Piero Sraffa at the University of Cambridge*

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You are a complete cipher to the outside world

(RFK to PS, 17 February 1933; SP: C/159)

1. Sraffa and the Cambridge Economics Faculty

My aim in this paper was to reconstruct the academic figure of Sraffa at Cambridge as it emerges from his papers, his correspondence with the economists with whom he had special relations, and the official documents of the university, in particular in connection with his role in the Faculty of Economics and Politics, to which he belonged from 1927 to 1965.

At Cambridge academic life is indissolubly bound up with the college that one belongs to. In Sraffa's case this was King's, where he began as a member of High Table to become later a College member, and Trinity, where he was appointed Fellow in 1939; again, for this aspect of Sraffa's life and academic experience I shall endeavour to give an account as far as possible based on the existing documentation.

A word of warning is necessary here: the figure of Sraffa cannot be fully understood and interpreted without reconstructing the interconnections with the scientific, cultural and political events in his life. Here, therefore, I cannot pretend to offer anything more than a few pieces to fit together with others to fill out the broad picture.

In the following sections I present a detailed examination of the various posts held by Sraffa at the University of Cambridge.

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2. The Lecturer

The sequence of events that led to Sraffa's appointment as lecturer at Cambridge is well known, but let us retrace the basic steps. In a letter of 25 January 1927, with characteristic understatement Keynes asked Sraffa if he would be prepared to accept a teaching post at Cambridge, were he to be offered one (JMK to PS, 25 January 1927; KP: L/S/25/25). In letters written in the February and March of that year Sraffa accepted the offer with gratitude and enthusiasm, assuring Keynes that he would be given leave in Italy even if he was awarded the chair at Genoa (letters of 6, 16, 28 February 1927; 10 March 1927). However, on forwarding his curriculum vitae to Keynes, Sraffa asked advice on how to draw up the application to be sent to the Vice-Chancellor (PS to JMK, 9 May 1927; KP: L/S/33/6).

Announcement of the official appointment was contained in a letter of 31 May (JMK to PS, 31 May 1927; KP: L/S/37/9), in which Keynes also advised Sraffa on the contents of the course, suggesting as the subject for the first term, 'The theory of value', for the second, 'The theory of distribution', and for the third any subject of a 'realistic' nature that he might be interested in treating (JMK to PS, 31 May 1927; KP: L/S/37/9). Keynes also mentioned the work of supervision, suggesting that Sraffa should not accept too many students but limit himself to five or at the most ten 'specially selected men, possibly research students'.

Sraffa's reply is interesting because it shows that as he drew up a scheme for his lessons he departed from his original intentions about what to teach. The following section will make this aspect clearer.

Having rejected the idea of holding a course on the theory of distribution on the grounds that he had 'fragmentary, confused ideas on the subject', Sraffa suggested to Keynes that the course on the theory of value should be divided into two parts, dedicating the first term to the theory of supply (or 'Problems of the Theory of Production'), addressing 'those aspects of the theory of production which have a bearing on value', and in the second term 'dealing on the demand side and, chiefly, with the questions properly of exchange' (PS to JMK, 6 June 1927; KP: L/S/40/1).

For the 'realistic' course to hold in the third term, Sraffa proposed as a subject the relations between banks and industry in the continental European system.

The choice of subjects for the courses in the three terms was motivated by the fact of having 'some material already collected', as emerges from the notes and jottings to be found among Sraffa's papers (Rosselli 2005). The extent correspondence that followed between Sraffa and Keynes tells us nothing of Sraffa's arrival and the first few months in Cambridge, but we find some vivid impressions in accounts by Keynes to Lydia and by Joan Robinson to Austin Robinson.

In January 1928 Sraffa sent two letters that must surely have been drafted by Keynes, asking for the start of the lessons to be postponed, first to the second term and then to the following academic year. The interest of these letters lies in the reasons Sraffa offers to justify this delay. In the first, dated 11 January and addressed to the Secretary of the General Board of the University, Sraffa explained that he was not yet ready to begin the course because, having prepared a certain number of lessons, he realized that the subject chosen was 'quite unsuitable'; moreover, he had been too preoccupied with his research work to turn his mind to other issues, and then there were 'difficulties of language' (SP: B9/1). If the General Board did not see fit to accept his request for postponement - which would mean foregoing a year's salary and returning the advance he had received - then Sraffa was, he declared, ready to resign. The second letter, of 14 January, was addressed to Pigou and contained a firm commitment to return to teaching the following year, regardless of the progress he made in his own research work. Sraffa was, he guaranteed, ready to teach some other subject, should he find that he could not overcome the difficulties that had held him back in the near future. If the need arose, he would teach some subject unconnected with the theory of value, which he would prepare in the meantime (SP: B9/1).

It appears that during the autumn of 1927 preparation of the lessons planned on the basis of Keynes's original suggestions came up against a change in approach (see Garegnani 2005), apparently halting him in his didactic tracks since it clashed with the change in his approach that had been emerging in the summer-autumn of that year. At the same time, however, we have confirmation that Sraffa was, at the time, interested in keeping his teaching post at Cambridge while making allowance for the new direction his research work had taken.

The reasons offered, with the authoritative support they received from Keynes, sufficed for postponement to be granted. Nevertheless, three years later Sraffa would resign from his post as lecturer, with effect from 30 September 1931. The Faculty was reluctant to let him go. On 22 May 1933 the Faculty Board deliberated to ask the university to award a new lectureship to Sraffa, or alternatively to appoint him Assistant Director of Research. (MFB: V/117: 142(6)), which was in fact the upshot in 1935. However, Sraffa was never again to hold university courses, except for a brief series of lectures during the war, eliciting even a request by Pigou to give a lecture on Ricardo in 1942 in a series dedicated to 'Eminent economists' organized by the Faculty (Marcuzzo 1986: 49–50).

Let us now take a closer look at the contents of the courses Sraffa held at Cambridge.
3. The lecture courses

3.1. Advanced Theory of Value

The course on Advanced Theory of Value, twice announced, twice cancelled, was announced anew for the Michaelmas and Lent terms of the 1928–9 academic year, every Tuesday and Thursday at King’s at midday, for Part II of the Tripos in Economics. The course was repeated in the Michaelmas and Lent terms of the 1929–30 academic year and in the Lent term of 1931, Sraffa having obtained leave for the Michaelmas term of the 1930–1 academic year in view of the charge he had been given by the Royal Economic Society to edit Ricardo’s writings for publication.

Of these courses we have Sraffa’s notes amounting to about 220 manuscript pages, roughly two-thirds of which address the theory of production and distribution while the remaining one-third deals with the theory of demand and forms of competition (SP: D 2/4).

Sraffa set out to survey the theory of value ‘historically’ and show how the concept of cost of production evolved from the meaning in classical theory of real cost (‘necessities’) to the sense of effort, sacrifice or abstinence in marginalist theory. These two conceptions of production cost imply two different theories of distribution: for the classical economists profit is determined on the basis of the principle of surplus on necessary commodities, while the marginalists take it to be a quota of the final product determined on the basis of the capital ‘contribution’ to production. These two conceptions also imply a difference in the way political economy was conceived: for the classics, a science grounded on the measurement of economic magnitudes, for the marginalists a science based on the motivations for economic behaviour.

To illustrate this thesis Sraffa reviewed the economic thought of Petty, the Physiocrats, Smith, Ricardo and Marx, examining how the meaning of the theory of value shifted under the influence of Senior, John Stuart Mill, Cairnes and Say, eventually to undergo total transformation in the hands of the Austrian School and Wicksteed.

The final part of the course, as Sraffa himself admitted, followed no ‘logical scheme’ but addressed somewhat disparate issues, such as the hypotheses underlying demand curves, the theory of general economic equilibrium, the ‘special’ cases of monopoly and imperfect competition, and international trade. Sraffa concluded by insisting on the importance for analysis to be based on the interdependence of the economic system as highlighted by general equilibrium theories, as opposed to partial equilibria.

3.2. Banking on the Continent

This course, announced in the Reporter in Sraffa’s second year of lecturing at Cambridge at somewhat short notice, was held in the Easter term of 1929 and 1930. Among Sraffa’s papers is a folder containing the manuscript notes, newspaper cuttings and bibliographic annotations regarding these lectures.

Sraffa presented the course, pointing out that he would address only one aspect of the subject, namely, the financing of industries and its effects on the banking system, taking reference from the German banks as constituting the most important and representative case (SP: D2/5).

Sraffa began by focusing on a characteristic of the continental banks differentiating them from their British counterparts, namely, the lack of specialization, in the sense that they perform all the activities that are carried out separately in England by the merchant banks, accepting houses, bill brokers and issue banks. The second aspect examined was a characteristic of the British system of payments, which had made huge strides ahead as from the Industrial Revolution, using bills of exchange and cheques to side-step the limit on the issue of banknotes sanctioned by the Peel Act of 1844. From the theoretical point of view Sraffa adopted an approach close to Keynes’s in the Tract on Monetary Reform, which Sraffa had of course translated into Italian in 1925.

‘... if no substitute to bank notes had remained in force, the growth of trade during the last hundred years would have required an enormous fall in prices - since a practically constant amount of currency would have had to carry out an enormously greater amount of work. And the fall in prices in its turn would have postponed the growth of trade... leaving aside the fact that an increase in the notes causes inflation and depreciation of the currency’

(SP: D 2/5 6-7).

Finally, we find in outline form some considerations on the concept of liquidity referring to both financial activities and commodities, which Sraffa was to elaborate upon over the following months in the course of discussion with Hayek.

3.3. Industry

Sraffa’s papers include lecture notes together with a great many newspaper cuttings and index cards regarding the course on Industry, for the Preliminaries and Part II of the Tripos, with an annotation by Sraffa reading: ‘Lent term 1941: 8 lectures; Easter term 1941: 2 lectures; Lent term 1942: 8 lectures; Lent term 1943’ (SP: D2/8).
These lectures centred upon analysing the separation between ownership and control in industry deriving from the transformation of the individual firm into a joint stock company. The approach adopted in the course is reflected in the opening question: 'In whose interest are the great joint stock companies being run, i.e. the shareholders, owners or of the group in control?' (SP: D 2/8 43). Sraffa's answer is that the parties have opposing interests, although the ideology attributes the joint stock company with an autonomous existence, independent and with its own ends. His analysis sees control of big industry shifting from the figures organizing production to the people controlling the financial aspects, to the effect that 'skill in stock manipulation has become more important than efficiency in production' (SP: D 2/8 44).

Sraffa concluded his course with an assessment of the measures adopted in the United States during the New Deal (Banking Act 1933, Securities Act 1933, Securities and Exchange Act 1934) with the aim of curbing speculation and the anarchy of the financial markets. His appraisal of just how effective the institutional changes were in putting the financial markets in order was palpably cool: 'the amount of gambling depending not so much on legal restriction as on inclination of the public. The decrease in speculation in USA may be due as much to disappointment of 1929 and there never having been a great bull market since, as to the New Deal Reforms' (SP: D 2/8 56–7).

4. Two special pupils
Among those following the course on Advanced Theory of Value in 1928 the names of Richard Kahn and Joan Robinson stand out; although they had passed their Tripos in 1927 and 1925 respectively, they were drawn to attend the lectures by the radical new contents (Robinson 1977: 26, 1990: 3). Sraffa's influence on Kahn and Robinson was in fact such that they embraced the hypothesis of imperfect competition as the starting point for their own researches (respectively in The Economics of the Short Period and The Economics of Imperfect Competition) although their approaches and results proved far from Sraffa's intentions and framework.

In the 1926 article and the Lectures Notes Sraffa advanced two reasons why the hypothesis of perfect competition was to be abandoned, the first being that the theory constructed on this hypothesis was logically flawed, the second that the description of the behaviour upon which the hypothesis was based did not correspond to the actual facts. The theory in question was that of Marshall and Pigou, who interpreted competition as a situation in which expansion of the firm (and the industry) yields its limit in increasing costs. If, however, we were to consider the industry as a set of monopolies – Sraffa suggested – then we could appreciate the fact, also recognized by businessmen, that the constraint on expansion lies not in increasing costs, but in the level of demand.

Kahn began writing his dissertation (the thesis required to compete for a fellowship) while following Sraffa's course, acknowledging in his preface to The Economics of the Short Period (completed in 1929, but published in English in 1989) his debt to Sraffa on account of both the 1926 article and his critical remarks and comments on a chapter of the dissertation (Kahn 1989: x). Kahn used the hypothesis of imperfect competition to explain that the price does not fall to equal the marginal cost at low levels of demand, and the level of production falls below the level corresponding to full capacity. Nevertheless, when he compares the price level in imperfect competition with the monopoly situation, his solution does not tally with Sraffa's. Kahn bases his analysis on particular demand curves, such that their inclination is interpreted as a measure of the 'conjectures' each firm makes on the reactions of the others to the various decisions regarding price and production, as in the case of the so-called 'kinked demand curve'. Since the inclination of the demand curve is less in monopoly than being no rival to conjecture upon – the price proves higher than in imperfect competition, where by contrast each firm must take the reaction of the other firms into account.

In the 1926 article and the lectures Sraffa had come to a different conclusion if the firms are identical, and identically situated, then the equilibrium price is exactly such as would be obtained if the industry were in the hands of one monopolist alone. Here his analysis rests on the assumption that if one firm raises its price, all the firms react likewise. The consumer who preferred the product of a particular firm would go on buying from that firm despite the price rise because the price of the possible substitutes has also risen. Thus, the limit to price rises is given by the number of consumers still prepared to buy the product of that firm and who have not abandoned the market, precisely as in the case of a monopoly.

The difference in approach lies in the role attributed to the demand curves and their elasticity: while Kahn sees them as expressing the strategic interactions of the firms, for Sraffa the curves – if indeed they exist at all – merely express consumer preferences.

More decisively still than Kahn, in the Economics of Imperfect Competition (Robinson 1933), Joan Robinson takes the cue from Sraffa to construct a general theory of competition, in which the 'perfect' type is a particular case. Making use of the average and marginal cost and revenue curves of the individual firm and the industry, Robinson sets out to demonstrate that all the cases encountered in reality can be incorporated in the two curves of
demand and supply: in the demand curve cases of consumer behaviour expressed in elasticity value; in the supply curve pattern of costs, expressed in its inclination. In contrast with Sraffa, Robinson reformulates Marshallian theory, the postulates of which, far from rejecting, she actually defends. It is therefore hardly surprising that the correspondence between Robinson and Sraffa from 1931 to 1933 shows 'disagreement' of a kind that cannot be reconciled (Rosselli 2001).

Sraffa’s relations with Kahn and Robinson lasted for the rest of their respective lives (Sraffa and Robinson died a few days from one another in 1983, while Kahn died in 1989), taking on a richly nuanced range of overtones and undertones deriving from the shared experience of personal and professional events and circumstances. One direction they did not take, however, was that of intellectual exchange at the level of economic theory, as in the two-way relations that Robinson and, above all, Kahn had with Keynes. The two ‘special’ pupils remained extraneous to Sraffa’s scientific project (Marcuzzo 2001); once the project took shape definitively with publication of the Production of Commodities by Means of Commodities, only Robinson eventually came to appreciate it, although she was never able to convince Sraffa that she understood it.  

5. Assistant Director of Research

In November 1933 the Faculty Board – which, as we have seen, had already deliberated to this effect in the May of that year – sent a report to the General Board requesting creation of the post of Assistant Director of Research 14 to award to Sraffa (MFB: V. 158 (3), 27 November 1933). Response being far from prompt, after four months the Faculty Board returned to urge approval (MFB: V. 172 (11), 12 March 1934).

As had already been the case with the posts of lecturer and Fellow, that of Assistant Director of Research again found Sraffa torn between accepting or retaining his present position, wavering now because he wanted to keep his post as librarian of the Marshall Library 15 at the same time, and he was moreover ill-disposed to have a set timetable to receive students.

Once again it was Keynes who stepped in and prepared the draft of the letter to send to Pigou, explaining why he was interested in the post but not in committing himself to work ‘at fixed hours’ (JKM to PS, 10 March 1935; SP: B9/3), and trying Keynes’s patience to the limit. 16 Once again, however, he let Sraffa’s reasoning persuade him, and the Secretary of the General Board wrote to Sraffa in the most diplomatic of terms. 17

An important role here was played by Robertson, who went out of his way to persuade Sraffa to accept the conditions the post entailed, acting as mediator (DHR to PS, 1 May 1935; SP: B 9/3/2). To play down the bones of contention – which of the undergraduates were to be considered research students, where and for how many hours Sraffa was to make himself ‘available’ to students – Robertson also applied an apt touch of irony. 18 Eventually an agreement was struck 19 on the conditions suggested by Robertson, as emerges from the official letters sent to Sraffa by the Secretary General of the Faculties (J.T. Saunders to PS, 3 May 1935, SP: B9/3).

According to the regulations then in force, the post of Assistant Director of Research could only be conferred on a yearly basis. It was then up to Keynes to persuade the General Board that the post of Assistant Director of Research should be equalized with the role of lecturer and renewed on a five-yearly basis. 20 It took some years to settle the matter, and Sraffa held the post from 1935 to 1965, when he was made reader until his retirement in 1965.

Two interesting episodes in the life of the research students’ seminar coordinated by Sraffa show just how Keynes counted on him to nurture and train the research of the budding economists at Cambridge. At the same time, they show how Keynes himself worked, thriving on the criticism, suggestions and prompts that he sought to draw from colleagues, pupils and students. Unlike Sraffa, Keynes needed a scientific community to refer to, interacting with it and acting within it.

In a letter of 18 October 1937 Keynes asked Sraffa to submit a problem to the students, namely, how to account for the fact that the quota of wages and salaries in the income of the United States remained fairly steady, at around 66%, between 1919 and 1935, although prices and wages had undergone huge fluctuations; moreover, how was it that a very similar percentage emerged from the statistics on other countries, too? Keynes asked Sraffa to get his students to ‘rack their brains’ to see if the data were in fact credible, and what the explanation was (JKM to PS, 18 October 1937, KP: UA/5/4/13–4). Sraffa responded immediately and enthusiastically, saying that ‘I suppose there is a Marxian answer to it, but I cannot think of a marginal one’ (PS to JMK, 20 October 1937; KP: PP/64/8–9).

The first answer came from Kalecki – who followed Sraffa’s seminar while he was at Cambridge 21 – in a paper that would be published in the April of the following year (Kalecki 1938). He showed that to account for the constancy of real wages in the cycle it was necessary to abandon the hypothesis either of the constant degree of competition or of decreasing returns, which Keynes had maintained. The second answer to the problem also came from a participant in Sraffa’s seminar, J.T. Dunlop, who informed Keynes on sending him his work that he had discussed it with – among others – Sraffa and Kalecki (Keynes 1979: 285). Dunlop held that, contrary to Keynes’s argument, real wages and money wages did not run
opposite but moved in the same direction. The same conclusion was also reached by another research student who happened to be at Cambridge at the time, L. Tarshis. In both cases the lack of empirical confirmation for Keynes's thesis was put down to what they held the unreal hypotheses of decreasing returns and constant level of competition. Keynes published both papers in the Economic Journal (Dunlop 1938, Tarshis 1939), and admitted that he had been mistaken in maintaining the hypothesis of rising marginal costs.

Keynes sent Sraffa the second problem to submit to the research students in a letter of 25 October 1937, asking whether it was 'historically correct' to say, as Hawtrey recently had, in opposition to Keynes, that the traditional theory 'never held that Saving and Investment could not be unequal', but only that 'their inequality [...] was inconsistent with equilibrium' (JMK to FS, 25 October 1937, KP: EJ/1/4/204).

Sraffa's answer is interesting since it refers to the Treatise on Money rather than the General Theory, and at the same time seems to suggest that the distinction between acts of saving and investment had come in with marginal theory, and only relatively recently. In other words, Sraffa seems to imply that Keynes might have been overhasty in the General Theory in bringing together under the one heading 'of classical theory' those who defended Say's Law, whether in the presence of an adjustment mechanism such as the interest rate or in the absence of it, as in the case of classical political economy, where the equality actually derives from the identification of saving with investment, and not from an adjustment mechanism to bring about equilibrium (Garegnani 1979). Unfortunately, no evidence has survived of the students showing any reaction, which may bear out the fact that not all that many students were interested in the history of economic theory.

6. Member of the Degree Committee

Sraffa was co-opted on to the Degree Committee in June 1935 and appointed secretary in the following October, subsequently being re-elected yearly until his retirement. The tasks facing this committee, which naturally evolved over time, included the admission of research students and deciding upon which degree (PhD, MSc, MLitt and DE) they should be admitted to, the choice and possible change of thesis subject and supervisor, and finally determining what qualification was to be conferred.

Sraffa was a very assiduous member of the committee, hardly ever absent in the thirty years he spent on it apart from sick leave (Michaelmas term 1952), sabbaticals (1954-5, 1962-3) and very few other occasions, as for example in the October of 1945, when the war had just come to an end and he failed to find a seat on a flight back from Italy (Piero Sraffa, personal file, University Library, Cambridge). However, Sraffa accepted supervision of a very limited number of students, and a large proportion of those initially assigned to Sraffa would find themselves under another supervisor after one term, or a year at most. The total number of students who came under Sraffa's supervision is somewhere in the region of fifteen, of which one alone (G.L.S. Tucker) appears to have completed his thesis under his supervision (MDC 25 May 1953). However, we should also bear in mind that fewer than seventy students gained PhDs in Economics in this span of time, and most of these were in the immediate post-war years.

Sraffa's modest 'official' showing may prove misleading; actually, he exerted great influence over the directions taken in research by a great many students who were attracted to Cambridge to a large extent, possibly even above all, by his presence there, especially in the final years and even when he had retired.

7. Examiner

We have some evidence of how Sraffa set about assessing students in examinations. On the one hand, we have the questions he prepared for his courses and on the other some reports on the Tripos exams that saw Sraffa on the board of examiners. According to the Reporter, Sraffa acted as examiner for Part II in 1931, the Preliminary Examination in 1937, and regularly for the Tripos from 1940-4, in the war years. Until the 1960s, when the Tripos subjects and contents were in part modified, the exams consisted of producing scripts on various subjects, some compulsory (four or five), some optional (one or two). For Part I: Elementary Economic Theory I; Elementary Economic Theory II; Economic Structure; Social Problems; Economic History; Essay. For the Preliminary Examination: Economic Principles; Industry; Labour; Money (1); Modern Economic History; Industry; Labour and Money (2). For Part II: Essays; Economic Principles; Industry; Labour and Principles of Politics were compulsory; Statistics; Public Finance; International Law and some aspects of Economic History optional.

Sraffa's papers include examination reports for some years, with the marks given and, in some cases, comments in pencil. As an examiner he was extremely meticulous - which is hardly surprising, knowing Sraffa - applying a virtual continuum of marks to reach an extremely precise, differentiated assessment for each student. He also brought in every possible shade of judgement - not the simple α, β, γ, δ with the relative + and −,
but also subscripts 1 and 2 (e.g. \( \beta_1 \), \( \beta_2 \) with further distinction between + and −), combinations like \( \gamma \), \( \gamma \beta_3 \), and even a doubt-ridden ‘?’.  

8. Member of the Faculty Board  
The Faculty Board with the associated Appointment Committee and Lecture List Committee was the decision-making centre for management of the faculty. Its members included the professors of Political Economy, Industrial Relations and, subsequently, Economics, the elected members of the faculty, the elected members of the University Council and the co-opted members. Sraffa was co-opted in 1939 (MFB V. 119 52 (3) 30 January 1939) to be elected in 1940, remaining on the Faculty Board until 1956.  

Once again, Sraffa reacted to the appointment in his characteristic way: ‘I am sorry to say they have made me a member of the F[aculty] Board by surprise: it is awful to have to sit through all their speeches – fortunately Pigou is an efficient chairman and allows no nonsense’ (PS to JVR, 31 January 1939, JRP: JVR/VII/431/25–6). Obviously the Faculty of Economics went through a great deal of change between the time Sraffa joined it and his retirement. In 1927, when Sraffa arrived in Cambridge, there was only one Professor (Pigou), no reader and nine lecturers; in 1935, when he became Assistant Director of Research, Pigou remained the only professor, but Robertson was a reader and there were twelve lecturers and a Faculty Assistant Lecturer.  

By the end of the war, in 1945, Robertson had become professor and Shove reader, but the number of lecturers had been cut to ten, with still only one faculty assistant lecturer. Ten years later, in 1955, the number of professors had risen to three (as well as the old chair in Political Economy, there were two new ones in Economics, attributed respectively in 1950 to E.A.G. Robinson and in 1951 to R.F. Kahn); there were two readers (J.V. Robinson and N. Kaldor), and nineteen lecturers. Finally, when Sraffa retired in 1965, the faculty consisted of three professors (R.F. Kahn and J.V. Robinson in Economics, J. Mcade in Political Economy), three readers (D. Champernowne, M.H. Dobb, N. Kaldor) and twenty-two lecturers, many on fixed-term contracts.  

As far as we can judge from the minutes, Sraffa seems to have been moderately influential in academic decisions on promotion and new appointments. We have few official documents on the subject, but a wealth of evidence in the correspondence with his closest colleagues. We know, for example, that his was the decision to appoint Shove, reader in 1944 when Robertson left the post vacant to become professor, while his proposal to give a lectureship to Kaldor in 1945 was not accepted. Sraffa also played an important part in the attempt to find a permanent niche for Kalecki with the creation of the Department of Applied Economics, as we shall see in the following section.  

9. The Department of Applied Economics  
In a celebrated passage Joan Robinson described her first meeting with Kalecki in Cambridge in 1936 ‘as a Pirandello play’: ‘Kalecki was perfectly familiar with our brand new ideas and he had invented for himself some of Keynes’s fanciful concepts […] I could not tell whether it was I who was speaking or he’ (Robinson 1979: 186). So it was that Kalecki came to make the acquaintance of Keynes, who responded with no great warmth for his part, sharing neither his political position nor his educational background, nor indeed his temperament. Keynes allowed himself to be persuaded by Kahn (RFK to JMK, 27 January 1938, RKP: RFK/13/57/285) and Robinson to look for a job for Kalecki, who then enjoyed neither pay nor prospects. Kalecki moved to Cambridge at the end of 1937 and was given a grant for the first six months of 1938; at the same time the idea was taking shape for a new project sponsored by the faculty.  

In May of that year (MFB: V. 119, 20 (1.v), 30 May 1938) a committee consisting of Austin Robinson, Sraffa and Champernowne was installed to advise Pigou on the research projects to be funded. The report came out a few months later, proposing statistical research on the major economic indicators for the United Kingdom over the 1930–35 period. The aim was to construct a series of annual averages for industry, covering sales, production and price indexes, employment, imports and exports.  

Thus was born the Cambridge Research Scheme of the National Institute of Economic and Social Research into Prime Costs, Proceeds and Output under the supervision of a committee consisting of Austin Robinson, Kahn, Kalecki and Sraffa, with Keynes as chairman. At the end of the first year Kalecki presented the principal results of the research — which also saw the collaboration of two research students, Hsu and Tew, who were attending Sraffa’s seminar — in the form of individual reports on the single industries and a general report (RKP: RFK 5/1/83–6). These reports came under heavy fire from Keynes, Kahn and Robinson, who objected to the methodology employed; we have no evidence of Sraffa’s reaction. Kalecki responded by resigning from his post, turning his back on Cambridge once and for all to leave for Oxford at the end of the summer of 1939, probably with the help of Sraffa. (SP: C 152/1).  

In the meantime, however, the Faculty Board had arrived at the decision to create a Department of Applied Economics (MFB: 5 June 1939); the
General Board authorized its constitution with a decree of the Senate dated 9 December 1939. The department was to be run by a managing committee of six, including Sraffa. In 1945 the committee resolved to create the figure of Department Director, and Sraffa himself wrote to Richard Stone before the position had been officially instituted by the university to ask him if he was interested in it (PS to RS, 27 November 1944, RKP: RSP 4/10). Stone declared himself willing, and in the following February Sraffa invited him to Trinity for a couple of days to discuss the matter further. After the meeting, however, the correspondence dealing with definition and details of the post – which continued for two or three months before Stone was finally installed – was taken over entirely by Dobb (then the Faculty Board secretary), although Sraffa remained on the Committee of Management until 1947.

10. Elector to the Chairs of Political Economy, Industrial Relations and Economics

Sraffa was nominated elector to the Chairs of Political Economy and Industrial Relations (a quadrennial appointment) in 1939, after which the appointment was regularly renewed and he held the position until 1966, also acting as elector to the new Chairs of Economics instituted in 1949 and 1950.

As we have seen, from 1927 to 1944 there was but one Economics chair, but by the time Sraffa retired the number had risen to three. Moreover, as it was a matter of permanent appointment at the pinnacle of the academic career, election of a new professor was an exceptional occurrence. Inclusion among the electors therefore amounted to a recognition of prestige and authoritarianism more than of real academic weight.

Sraffa found himself playing a conspicuous role of considerable importance in the academic world on only one other occasion, although, typically, in a minority position.

In fact, in 1950 he gave his active support to the candidature of the then Prime Minister of India, Pandit Nehru, to the Chancellorship of the University against Lord Tedder (a high-ranking air force officer who had been second-in-command to Eisenhower). Indeed, together with such illustrious figures as A.S. Besicovitch, E.M. Forster, E. Hobbsbam and J. Needham he had proposed the candidature, and contributed financially to the electoral campaign. However, Nehru stood down, and Lord Tedder was elected.

A comment published by the Spectator on the eve of the election and conserved by Sraffa in a cutting evokes the climate of the times all too well:

‘The Supporters of Pandit Nehru […] are largely younger men of left-wing views […] The possibility, moreover, cannot be ignored that India may yet separate herself completely from the Commonwealth: Cambridge would hardly wish to have a Chancellor who was a foreigner.’ (SP: B9/8).

This sort of identity as a ‘foreigner’ may, perhaps, together with various other factors, help us to understand Sraffa’s secluded role at Cambridge University: not only a choice, but also a personal condition.36

11. Member of King’s College

In Cambridge the social life of the college forms an integral part of academic life. Dining with the Fellows and guests at the college High Table — so called because it traditionally stands raised above the students’ table — was considered a sign of recognition and prestige reserved to academics of great authority or on a short visit to Cambridge. Sraffa became a member of the High Table at King’s on his arrival in 1927, and a College member in 1930 (King’s College Council Minutes, KCGB/5/1/10, 17 May 1930).

King’s was the most renowned college for economics studies since it could then boast the presence of Fellows of the calibre of Keynes, Pigou, Clapham, Ramsey, Shove and Kahn, but the students engaged in the field were indeed few. Between 1927 and 1931 — the years when Sraffa was teaching there — all together only thirty-one students at King’s passed the economics Tripos, and by 1939 the average was hardly much higher, with a mere ten students that year.

Unfortunately, we have no documentation on Sraffa’s life at King’s apart from the odd account Keynes supplied to Lydia (JMK to LLK, 1 June 1930, KP: PP/45/190/4/256-7; JMK to LLK, 18 June 1934, KP: PP/45/190/6/163-4) and correspondence about renting an apartment belonging to the college in St. Edwards Passage,57 where Sraffa lived.

Although we lack the documentation to back it up, the impression remains that the environment of King’s in those years, under the influence of Bloomsbury and the various debating societies (including the Apostles), must have seemed very remote from Sraffa’s world and lifestyle. Sraffa’s affective and relational existence was compounded largely by his friendship with Gramsci and Mattioli and strong ties with his mother and father, occupying an area far from the ambience he had abruptly entered. The Bloomsbury culture, with its unconventionality and typically English insularity, was a far cry from Sraffa’s background, politicized, international, but still very much founded on solid bourgeois mores.

Finally, there is the question of Sraffa’s Marxism and how large it loomed in his British environment. In Cambridge, Marxism was at the height of its
vogue in the 1930s, especially among the more brilliant students of King’s and Trinity (Carter 2001), to the extent that Keynes stigmatized it as ‘the new orthodoxy that had fastened itself upon the minds of the undergraduates’ (Skidelsky 1992: 523).

Indeed, in his animadversions on Marx, Keynes went as far as to write to Sraffa: ‘I made a good try at the Marx volumes, but I swear that it absolutely beats me what you find in them or what you expected me to find! I did not discover a single sentence of any conceivable interest to a rational human being. For next vacation you must give me a marked copy’ (JMK to FS, 5 April 1932; SP: 08/11/65 53). The evidence we have shows Sraffa choosing not to rise to Keynes’s challenges on a number of occasions. Indeed, Sraffa’s great reserve in his adhesion to Marxism is matched by the paucity of documentation confirming or disproving connections, contact or even everyday relations with communist militants or sympathizers in Cambridge, with the exception of M. Dobb. This is an aspect of Sraffa’s life that has so far eluded reconstruction, apart from course of the evidence offered by the *Lettera a Trinità* (Sraffa 1991). Reading this correspondence in the light of his exchanges with the Cambridge economists, we can see how much of a ‘double life’ Sraffa led in this respect, and also that he could hardly have done otherwise.

12. Fellow of Trinity College
The annual records of Trinity – the most prestigious of the Cambridge colleges – provide accounts of the main events in the life of the college and its members’ activities. These volumes have extraordinarily little to tell us about Sraffa. His matriculation, or entry into the college, is recorded as 1930, but the relevant volume has no mention of Sraffa, whose election as Fellow went through only in the October of 1939, with nomination as College Lecturer in Economics. Throughout the years to follow, Sraffa’s name made very few appearances under the headings of University Appointments and Distinctions, College Offices, Academic Honours, Other Appointments and Distinctions, receiving mention whenever his appointment as Assistant Director of Research was renewed; in 1954, for nomination as Fellow of the British Academy; in 1961, when he was awarded the Söderström Medal of the Royal Swedish Academy of Science; and in 1964, when he was made reader.

When in 1984 the Master of Trinity delivered his annual address, commemorating the three Fellows who had died in the previous year, he could find nothing better to say than that ‘all three had made important contributions to the intellectual life of the college, albeit in very different ways’, putting Sraffa, John Robinson (the chaplain) and Arthur Sherecliff (the head of the Engineering Department), on the same plane. The obituary of Sraffa published in the *Annual Record* was not written specially for it, as was the practice for the most illustrious Fellows, but reproduced from *The Times*.

Are we, then, to conclude that Sraffa was a secluded figure, isolated even within the college? It is of course true that, unlike other Fellows and economists in other colleges (Keynes and Kahn at King’s, for example), Sraffa had no official appointments, but he did have important and significant relations with various Fellows of Trinity including A.S. Besicovitch, L. Wittenstein, M. Dobb, D.H. Robertson, D. Champernowne, A. Sen and R. Nield. Indeed, according to Kaldor, Sraffa actually played a decisive role in the election of Nield (NK to FS, 19 August 1956, SP: C/151).

Accepting the fellowship was certainly no easy decision for Sraffa, now more than ever driven to seek some way out for a number of reasons, taking a lofty attitude to the importance attached to the appointment, worried about passing over Dobb and at the same time faced with the difficulty of accounting for a refusal that all would find inexplicable. Eventually, however, Sraffa accepted and after his mother’s death his habitat became the college.

Sraffa’s last years were marked by rankling resentment against Trinity. In a letter to the senior Bursar of 1976, never actually sent, Sraffa wrote in reply to the junior Bursar’s curt demand that he settle his accounts with the college: ‘I have burned my will which, madly, was entirely in favour of Trinity and all my money will go to my numerous relatives according to Italian law – it will be not a good bargain for Trinity!’ (SP: B11/5). The letter he did send was somewhat toned down, with only an allusion to such a possibility: ‘I have hidden my will which is in favour of Trinity, but cannot find it! Or did I deposit it with you?’ (SP: B11/5). As we know, it was ultimately Trinity that inherited his legacy, including his papers and extraordinary library.

13. Relations with the economists at Cambridge
Naturally enough, Sraffa had social and professional relations with various Cambridge economists, and with some a very close, personal rapport. Here we are speaking of the people Sraffa used to see with regularity and considerable familiarity, although in most cases it might be stretching the point to speak of ‘friendship’.

In general personal relations are characterized by asymmetry: they are rarely on an equal footing, since they reflect different degrees of reciprocal
How are we to characterize the relationship between Sraffa and Keynes? As far as Keynes is concerned, we can give credence to his qualification of Sraffa -- made on a very particular occasion but probably not far from the truth -- as 'one of my closest friends'. As for Sraffa, however, it is no easy task to interpret his rapport with Keynes, apart from pointing up its evident importance (Ranichetti 2005).

As we have seen, Sraffa eventually stopped discussing his work or economic theory in general with the Cambridge economists, and even with Keynes, who died too soon to see Sraffa's theoretical project accomplished. In fact, it was only in 1960, with the publication of Production of Commodities, that the economists closest to Sraffa could at last see the work that had absorbed him for the whole of his academic life in Cambridge -- the one publication, apart from the Ricardo edition and the controversy with Hayek, attesting to his work since the 1926 article that had taken him to Cambridge. Let us now go on to the second case we chose to consider.

Kaldor referred to Sraffa as a 'kindred soul' (Marcuzzo 1986: 48), attributing him with 'a rare capacity for friendship' (Kaldor 1985: 615), and yet Sraffa made no exceptions for Kaldor in his reticence about his own work. And when Sraffa spent three hours explaining to Kaldor how to conduct a lesson on Ricardo, it was one of the rare occasions when Piero talked to me on the subject of economics [...] he was so protective about his own ideas that for years he would not tell me, or for that matter anyone else, what exactly they were about. He told me of course what he was working on in general terms, but not his specific ideas in the field of the theory of value (Marcuzzo 1986: 50).

Now can Kaldor have been too sure about the opinion Sraffa had of him, as emerges from a letter to Kahn, who had written to him saying he had heard from Sraffa that Robertson 'strongly approve both of your Pekin lecture and of your book' (RFK to NK, 17 July 1956, NKp: 3/17/3/49). Kaldor answered the letter with a touch of anxiety, protesting: 'but you don't tell me what Piero thinks of them all, it would be too much to expect approval from both' (NK to RFK, 23 July 1956, NKp: 3/17/3/49).

Finally, when a rift eventually opened in the faculty between Kaldor on one side and Joan Robinson and Kahn on the other, Kaldor hoped to find in Sraffa 'a sympathetic ear', but Sraffa would not openly side with Kaldor and kept aloof from the whole business.

14. Sraffa and academia

We may therefore conclude by saying that Sraffa's relationship with Cambridge University was complex, contradictory and intense, and should...
be seen within the broader context of the ambiguous relations Sraffa had with academia in general. To begin with, we must bear in mind that Sraffa’s academic career was marked by great honours, but also by great insecurity, from the chair awarded to the still very young Sraffa to his first, prestigious appointment at Cambridge, and then the loss of his post and the eternal wavering between remaining at Cambridge or returning to Italy.

From 1931 to 1935 Sraffa held no ‘official’ post at Cambridge University. Once he had foregone the lectureship, Sraffa was only the librarian of the Marshall Library (MFB: Y.117, 46 (1), 4 May 1931), but a year later he also gave up this position, possibly with a view to leaving Cambridge with a Rockefeller Foundation scholarship, which, however, he would never make use of (Naldi 2005). In 1935 he was nominated Honorary Librarian as from June, and Librarian from October 1935. In the same year he accepted the post of Assistant Director of Research, which he would continue to hold for thirty years.

Beginning in 1950 – when he was re-admitted to the Italian university system on the basis of the law of 7 September 1944 regarding professors who had not sworn the oath of allegiance to Fascism – Sraffa found for ever hanging over him the obligation to return to his duties at the University of Cagliari, especially after the faculty deliberation in 1954 reasserting that his teaching was absolutely necessary. He turned down the offer of a chair made by the Faculty of Genoa through the agency of Bresciani-Turroni in 1956 on very generous terms that would have allowed him to spend most of his time in Cambridge. He appealed to Segni (the Italian president at that time) and entered into a spate of correspondence with the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Education, together with the Italian Embassy and the Italian Institute of Culture in London, asking to have his status preserved as being ‘assigned’ by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to teach abroad. He had to wait until February 1970 to be informed that his request had been granted (SP: B16/1).

The second aspect lay in the difficulty Sraffa had in identifying with any institution. The matter of accepting a post then among the most prestigious of all, and becoming a Fellow of Trinity, drew a positive gut reaction from him in a letter to Robinson, where he graphically evoked: ‘a sort of disgust at the attitude of some people in Cambridge to a fellowshop: the immediate desire of some who try to get one, and the absurd conceit of some who have it. This is similar to the attitude of other people to titles etc. which is one of my horrors’ (PS to JVR, 15 February 1939; JRP: JVR/vi/431/27–32).

The third aspect was the uneasiness Sraffa seemed to experience being ‘member of the majority’, a necessary condition for those holding official posts. As we have seen, although he enjoyed considerable prestige and authoritiveness within the circle of economists and those well acquainted with him, his profile remained relatively low in the University of Cambridge both in terms of his career – he was made reader only two years before retirement – and from the point of view of the positions he held. He had no prestigious post within the university apart from the elective appointments in the faculty, where he had great authority but never a leading position. With his students, as with his colleagues, his rapport was profoundly influential, but in both teaching and supervision his attitude was marked more by rejection than wholehearted identification with his role.

How much did this have to do with Sraffa’s ambiguous position in the academic life of Cambridge, in many respects the eternal émigré, never totally integrated, nor with any great will to be so? (Naldi 2005) Sraffa’s ambivalent attitude towards academic life took him as far as refusing chairs both at Cambridge and in Italy, but never quite as far as severing ties with the two universities. To what extent was this wavering the consequence of his precarious position both in Italy and at Cambridge? How much of it was due to external circumstances, and how much to some inner conflict? And, in turn, what part might other interests and passions – politics, culture or even the simple love of collecting books – have played in these conflicts, these very personal impulses?

Any attempt to answer these questions would entail piecing together the entire mosaic of the elusive figure of Sraffa, this study, as we said, contributing but a few pieces to the picture.

Notes
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The following abbreviations are used in the text:
ACP: Pigou; DHR: Robertson; FAGR: Austin Robinson; GS: Show; JMK: Keynes; JVR: Joan Robinson; LLK: Lydia Keynes; MHD: Dobb; NK: Kaldor; RFK: Kahn; FS: Sraffa.
Piero Sraffa at the University of Cambridge

or place. Sraffa went on leave in the Michaelmas term of 1930, and the course in Advanced Theory of Value was moved to the Lent and Easter terms of 1931; the lectures on Banking on the Continent were held only in 1929 and 1930.

12 In the Reporter of 16 April 1941 the course was announced for the Lent and Easter terms of 1941, on Saturday at 12, while the issue of 3 October signalled it only for the Lent term, on Saturday at 11. The same was repeated in the four announcements that followed (17 April 1942, 2 October 1942, 11 January 1948, 16 April 1943), implying that in the three years Sraffa held the course in the Easter term only once.

13 A letter from Joan Robinson to Sraffa following upon publication of the Production of Commodities reveals perhaps better than any other the characteristics of this relationship as it had evolved over the years: 'Dear Piero: all the work that I have been doing the last 10 years has been very much influenced by you — both our conversations in the old days and by your Preface. When I went off my head the idea that I had seen in a blinding flash was yours, because it came to me in terms of Ricardo's corn economy; but it was connected with time and it now appears is very much alien to your point of view (though to me it seems to fit perfectly well). Since, quite apart from worldly success, I had a lot of fun. I have a deep feeling of gratitude to you. The fact that you reject it does not affect the case at all' (JVR to PS, 18 June 1966, SP: 05/12/11/340-1).

14 This was an official appointment to supervise the work of students continuing after the first degree level (research students), with precedents among the university staff. Sraffa remained the only Assistant Director of Research in Economics until the mid-50s.

15 Sraffa was nominated Honorary Librarian as from 1 June 1935 (MP: V. 52 (4), 20 May 1935) and Librarian from 1 October of the same year. In fact, he had already held that position for one year, after he had resigned from the lecturership in May 1931.

16 'Piero is in his most depressive mood, wants to throw in his hand and leave Cambridge, although really longing to stay; and he won't lift a finger to help me to save the position for him. Even Ludwig [Wittgenstein] says that he is like a troublesome child. But only is the intensity of some queer unresolved pupil feeling' (pupil is a word deriving from Russian, which might be translated 'gut'; I thank Joan Hall for the suggestion) (JMK to LLK, 4 March 1939, KP: PP/45/190/7/26-8); 'Piero is still giving trouble and won't make up his mind; he thinks that life in Cambridge is sapping his moral fibre and that he ought to throw himself on the bleak world again!' (JMK to LLK, 10 March 1935, KP: PP/45/190/7/31-2).

17 The General Board this afternoon considered the post of Assistant Director of Research in Economics, which they have recommended to the University to be established. They understood from a letter which you wrote to Professor Pigou that you may find some difficulty in accepting appointment to this post. They thought it possible that there may have been some misunderstanding, and I was asked to see you personally' (J.T. Saunders to PS, 13 March 1935, SP: 89/3).

18 You know how easily young men are put off by even one fruitless journey, and how apt to personalise — Prof. Pigou seems to be always in the Lakes, Prof. Hilton seems to be always broadcasting, Mr. Sraffa seems to be always in bed, or playing chess or talking to Bulgarian professors' (Ibid.).

19 'Piero has signed on at the last moment, will take the job, and all is over. What a troublesome fellow' (JMK to LLK, 11 March 1935, KP: PP/45/190/7/31-2).
Initially Keynes's suggestion to the Faculty Board that an Assistant Director of Research be assigned the same tenure of office as a lecturer was rejected by five votes to three (MF B: V.119 38(ii), 7 November 1938).

In a letter to Tarkish of 10 December 1938, Keynes wrote: "It is clear that I have made a mistake in saying that real wages usually fall when money wages are rising. There are two or three explanations of how I came to make the mistake, and which of them is correct is not very clear to me" (KP: EJ 1/5). For lengthier treatment of the point, see Marruzzo 1993.

"As to Hawtrey, it seems to me that you have settled the question in "Treatise", i/171n. I have no doubt that you were right in saying that the very notion of a distinction between S and I was unknown before Mises; you may have overlooked some forerunners, but there is no question of "old fashioned orthodoxy" having been aware of it. In fact, I should think that the very meaning of "investment" has been changed recently. The former meaning was the Stock-Exchange one, which still connotes "investor" (PS to JMK, 26 October 1937; KP: EJ/1/4/206).

The Degree Committee consisted of: the professors of Political Economy, of Industrial Relations and, after the war, also of Economics; the members elected by the Faculty Board; the members nominated by the University Council; the members co-opted and the professors of International Law, Political Science and Economic History, i.e. of the Tripos optional subjects.

Three postgraduate degrees: Master literarum, Master of Science, Doctor philosophiae and, in the following years, the Diploma in Economics.

The number of postgraduate research students at the University of Cambridge changed over the years, as did the composition in terms of nationality, degree level and qualification conferred. Many gained no qualification, either because the results were considered unsatisfactory or because they failed to complete their studies. Some data on flows and stocks may help here: for example, in the case of the Faculty of Economics and Politics, in 1935 three candidates were admitted to the PhD course, one to the MLitt, and three were still research students (i.e. with no definition of the degree level). Ten years later, in 1945, twenty-two new research students were admitted; there were ten candidates for a PhD and one for a Diploma. By 1950, the number of new students accepted had risen to thirty-seven; there were twenty candidates for a PhD and one for an MSc shortly before Sraffa's retirement, in 1963, the number of students accepted as PhD candidates had risen to sixty-six.

The committee met three or four times a year on average.


For example, in the paper Theory I of the Tripos, Part I, 1942, we find the following comments on various students: "full of mistakes, but by no means stupid"; "very stupid"; "has original ideas"; "very long-winded, but knows the stuff and got it always right" (SP: B/9/6).

The Appointment Committee was a body including the Vice-Chancellor of the University, the Chairman of the Faculty Board, and members nominated by the Faculty Board and the General Board, responsible for appointments and covering the various academic positions. Sraffa belonged to it from 1941 to 1946.

This committee had the task of drawing up the list and calendar of lectures to be given year by year. Sraffa belonged to it in 1944 (MF B: V.119, 258 (5), 31 January 1944).

For example, the file containing the applications and recommendations of candidates (twenty-six) for a lectureship in the Economics Faculty of October 1944 shows no comments or side-notes by Sraffa, such as might have conveyed his opinions (SP: B/9/7). Moreover, as reference is frequently to personal cases, access to the records is restricted. At present only the 1948 records can be consulted, conserved in the University Library.

"On the motion of Mr Sraffa, seconded by Guillebaud, it was unanimously agreed to ask the General Board that the readership in economics formerly created for Dr D.H. Robertson, should be continued for G.F. Shove of King's College" (MF B: V.120: 290 (1), 8 June 1944).

"A discussion took place concerning the vacant lectureship in Economics. It was moved by Mr. Sraffa, seconded by Mr. Bruthwaite that the vacant lectureship in Economics should be offered to Mr. N. Kaldor of the London School of Economics. On a vote this motion was defeated by four votes to two [contrary Robertson, Shove, Fay, Rowe] (MF B: V.120: 351 (5), 7 May 1945).

The correspondence concerning this matter can be seen in RPK: RPK/5/1/146-169.

This condition is effectively encapsulated in the title of Pasinetti's bi-bibliographic study: 'Piero Sraffa: economisto italiano a Cambridge' (Pasinetti 1985).

When Kahn was Bursar he eventually got involved in a hair-splitting discussion with Sraffa on the terms of rent, reacting with the cautious observation: 'The College fully recognises that the attitude that you are adopting is in no way dictated by self interest but purely and simply provoked by a desire to cause the Bursar as much annoyance as possible' (RKP to PS, 1 June 1937; SP: B/10/2-5).

We know of many occasions when Keynes took up the cudgels against Marxism and Marx. For example, on one of these he is reported as saying that Marxism 'was founded on a silly mistake of old Mr Ricardo's', and on another occasion that after his book [the General Theory] 'the Ricardian foundations of Marxism will be knocked away' (Skidelsky 1992: 517, 520).

At a meeting of the Political Economy Club on 28 October 1938, having heard Keynes declare that Marxism 'was complicated boccos-poccos, the only value of which was its muddleheadedness', Sraffa appears to have kept quiet, and to have held his peace afterwards, too, in the street' (Skidelsky 1992: 523). However, Roger Simon, who studied economics at Cambridge from 1932 to 1935, wrote to Sraffa in the late 1960s: 'I read economics at Cambridge in 1932–35, and one of my favourite memories is of a meeting at Keynes' political economy club at which you defended Marx's Capital against a terrific onslaught' (SP: C/291).

In a letter to R. Palme Dutt -- the founder of the British Communist Party -- Sraffa recorded Keynes's judgement with the following comment: 'What is interesting, of course, is not his individual case (in fact it is not at all individual, all economists, and most intellectuals in England must react in a similar way), nor even that of bourgeois intellectuals as a whole. The question I am puzzled by is this: the intellectual and literary food of the working class in England is entirely provided, in the form of school-teaching, newspaper, fiction, sermons, popular science, films, political and T.U. speeches etc. by people of Keynes's mentality: and if they start with such a 'culture' how can they pass on directly to Marx without some 'mediation' And is
anything being done to provide this mediation?" (PS to R. Palme Dutt, 19 April 1932, National Museum of Labour History, Manchester). My thanks to N. Naldi for drawing my attention to this letter.

41 Of course, we must remember that Sraffa had to defend himself against real dangers in those years given the continual police and OVRA (the Fascist secret police) surveillance (Belfiore and Poitier 1998: 60-3).

42 "Through [the] period [1870-1990] Trinity has been the undisputed giant... its academic distinction made it a university within the university" (Brooke 1993: 69).

43 According to J. Smith, the present Trinity Archivist, this is probably an error of transcription, the figure '9' being taken for zero. However, having in 1930 been made a member of King's, Sraffa by right became a member of Regent House, the university governing body, and the date may refer to this.

44 So described in a letter of 5 July 1940 to the Home Office, urging that Sraffa be released from internment on the Isle of Man.

45 In a letter of 19 August 1956, from Geneva, immediately after the publication of Robinson's Accumulation of Capital, Kaldor wrote that he did not want to return to Cambridge the following term because 'I just couldn't face being bullied by Joan and Kahn about the wonderfulness of Joan's book and how everything must be different from now on!' (SP: C/151).

References


Abstract

This paper reconstructs the academic figure of Sraffa at the University of Cambridge as it emerges from his papers, his correspondence with the economists with whom he had special relations, and the official documents of the University, in particular in connection with his role in the Faculty of Economics and Politics, to which he belonged from 1927 to 1965. It presents a detailed examination of the various posts held by Sraffa at the University as Lecturer, Assistant Director of Research, Member of the Degree Committee, Examiner, Member of the Faculty Board, as co-founder of The Department of Applied Economics, Elector to the Chairs of Political
Economy, Industrial Relations and Economics, Member of King's College and finally as Fellow of Trinity College. Moreover, the relationship with his fellow economists in Cambridge, in particular Keynes, Kahn, Kaldor and Joan Robinson is also examined and assessed.

The broad conclusion of the paper is that Sraffa's relationship with Cambridge University was complex, contradictory and intense, and should be seen within the broader context of the ambiguous relations Sraffa had with academia in general.

Keywords
Sraffa, University of Cambridge, correspondence, Keynes, Kahn, Joan Robinson