory by its more ardent supporters and the nihilistic opposition to it displayed by its more sectarian critics, and applying those of its propositions which came out unscathed from his own searching criticism to the problems of economic choice in a socialist economy.

It is in his *Theories of Value and Distribution Since Adam Smith*, however, that the remarkable freshness and continuing vitality of his intellectual vision revealed themselves most prominently. In a certain sense, this last book of his represented a return by Dobb to the territory he had explored thirty-five years before in his *Political Economy and Capitalism*. It would be quite wrong, however, to regard the *Theories* merely as a kind of updated new edition of the earlier book, since the general orientations of the two works are quite different. In *Political Economy and Capitalism*, Dobb's main aim was to show that Marxian economics was the logical successor of classical economics, and to develop Marxian economics in such a way as to provide better answers than orthodox economics was then capable of providing to certain key problems relating (for example) to imperialism and socialism. In his *Theories*, by way of contrast, his main aim was to rewrite the history of economic thought (with special reference to value and distribution theory) in the light of the present-day controversy over capital theory, and, more particularly, in the light of the so-called 'Sraffa revolution' ushered in by the appearance in 1960 of Piero Sraffa's *Production of Commodities by Means of Commodities*. In carrying out this aim, Dobb took the opportunity of correcting what he had now come to believe were certain errors of emphasis in *Political Economy and Capitalism* (a book, he told me a few years ago, that he sometimes now regretted that he had ever written), and reinterpreted nineteenth-century economic thought in terms of the emergence and development of what he called 'two quite distinct and rival trends' in value and distribution theory. The *Theories* is an extremely perceptive and stimulating book, which—if economics is in fact now at an important turning-point in its development, as Dobb believed—is bound to have a profound effect on the writing of the history of economic thought.

Sraffa's *Production of Commodities*, which embodied in effect both a kind of rehabilitation and development of Ricardian and Marxian theory and at the same time a critique of modern 'neo-classical' theory (particularly capital theory), not only directly inspired Dobb's *Theories* but also had the additional—and equally happy—effect of bringing him closer to a number of

economists, at Cambridge and elsewhere, with whom his relations in earlier years had at times been rather more uneasy. In the last years of his life, Dobb began to feel that if this new alliance could be preserved and strengthened there was a real possibility that what he called 'the century-old dominance of orthodox doctrine over economics teaching' might fairly soon be overcome. But he was also very much aware that the battle was by no means won; that the defenders were mounting a powerful counter-attack against the Sraffian critique; and that under these conditions 'leftist' criticism of what had come to be called (pejoratively) Sraffa's 'neo-Ricardianism' could only be harmful and divisive. In a moving passage at the end of what must have been almost his last journal article, Dobb wrote:

When such an ideological contest is being joined I would suggest that Marxists have more to gain by stressing what they have *in common* with their allies, in the shape of fellow-critics of prevailing bourgeois orthodoxy who would not perhaps go all the way with them in positive statements of what they believe; and that it is weakening and divisive (and in this sense sectarian) to focus attention on *differences* between Marxists, near-Marxists and others (even if such differences are not to be ignored). Joined with this consideration is the question of the audience one is addressing . . . This audience should be largely, if not mainly, those still unconvinced by recent criticism. In the present context the sectarian critics have in my view much underestimated the extent to which rehabilitating Ricardo, for the great majority of people schooled in orthodox teaching . . . is *ipso facto* an introduction to the study of Marx.

Looking at Dobb's life and work as a whole, one is struck in particular by two things. The first is that although he was from the beginning a convinced Marxist, he always firmly resisted, in all its manifestations, the vulgar notion that Marx's ideas constituted a kind of self-contained, encapsulated system which had had no history and was incapable of further development. On the contrary, he always insisted that there was an important sense in which Marx as an economist had worked within a broad analytical tradition established much earlier by Smith and Ricardo (a fact which suggested a ready way of introducing Marx to British audiences); that Marxian economics could and should be developed, and even where necessary transcended; and that this should be done not only with the aid of tools fashioned by Marxists, but also with the aid of at least *some* of those fashioned by 'bourgeois' economists. Why, he asked in

effect, should the devil have all the good tools? Dobb always refused to join in the wholesale denigration of Marshall and Pigou which became fashionable in certain quarters; and when it came to modern welfare economics, although he severely criticized a number of its leading propositions and attitudes, he was very careful (as we have seen) not to allow the wheat to escape with the chaff. Dobb once told me of an amusing 'economists' dream' which he had just had. One of the economics tutors at St. John's, it appeared, was giving a sherry party (in an attic room somewhere above the chapel) for the Economics Faculty in order to introduce Karl Marx to Alfred Marshall. The party was apparently a great success: the two old men were talking together with tremendous animation and in perfect amity. The tutor who had organized the party, however, was not satisfied. 'What a pity Sraffa isn't here,' he said to Dobb, 'Marx would have been so interested in his new edition of Ricardo.' Can one perhaps see in this dream, besides its obvious charm, an indication of Dobb's lifelong concern to have Marx placed in a historical—and British—setting?

The second thing which strikes one about Dobb's life and work—and it is something which I think he himself would have liked to see emphasized—is the way in which throughout his whole life his political and academic activities were so closely linked together, with no loss of integrity and very little sense of strain. He always considered it part of his everyday duty, as a politically conscious academic, to make the results of his research available not only to the *cognoscenti* but also to interested lay people. And his popular books and pamphlets, whatever their level of discourse, are marked by the same meticulous scholarship, precision of argument, and refusal to make concessions to dogmatism, as his major 'academic' works. The other dimension of this which should be noted is that the level of objectivity which Dobb managed to achieve in all his work was very high—quite remarkably high, in fact, if one remembers the political circumstances in which he found himself. It must have been extraordinarily difficult, for example, for a Communist academic like Dobb to write as objectively as he usually did about the U.S.S.R., while giving so few hostages to the dogmatists at either end of the political spectrum. If there are few economists of our time who can match Dobb in the range, quality, and originality of his contributions, and few who can match him in his great modesty and humanity, there are even fewer who can match him in his integrity and honesty.

*Acknowledgements.* I have made considerable use in this memoir of the tribute to Dobb written by Professor Hobsbawm for the *Festschrift* mentioned above, and also of some articles on Dobb which appeared in the August 1967 issue of *Marxism Today*. A number of Dobb's friends and associates have also assisted by providing me with reminiscences and further information.

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