
BOOK REVIEWS

Political Economy Now! The Struggle for Alternative Economics at the University of Sydney

Gavan Butler, Evan Jones and Frank Stilwell

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Reviewed by Joy Dodds

University campuses now seem far quieter than those of yesteryear. Nowhere is this more apparent than in relation to the struggles by staff and students in Sydney University's Faculty of Economics that began in the late 60s and continued for more than three decades. The 1970's and 1980's were periods of particularly intense struggle, with demands for a Department of Political Economy being backed by an array of student protest activities. Eventually a successful outcome has been achieved and the alternative political economy courses continue to operate as an alternative to the mainstream economics program.

I enrolled at Sydney as a callow compliant youth, only to become caught up in the most exciting episode of student activism in that University's history. Students invaded the Vice-Chancellor's office in the historic Main Quadrangle, urging that the new brand of economics – political economy – could see the light of day and compete equally with orthodox theory. The demand was that they could study political economy (Marxist and institutional economics, post-Keynesian approaches, feminism, etc.) as well as the mainstream micro/macro economic theories (providing an uncritical view of the rule of the market).

The story of the long struggle is now documented in *Political Economy Now!*, penned by three of main combatants in the fight – Frank Stilwell, Gavan Butler and Evan Jones. These renegade academics were not deterred by the David and Goliath situation that emerged, as they came up against the likes of Vice-Chancellor Bruce Williams and other orthodox economics stalwarts such as Professors Warren Hogan and Colin Simkin. Butler, Stilwell and Jones were relatively junior lecturers

when they arrived in the early 1970s, but they were backed by other far-sighted academics, notably Associate Professor ‘Red’ Ted Wheelwright and Geelum Simpson-Lee, staff-elected Dean of the Economics Faculty.

The book acknowledges the unrelenting efforts of the student activists – including the late Michael Brezniak, Clive Hamilton [formerly executive director of The Australia Institute and now Professor of Public Ethics], Stephen Yen [a lawyer for ASIC] and Paul Porteous [a Fellow at Harvard University and formerly senior advisor to the President of Madagascar]. Personal memoirs from these and other student activists are sprinkled throughout the book – one at the end of each chapter.

There are also photographs of the many demonstrations. One shows a group of students on the roof of the cloisters in the Main Quad in June 1983, waving a banner calling for the Vice-Chancellor to ‘resolve or resign’. The authorities instituted disciplinary action against six of the activists, including Anthony Albanese [now a Federal Minister], and then laid further charges against three other student leaders involved a week later in the occupation of a wing of the Merewether [Economics Faculty] building. Police were called to evict the protestors and they arrested one student. Concern about ‘cops on campus’ and victimization of student leaders were added to the demands for political economy courses. The students occupied the Merewether building again a few days later and stayed there in a sit-in/sleep-in for 10 days. Significantly, the police were not called in this time - the students had demonstrated they were not to be deterred by the prospect of disciplinary action.

Earlier protests had seen signs such as ‘*Re-instate David Hill*’ hoisted on campus, referring to the former Economics tutor who had supported the student’s demands for course reform – the same David Hill who went on to be head of NSW State Rail, the ABC and Soccer Australia. As the staff-student movement advocating the alternative gained momentum during the 1970s protest activities became more diverse and intense. Apart from the protests at the Vice-Chancellor’s office and on the cloisters in the Quad, the students erected a tent in the Quad (even holding a lecture there!), occupied the clock tower and installed a caravan on the Front Lawn for a fortnight as an information centre. Such audacious actions are unthinkable on today’s more conservative campus.

Newspaper coverage of the protests blasted: *'Police vs Students: Uni Clash'*, with an accompanying photo of baton-wielding cops. As one activist comments in the book: 'This wasn't quite how it was supposed to have turned out. A fleeting newspaper headline, little more than a footnote to the history of the struggle, hid years of hard work, frustration, passion, emotion and incredible learning that characterized being part of the political economy movement.'

The authors of the book identify the nature and causes of the struggle – interacting concerns over curriculum, teaching and power relationships. They write: 'The right to define the discipline [was] monopolised by the authorities, the result of which was that official student feedback was either minimised or deflected. This tendency came to be particularly well developed in the Department of Economics at the University of Sydney. Indeed, it was the standard of teaching of the compulsory courses by those of professorial rank and their denial of the legitimacy of adverse student opinion that initially fuelled the rebellion by students.'

In the authors' eyes, there was misuse of power by the Economics professors and university heavies who had control over staffing, courses and resources, thereby blocking 'free intellectual exchange and a liberal education ... this is what is known as intellectual suppression.' An official Economic Faculty committee in 1974 recommended the creation of a separate Department of Political Economy and a full four-year course in political economy, but Vice-Chancellor Williams declined to create the new department recommended by the Faculty. Then in 1976, Williams rejected the key recommendation of another official Academic Board inquiry on the issue. Students again staged an occupation and 4000 students and staff mounted a university-wide strike in support of the PE movement.

This book also sees the struggle for political economy at Sydney University as 'a struggle for education that would fit in better with the needs of the modern workforce and society.' It points out that PE graduates include 'a former NSW premier, a deputy premier, a state treasurer, ministers for housing and local government, other state government parliamentarians, a leader of the federal ALP Opposition, other federal government ministers, a federal public service commissioner' ... the list goes on.

What does the political economy struggle tell us about the economics profession? The book points out that, with rare exceptions, the efforts of the dissident staff in the Department of Economics Sydney University were not supported or embraced by mainstream economists elsewhere in Australia. The latter were ‘evidently unwilling to pick up the gauntlet thrown down by the political economists.’ According to the authors, ‘professional marginalization within academia persists. The mainstream economists generally don’t want to know.’ When *SMH* economics editor Ross Gittins gave a talk at the University in 2007 about the limitations of conventional economics, ‘the economics students came in large numbers but their lecturers were conspicuous by their absence.’

Within the University itself, the long battle was finally resolved by the restructuring of faculties, which established the Department of Political Economy in the Faculty of Arts as a part of a new School of Social and Political Sciences. This positive outcome contrasts with an earlier attempt to solve the conflict by institutional restructuring, a process Ted Wheelwright referred to as the Vice-Chancellor’s proposal to locate the untidy bits which did not fit comfortably elsewhere in the University in a ‘cesspool faculty.’ It now seems that the University has got it right, and the presence of Political Economy as a distinctive department there is a major draw-card.

Were all the efforts by staff and student activists to get to this point worthwhile? As one former activist, Sally Edsall, [now NSW Teachers’ Federation research officer] writes in the book: ‘There’s much to be said for a grounding in university activism ... When it is accompanied by a spirit of scholarship and enquiry of the highest standard – the hallmark of the course offered through political economy – then it is something to be treasured. There is no room for complacency and inertia in this world.’

Clive Hamilton also advances the view that there is a broader significance in the threat to the interests of the conservative elite, writing: ‘The University of Sydney is the training ground for the next generation of elites who occupy the positions of influence in business, the professions and government, and the worldview of the mainstream economists was central to the ideological reproduction of the system.’

So what have the activist staff and students achieved? The political economists have published important books and articles challenging economic orthodoxy. From time to time, particularly now that the wider economic system is in crisis, there is media interest in these critical political economic alternatives. Frank Stilwell became Australia's first Professor of Political Economy at an Australian university in modern times. In 2008, after Political Economy became a separate department within the School of Social and Political Sciences, it had a strong surge of enrolments – over 600 undergraduate students studying first year PE. A new Master of Political Economy degree was introduced in 2009 and immediately attracted strong enrolments too. The authors of the book evidently believe the struggle was worthwhile. They say: 'Clashing with the neoclassical structure and its defenders was compelling, heady stuff ... moreover, it had strong parallels with what colleagues were trying to do simultaneously in a few notable universities abroad.'

That the political economy courses are currently flourishing is timely, as markets crash worldwide and there is a widespread perception that the behaviour of capitalist economic institutions needs to be collectively monitored and regulated. As the world's economy lurches towards financial crises and unemployment, continuing poverty amid affluence, and intensifying ecological stress, surely the students of political economy will be well-equipped to probe the causes by looking at the bigger picture and to contribute to cooperative change for the better.

A relatively recent PE graduate Darren Rodrigo, now a senior policy advisor to the NSW Minister for Planning, writes in the book about the enduring legacy of the struggle for political economy. Praising the earlier generations of activists, he says: 'the opportunity to study alternative approaches to economics was won through the courage, struggle and sacrifice of the radical students and lecturers who went before them ... As for the future, we are here, we remember and we remain committed.'

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