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## A Noble Protagonist of the Proletariat and the Peasantry: A Tribute to Bruce McFarlane

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**ABSTRACT** At all times, Bruce McFarlane lived the Wobblies' injunction: Organise! Educate! Agitate! Born in 1936 in Wollongong, Australia, his Marxism was nurtured by his father. After high school, he studied economics at Sydney University and taught in Wollongong, Australia, his Marxism was nurtured by his father. After high school, he studied economics at Sydney University and taught Economics at the University of Queensland, Politics at the Australian National University, and went on to the Chair of Politics at Adelaide University and the Chair of Economics at the University of Newcastle. He also held posts in Yugoslavia and India, studying and working on economic planning and worked at Cambridge University with Maurice Dobb, Michał Kalecki, Piero Sraffa and Joan Robinson. He authored dozens of books and articles, mentored and collaborated with a range of colleagues including Melanie Beresford, Robert Catley, Steve Cooper, Peter Groeneweg, Geoffrey Harcourt, Peter Limqueco and many more. He was the co-editor of the *Journal of Contemporary Asia* from 1980 to 2005.

### KEY WORDS

Bruce McFarlane; Marxism; political economy; protest; socialism

Few people have two songs written about them. Few are arrested three times in anti-war protests. Few are threatened with castration by a member of parliament. Few are burnt in effigy. Few publish dozens of learned articles and a score of books, translated into Chinese, Dutch, Italian, Japanese and Norwegian. Few co-edit two academic journals. Few hold chairs in politics and in economics. Few work with four state planning commissions in Belgrade, Warsaw, Delhi and Hanoi.

In his more than eight decades, Bruce McFarlane has done all of that and more, establishing him as Australia's pre-eminent critic of political economy, both through his analyses of real existing capitalisms and socialisms as well as of the attempts to prettify them. His practical criticism combines political activism with intellectual integrity as he interrogates the actualities of monopolising capitals in Australia and around the globe along with revolutions and counter-insurgencies.

### “Not One Of Us”

Before filling out how one person fulfilled these attributes, a few words about his background. Bruce's father was a pharmacist and a Communist Party of Australia member, a combination which attracted the displeasure of the Pharmacy Guild and the attention

of Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, so that he ended his days as a tally clerk on the Sydney wharves. He gave his schoolboy son a copy of Engels's *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, a work which, more than any other, has attracted people to socialism and led many onto Marxism. At Wollongong Boys High in 1952, Bruce came third in his final year which tells us something about the standards of his classmates. The personal remained political when, in 1958, he married Julia Ryan, sister of the historian Lyndall, daughters of the equal-pay campaigner, Edna, and of Jack, foundation editor of the Communist Party's *Pan-Pacific Worker* in 1927 until expelled from the Communist Party as a Bukarinite early in 1930.

As a student in the Economics Department at Sydney University, Bruce took all the prizes, securing a First Class Honours degree but not the usual scholarship to Cambridge University. He does not think that the Dean, Syd Butlin, was prejudiced against him because of his views but because of his activism. Bruce was not a "chap." Years later, Cambridge did become his intellectual home with Piero Sraffa, Maurice Dobb and "Aunty Joan," as he calls Joan Robinson. In Adelaide from the mid-1970s, Bruce and Geoff Harcourt set up a sub-branch of the Cambridge controversy over capital theory (Cohen and Harcourt 2003).

Not to run further ahead of the introduction, we shall strike up the two songs. Bruce was Secretary of the Australian Student Labour Federation (ASLF) as it split between the Groupers and the Labor Party, while the Communist Party fractured in the aftershocks from Khrushchev's 1956 Secret Speech on Stalin. At the ASLF Residential Conference in 1957, each faction feared that one of the others would come during the night to deliver a thumping, so, having locked themselves in their rooms, they cheered themselves up by composing songs such as this little ditty:

*Pravda says  
It's quite alright  
To throw bricks at Joseph Stalin.  
But how can we be sure  
That next week  
It won't be Bruce McFarlane.*

The second song grew out of Bruce's arrest during the visit to Canberra of the Hitler-loving war criminal and Prime Minister of South Vietnam Air Vice-Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky in January 1967, for which Julia made the first National Liberation Front flags to be carried at anti-war demonstrations. Chatting to Bruce at the wooden barrier, I was flabbergasted when he hurled himself across it into the wall of New South Wales walloppers or pigs (police) whom the Holt government had brought in to control us. Later I learnt that he had seen a friend, Mick Collins, being roughed up by the pigs and sprang to his rescue. Bruce was arrested and charged with the usual string of offences. A committee collected funds to employ Jim Staples as barrister for the defence. At one of their money-raisers, Australian National University (ANU) scholar, jazz muso and poet, Bob Brissenden (1984, 12–14), performed his "The Ballad of Muscles McFarlane," of which we reproduce two of its seven verses:

He stood eight feet tall and weighed twenty-five stone;  
Like two bloody red stop-lights his spectacles shone.  
So me and me cobbbers, we turned tail and ran

At the sight of McFarlane, that terrible man.  
*Chorus: All in blue, all in blue,*  
*Each word I say is true:*  
*I'm a New South Wales copper, I can't tell a lie.*  
 That's me story, Your Worship – it's here in me book;  
 And if you don't believe me you're welcome to look.  
 And should Muscles McFarlane attempt to deny  
 What I've said – just remember that policemen can't lie.  
*Chorus*

Bruce was acquitted, as he was once more, though he was found guilty on the third occasion when he had been the victim of an unprovoked police assault during a protest at the US War Memorial. Those experiences confirmed that bourgeois justice means that the guilty get off while the innocent are stitched up, as evocatively explained in Ken Buckley's (1970, 143–163) chapter “Canberra Rugger – Sydney Police Style.”

University of New South Wales student paper, *Thurunka*, published Bruce's support for the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam in August 1965 shortly after he had helped to conduct at the ANU one of the first Australian Teach-Ins; five years later, he became organising secretary of the Canberra Moratorium Committee. After winning his school's prize for public speaking in 1951, his soapbox gifts were considerable. He summed up the Imperialists' strategy as: “Kill all, burn all, destroy all” and the strategy of the peoples of Indo-China as to “drive the invaders into the sea,” which they did in April 1975. By then, Bruce had published a study on how the Vietnamese could plan re-construction (Catley and McFarlane 1974a). He extended his engagement with Vietnam in association with his long-term partner, Melanie Beresford (Beresford and McFarlane, 1998).

### Where the Climate's Sultry

Bruce started work in the Economics and Commerce Department at the University of Queensland in 1960 where his professor, J. K. Gifford, was a maverick with some claim to having pipped Milton Friedman on monetarism; his sense of being neglected predisposed him to employ the unorthodox (King and Millmow, 2008).<sup>1</sup> In the aftermath of the 1960–1962 credit squeeze, which hit the State of Queensland hardest and came within one seat of tossing federal government out, Bruce and three others investigated the state's slothful development to reveal that it owed as much to bad performance by government and bosses as to climate and distance (Gough et al. 1964); their book is overlooked by current academic accounts of “People-the-North” campaigns (McGregor, 2019). Interviews with company executives from 66 firms documented that their investment decisions bore little relation to a rational calculation of demand. A jump in book profits justified expanding output, but so, as Bruce was wont to put it in conversation, was whether the proprietor had had a good naughty the night before. Queensland was far from unique. In 1964, Donald Horne, still on the far Right, scarified Australian elites in *The Lucky Country* as second-rate Edwardians like Menzies who shared its luck.

The threat of castration, which Bruce still finds chilling, came in 1962 from a Labor rat, Tom Aikens, the member for South Townsville in Queensland, who by then carried the moniker “Tory Tom.” Castration was Aiken's solution to sex offenders. Bruce, however, transgressed more grievously by casting stones at Aikens' sacred milch cow of Northern

Development (Aikens, 1962). On route to Mt Isa to give University Extension Lectures, Bruce spent a night in the Kynuna pub and proposed a University College there as well as the one that had just opened in Townsville,<sup>2</sup> and which Aikens had built with his bare hands. Bruce endorsed B. R. Davidson's *The Northern Myth* (1965), which set down the "physical and economic limits on agricultural and pastoral development in tropical Australia," damming the Ord River Scheme where the rice crops were much appreciated by pied geese and the occasional Burdekin duck. Bruce penned a fulsome introduction to Jack Kelly's *Struggle for the North* (1966).

After Bruce moved to the Research School of Social Sciences at the ANU in 1963, his research focused on the provision of electric power and the Snowy Mountains Scheme. Irrigators around Coleambally burnt him in effigy after his report for the Commonwealth Bank on the efficacy of the Snowy Mountains Scheme gave high marks to electricity production but a bad fail for the provision of water to keep reactionary farmers voting for the Catholic-based Democratic Labor Party. His further research at the ANU was in the prospects for Southeast Asian economies.

### Forever Amber

*Economic Policy in Australia* came in 1968 (McFarlane 1968). Despite conventional wisdom to the contrary, the Menzies era had been a rolling economic disaster, with one credit squeeze after another. Underlying the stop-go economy was an imbalance-of-payments, dependent since the late 1800s on rural produce with all the uncertainties of the weather and international demand, making repayments on even medium-term overseas loans a bigger than usual risk. Policy was hobbled further by a government hog-tied to the pork-barrelling Country Party, busily "socialising" losses. Australia avoided Copland's (1951) fear of ending up as no more than a "milk-bar economy" through being saddled with what Bruce attacked as hydra-headed planning from the Tariff Board, the Arbitration Court, the Reserve Bank and Treasury. An affluent society was not secured until after 1963 when the export of several varieties of dirt added ballast to the current account. Cornered in 1962, Menzies set up the Vernon Committee to inquire into what had gone wrong and how it might be put right. Refusing to contemplate the socialism of indicative planning along the lines of France, Menzies was a pushover for Treasury's demolition of Vernon's (1965) *Report of the Committee of Economic Enquiry*.

Against this muddling through and surrender of the commanding heights of the economy to US corporations, Bruce proposed methods for countering the power of big business (McFarlane 1970). The sole criticism of *Economic Policy in Australia: The Case for Reform* made by his friend and later collaborator, Peter Groenewegen, was that he generated more reforms than he had space to substantiate.

In the days when Australia had a Labor Party, and its Left meant more than place-seeking, Bruce and his Adelaide colleague, Bob Catley, strengthened socialist responses to the new Whitlam government agenda with *Tweedledum to Tweddledee* (Catley and McFarlane 1974b) and "The Limits of Technocratic Laborism" (Catley and McFarlane 1973; 1974c; 1975). They were thus ready to interpret the 1974 economic crisis (Catley and McFarlane 1980; 1981). With Beresford, Bruce offered a Kaleckian analysis of the Australian economic crisis (Beresford and McFarlane 1982); this was what Korpi later called the end of "the great trough in unemployment" (Korpi 2002). These writings

provide foundational documents for positioning the Hawke-Keating reforms within the needs of global corporates and the US warfare state, enabling us to see past the bleats of “the Accord did it, the Accord did it.”

## Almost Managing

A criticism, *Economic Policy in Australia: The Case for Reform* promotes self-management in tune with the upsurges of student rebelliousness and the metal-workers’ defeat of a Total Wage in early 1968 leading to the successful “Free Clarrie and repeal the penal powers” campaign in 1969 (Arrowsmith 1969). This general strike was triggered by then judge John Kerr’s jailing Clarrie O’Shea, Victorian State Secretary of the Australian Tramway and Motor Omnibus Employees’ Association for contempt of the Commonwealth Industrial Court. Bruce acknowledged that his advocacy of “self-management” might seem “unreal” but he carried forward lessons learnt in Yugoslavia and voiced his visceral resistance to the state. Those experiences and expectations found new life when he and Sydney University academic Ted Wheelwright, who had been one of his teachers, travelled through China as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was getting under way, dealing with its politically-charged economic dimensions in *The Chinese Road to Socialism* (Wheelwright and McFarlane 1970), with its comradely “Foreword” by Joan Robinson. A shop-floor activist in Wuhan explained the workers’ takeover of their factory in terms of a folk legend: “The Golden Monkey waved his magic baton and the Green Jade King fell down.” The Golden Monkey represented the workers, the magic baton was the Thought of Mao and the Green Jade King was the bureaucratic capitalist-roader.

Although always striving for a worker’s’ state, Bruce never missed the chance to promote self-management in every workplace. As professor of politics at Adelaide, he worked with the anarchists and Maoists driving for worker control in the car plants. Among his closest lifelong friends was the Sydney anarchist Jack Grancheroff – whom he took to a cocktail party in Cambridge where Jack declared himself to be more impressed by the number of people giving each other honours than by the recipients.

## Solidarity

That so many of Bruce’s publications are co-operative efforts is no accident. He needs no help but works with others because he sees scientific research as a collaborative activity, with the comradeship between Engels and Marx as the exemplar. He was ever willing to lend a hand to others, such as his life-long friend, the worker-intellectual Steve Cooper, writing on the Asiatic Mode of Production (McFarlane, Cooper, and Jaksic, 2005a, b). A post-graduate student in Adelaide, Peter Cochrane, remembers “... a great supervisor and a terrific host. ... the house was terrifically sociable and kind to rather timid post-grads” (Personal communication, July 15, 2016). Bruce had seen that people could remain socialists without becoming Marxists but knows that no one stays a Marxist for very long once they give their socialist convictions the slip.

Being attached to Planning Commissions provided another opportunity for the collaborative work. In Yugoslavia as “Oceania Fellow” for 1958, he was inspired by the mixed marriage of self-management and market socialism, leading to a Masters of

Economics degree from Sydney in 1961 on “A Critique of Economic Planning in Socialist Economies” (McFarlane 1961). The experience in Yugoslavia enriched his education beyond his thesis and Bruce wrote regularly about the Republic’s tracking round and about socialism (see McFarlane 1966a; 1998). Hence, the Balkan wars were personal for Bruce when the German bishops, having secured the election of Karol Józef Wojtyła as Pope in 1978, engineered the defections of Slovenia and Croatia, triggering the break-up of the Yugoslavia federation by December 1991. A sojourn in Poland let Bruce encounter Oskar Lange’s notions of market socialism (Lange 1970). At Cambridge, he absorbed much about the splendours and miseries of central planning in the Soviet Union from Dobb (Dobb 1940; McFarlane and Pollitt 2000). But it was India with Michał Kalecki, alongside Jagdish Bhagwati and A. K. Sen, which left the most lasting impressions of character and intellectual influence, especially from travelling with Kalecki and his wife throughout the sub-continent (see McFarlane 1971; Kriesler and McFarlane 1993).

A different kind of collaboration came from co-editing journals. Bruce became associated with *Labour History* shortly after its inauguration in 1962 as a Leftist move to outflank *Business Archives and History* (since 1962, *Australian Economic History Review*). Bruce joined *Labour History*’s editorial board in 1964. Two years later, the Canberra Branch of the Society for the Study of Labour History published his monograph on R. F. Irvine, a Syndicalist sympathiser and foundation professor of economics at the University of Sydney, later advisor to Labor Federal Treasurer Edward “Ted” Theodore on a fiduciary issue against the austerity of the Premiers’ Plan (McFarlane 1966b). Irvine had been dismissed in 1922 for “gross moral turpitude,” to wit, a liaison with his secretary. On the occasion of Bruce’s 80th birthday the Society granted him life membership.

Bruce’s longest and finest collaboration went into the *Journal of Contemporary Asia* (JCA), joining the editorial board within a year of its foundation in 1970. At the time, in Australia, there was considerable agitation about academic links with the US military and the CIA, with militant opposition focused on the University of Sydney’s anthropology professor William Geddes and the psychologist vice-chancellor at Flinders University, Roger Russell (see Yates and McHugh 1974; McCoy 1971). JCA board member Jean Chesneaux pointed out on his first visit here in 1970 that universities had Departments of Government but not of Revolution – though they did teach counter-insurgency (Chesneaux 1978, Ch. 7). On the barricades with Bruce were scholar-activists Keith Buchanan, Noam Chomsky, Kathleen Gough, Gabriel Kolko, Peggy Duff, Peter Limquenco and W. F. Wertheim. Later, James Petras supplied perspectives on the USA’s corporate-warfare state as the cops of the world. The 1978 murder in Phnom Penh of JCA’s founding editor, Malcolm Caldwell, deeply affected Bruce who saw to it that Caldwell’s name continued to appear until 2001, with JCA continuing to pay tribute to Malcolm (Hewison 2020). Telling truths that *le Pouvoir* does not want its subjects to hear can be a matter of life and death. JCA later transferred its centre of operations from Stockholm via Bangkok to Manila, with Bruce serving as co-editor with Peter Limquenco between 1980 and 2006. Bruce spent more time in the Philippines, a habitat never risk free for radicals.

JCA sponsored conferences and a book series including, with Beresford, *A Manual of Political Economy* that sought to “deal with recent trends in Third World countries and especially in Asia” (McFarlane and Beresford 1985). The series also published a field

survey of labour conditions of thousands of workers in sixteen factories in the Philippines, Thailand and Malaysia by Limqueco, McFarlane, and Odhnoff (1989). In supplying evidence for locals fighting the havoc wrought by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank (Davis 2006: Ch. 7), JCA combined conceptual explorations with political disputatiousness, a range expressive of Bruce's commitments and passions. One of the earliest actions of JCA editors had been to join the British campaign to raise funds for the liberated areas of Indochina, when to do so was a crime in Australia. In sharp contrast to the Indonesia Lobby around ANU Professor Heinz Arndt (Fernandes 2004), JCA remained relentless in exposing the 1964–1966 democide in Indonesia. In company with the *Bulletin of Concerned Asia Scholars/Critical Asian Studies*, the *Review of Radical Political Economy* and *Antipode*, JCA guaranteed a platform for committed scholars.

Bruce's style is conveyed by an anecdote from Rajah Rasiah about the hostile reception of his paper at a JCA conference in 1986, later published in JCA, where he contended that a downturn in the economies of Southeast Asia did not threaten the region's industrialisation (Rasiah 1988). Instead, he highlighted:

increasing capital-labour ratios and the introduction of new technologies (product and production) in electronics assembly and test rather than closures ... to argue that the conditions for another boom in Southeast Asian industrialisation were already being laid ...

Bruce was the lone ally I found as he defended the scientific merits of my arguments, telling fellow radical scholars to stop moralising and to concentrate on the scientific laws of capitalist accumulation as advanced by Marx himself. Many an academic attach their academic paradigm to Schumpeter's arguments on the positive role of competition in producing gales of creative destruction effect (innovation) on capitalist growth. The fearless Bruce was happy to quote instead the original Marx who had argued lucidly on how competition forced firms to replace old modes of technologies with new ones (Rasiah 2006, 529).

To consult the fifty volumes of JCA today is to be struck by how its collectives more than fulfilled Georg Lukacs's (1971, 157) call to "consider the problem of the present as an historical problem," where history, as the totality of sensuous human practice, is recognised as transient because it is conflict-driven.

Nowhere are those precepts more evident than in Bruce's eight-page "Imperialism in the 1980's.". Its opening sentence lobs a grenade among the Third Worldists who equate imperialism with colonialism and both with "rip-offs" from enforced underdevelopment. On the contrary: "When we speak of 'imperialism' we mean the recent international activity of monopoly, and so we mean the activity of multinational firms as the modern form that capital export takes" (McFarlane 1977, 453). He follows this Bukharinite sortie with a barrage from *Capital* against those vulgar Marxians who have "forgotten" its scenario:

Surplus value does not necessarily flow so easily in Third World countries if labour is used inefficiently or is inefficient. In that case the low wages do not produce commensurate surplus value and much of the capital stock sent to such countries is wasted. ...

Moreover, if wages are so low, there is a temptation to use older technology and dump it in Asia. Or with wages low, there is no incentive to use highly capital-intensive technology of a new kind (McFarlane 1977, 455).

Out of his clashes with the labour lieutenants of capital in Australia's regime of compulsory arbitration, Bruce could warn that "the post-colonial state will co-operate more with international capital (and may have to organize unions to get labour properly 'organised') . . ." (McFarlane 1977, 455). A run of comparisons and contrasts then specifies how Australia too is a location for the restructure of the expanding reproduction of capital, such as with the "world-car," whereby General Motors-Holden could import automatic transmissions from its plant in the Philippines by earning credits from the export of engines from Victoria to Europe (McQueen 1982, 27–30).

Secure in his internationalism, Bruce is not afflicted by the moral panic that to work out exactly how Australian workers are exploited by overseas capital might be bourgeois nationalism – or worse. Nor does he suffer from the cultural cringe that suspects that locating the local within the dynamics of global capital is to succumb to its siren cosmopolitanism. His *oeuvre* testifies to how he approaches each nation-market-state as buffeted along a meridian between those poles.

Although blather about "globalisation" had not gone viral in 1977, Bruce would have none of the alarm that corporations could displace nation-market-states:

In my view, any notion of a post-colonial state (or for that matter any picture of the nation state versus the multinationals) may easily mislead. The general function of the state needs to be seen from the viewpoint of what capital requires for its own reproduction and the reproduction of social relations vital to that, and not from the viewpoint of the nation state plus the progressive national bourgeoisie versus imperialism, i.e. the function of the state needs to be seen from the viewpoint of class relations, and not from the viewpoint of the state. (McFarlane 1977, 457).

Globalisation as a descriptor lacks substance unless rooted in place, purpose and time, and even then its explanatory power for how the valorisation process feeds into accumulation remains nugatory, a truth espoused by Ellen Meiskins Wood (2002), among others (McQueen 2003).

Historical materialists, Bruce contends, have no use for a notion of "Underdevelopment" that can embrace "India, Brazil, Haiti and Tanzania." Instead, he calls upon practitioners of the

political economy of imperialism in the 1980s . . . to look at the concrete location of the state in Asia in the intersection of national and international capitalist pressure. It should treat each Asian country individually and avoid blanket, universal, abstractions like "the post-colonial state", "the nation-state," etc. (McFarlane 1977, 458).

These precepts are in line with Engels's cautioning of Kautsky: "Altogether you generalise far too much and this often makes you absolute where the utmost relativity is called for" (Engels 2001, 267).

### **Forgetting, Not Laughing**

Given that Bruce would have added lustre to any chair with "history" in its title, his name is a significant absence from the *Oxford Companion to Australian History* (Davison, Hirst, and Macintyre 2001), even erased as co-author of *A History of Australian Economic Thought* (Groenewegen and McFarlane 1990), a work that was republished in 2011. He

does get, however, a passing mention in *The Oxford Companion to Australian Politics* (Galligan and Roberts 2007), only to be purged from its entry on Marxism.<sup>3</sup>

Not all is lost. In September 2019, the Melbourne union officer, Jack Howard, who organised the celebration of the O'Shea strike, hoped to have Bruce as keynote speaker to the Left Young Labor Conference. Brisbane activist-scholar Dave Eden had just come upon Bruce's "Australia's Role in World Capitalism" for Playford and Kirsner's *Australian Capitalism* (McFarlane 1972) and was devouring everything else he could find of Bruce's, while deploring that, as an undergraduate, he had not been introduced to this radical corpus. And, the Adelaide organisers of events to draw lessons from the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam Moratorium also sought Bruce's participation.

When I told Bruce that I was preparing this tribute, he told me to forget about him and to stick with my attempt to specify how exactly the revolution inside capital had opened the way, from around 1800, to the global dominance of capital-within-capitalism. I replied that I need relief from not being able to chew all that I had bitten off. Further, his articles on Dobb and Kalecki had illumined my efforts to replace the cliché of "transition from Feudalism to Capitalism" with a revolution inside capital via the second serfdoms and the middle passage of chattel-slavery (McFarlane 1984; Kriesler and McFarlane 1993). Above all, I wrote back, without him in the early sixties, it is less than likely that I would have embarked on the project at all. When we met in 1960, the year after I left school, I assumed that Rosaluxemburg was a man's surname. Late in 1962, and by way of encouragement after his failure to get me to translate sentences into graphs, Bruce laid it out that one need not become a technical economist to be a Marxist, but unless one absorbed Marx's critique of political economy one could never become a Marxist geographer, psychologist or cultural critic. Bruce's presence through the 1960s at seminars in the ANU's History of Ideas Unit discombobulated its head, Eugene Kamenka, who was as innocent of political economy as a frog is of feathers.

As well as repaying more debts than for that one piece of wisdom, this survey of Bruce's life's work aims to redress a little of the loss of collective memory around the Left, as one strand of a wider amnesia induced through Educational Enterprises Pty Ltd. As on every topic, we must penetrate the surface of phenomena to its inner dynamics. Yet again, education and health have come under the hammer of the need for the agents of capital to find territories to invade so that it can expand, an extension of Kalecki's "domestic exports" (Kalecki 1990). Intensified exploitation is not the product of a bad idea known as neo-liberalism, which remains a good idea for almost all global corporates, while dishing up one more cliché to clog the neural paths of its would-be critics. Nobody drowns, as Marx pointed out, because our heads are filled with the idea of gravity (Marx 1976a, 24). Nor will our class begin to roll back the reverses suffered by working peoples across the past 40 years by the over-production of doctoral candidates' animating categories, such as "globalisation", "the market," "the Accord," or "privatisation," the latter as a blind for selling out to corporates. Bruce remains scornful of the propensity around the Left to carry on as if neo-liberalism, like "the market," stalks the globe wreaking havoc.

Russell Jacoby (1976) foresaw that the law of the tendency of rate of intelligence to fall would make it hard even to recognise the law's existence as the pace of its advance goes from the arithmetical to the geometric. Class-riven nation-market-states never enjoyed a golden age when universities "served the people" (McQueen 1996). The biases of objectivity are buried in the daily doings, not proclaimed as mission statements. The

symptoms, nonetheless, are manifold. Faculties of Economics and Commerce trade up to Schools of Business. Honours students leave the College of Business and Economics at the ANU without hearing more about Keynes than that he was wronged, wronged, wrong, and nothing of Kalecki.<sup>4</sup> When 1,500 words is a long read why should the holder of a post-graduate scholarship in Sydney's Department of Political Economy be embarrassed to post that she has never read a book?

A rash of post-modernist cultural criticism has not protected everyone claiming to be a progressive political economist from early on-set aphasia, as is apparent from the fate of R. M. Titmuss (1907–1973).<sup>5</sup> In 1963, Bruce lent me Titmuss's *Social Change and Income Distribution* (1962), helping to set my course against incremental reformism. Chasing income equality is a mug's game unless you upend the inequalities in production capital. How now Piketty, Andrew Leigh & Co?

In a coruscation of essays, Titmuss (1987, 157–169) shows why patients cannot make informed choices for medical treatments in the way they might for commodities and why an economy with dual systems in health care (as perpetuated under Australia's Medibank-cum-Medicare, and funded by a flat-tax) will give preferential treatment unto those who have (McQueen 1972), a fact of death being driven home during the coronavirus (Frank 2020). In *The Gift Relationship, from Human Blood to Social Policy*, Titmuss (1970) counterpoises such state-sanctioned drivers for institutionalised discriminations against the weakest and poorest with his ideal of communities, such as ours, where blood is still being donated blood and not sold, a distinction so often fatal during the eruption of HIV-AIDS.

Despite Titmuss's pre-eminence in conceptualising conditions for approaching social equality in health policy, none of the contributors to a special issue of the *Journal of Australian Political Economy* (JAPE) on health in 2014 mentions him, nor does the article on that topic in the special issue entitled "Contesting Markets" in 2011–2012. Professor Stilwell's *The Political Economy of Equality* (2019) perpetuates this neglect. Even Ray Moynihan told me in 2016 that Titmuss was but a name in his passive memory (see Moynihan 2003), though I was somewhat reassured later that year to find that he is still revered around the London School of Economics where he became the foundation professor of Social Administration in 1946, without so much as an undergraduate degree.

We should stay open to novel techniques for crunching data, as did the materialist dialectician Richard Levins (1998) with systems theory and Marx's revelling in differential calculus (Kennedy 1977). It is another matter to surrender the analytical power of Marx's critique of political economy.

Similar dualities apply throughout any pedagogy for the self-emancipation of the oppressed. To what should we stay open? In one strategy, we study the enemy's ideas, as Marx does throughout the four volumes of *Capital*, to come out fighting against their deleterious impacts on working people (Bukharin 1927, 103). Marx mocks the opposite approach when he traces the triumph from the 1830s of "vulgar political economy" over the science of its Classical exponents, from Petty and Quesnay to Smith and Ricardo:

The last form is the *academic form*, which proceeds "historically" and, with wise moderation, collects the "best" from all sources, and in doing this, contradictions do not matter; on the contrary, what matters is comprehensiveness. All systems are thus made insipid, their edge is taken off and they are peacefully gathered together in a miscellany. The heat of apologetics is moderated here by erudition, which looks down benignly on the exaggerations of

economic thinkers, and merely allows them to float as oddities in its mediocre pap. Since such work appears only when political economy has reached the end of its scope as a science, they are at the same time the *graveyard* of this science. (Marx 1971, 501–502).

The devotees of pluralism never mention its filleting as a specimen of Cold War propaganda by Bruce's Canberra colleague John Playford (1969).

Even were descriptive economics to be taught as the economic history of the present (Robbins 1955, 587), to paddle in the shallows of eclecticism is no reason to laud those around Sydney's Department of Political Economy and in JAPE who stick to narratives about the institutional, a treatment by which they eschew the rigours of critical analysis.

Few political economists can beat Bruce at bringing the institutional to life, yet he endorses Michael Lebowitz's (1986, 41) charge that "the absence of mathematical proofs is a serious flaw" in David Harvey's reinterpretation of Marx's *Capital*, an avoidance which adds to Harvey's popularity among the vulgar Marxians (McQueen 2012).<sup>6</sup> They fear that Marx's (1978, 124) extended formula for the circuit of money-capital,

$$M-C < \overset{L}{m}_p \dots P \dots (C+c) - (M+m)$$

might be schematic letters or, worse still, that it is an equation for them to solve. To be bamboozled by the binomial, or not appreciate why a measure of social deviation need not come with the "law of errors," is to be left at a double disadvantage, firstly, in not having access to a full toolbox, and secondly, in being vulnerable to attacks by econometricians who assume that there is no truth but algebra with Samuelson as its prophet (Mirowski 1989).

In his 1955 Presidential Address to the Economics Society, Lionel Robbins (1955, 590) acknowledged that not 80% of honours students "could survive the ordeal" of mathematical economics. Although Bruce is in the happy 20%, he nonetheless concurs with Joan Robinson's (1981) summation in her "Open Letter from a Keynesian to a Marxist," that the diet of econometrics force-fed to first-years at the University of Sydney by Warren Hogan from the late 1960s, remains unsurpassed for determining why an egg will usually cost more than a cup of tea, an achievement which Bukharin (1927, 19) looks upon as the marginal theory of rentiers, themselves a marginalised fraction of bourgeoisie. Although Bruce became an early contributor to JAPE he laments that Sydney's Political Economy Department has never escaped from its birth pangs as a protest against doing sums, compounding its mis-education of generations of progressive students.

### **Skools Over?**

Another issue of pertinence for the critical analysis of political economy as a social practice in the 2020s follows from *A History of Australian Economic Thought* (1990), written with Groenewegen. The concluding chapter asks: "Can Australian economics survive the twentieth century?" Their book documents the Australian schools, in the plural, which emerged from seeking to make sense of the peculiarities of real existing capitalism, notably, the impress on a balance-of-payments decided by unpredictable earnings from rural exports for highly protected processors under shifting loci of overseas ownership and control. None of those elements has been unique to Australia across the era of monopolising capitals, yet exceptional combinations here sent prominent economists down novel pathways (Fitzgerald 1990, 37–49; Beggs 2015.).

The prospects for the genesis of future Australian schools of economic thought depend, first of all, on the extent to which the configurations of capital will continue to differ between its centres and peripheries. If the world does turn out to be flat once labour-times are universalised (Marx 1970, 45–47), then the isolation required for evolving what some biologists call “sports” will have disappeared. Before then, however, as the differences between local average labour-times and those among competitors approach zero, they will do so within distinctive structures left over from a services-based economy dependent on extractive industries. That hangover is indicative of how path dependency recurs in the social reproduction of ideas as well as for commodities.

Schools of thought in any domain do not “mirror” actualities but are mediated via inheritances, to be either enriched or etiolated, the latter becoming the case here. No sooner had the tertiary teaching of the economic history of Australia escaped from being an appendage – often an afterthought – to British history than economic history, lock, stock and barrel, fell victim to Business Economics (Clarkson 1989; Boot 1997). Far from rushing in to occupy the vacuum, political and social historians breathed sighs of relief that their Once-Upon-A-Time stories would no longer be ridiculed from that quarter. Hence, a recent collection surveying the aftermath of the Great War can make no mention of the 1921 Greene Tariff that increased protection for industries that had grown during World War I, yet be praised as “a tour de force” (*sic* for “farce”?) (Holbrook and Reeves 2019). No less grave for students of economics is the driving to near extinction of courses in the history of economic thought. Once the market is equated with capitalism, and both apotheosised into the Eternal, the Natural and the Universal, Marx’s specification of their transitoriness sinks beneath a super-saturated solution of bourgeois bullshit. Dogmatism is the outcome. In aspiring to be replicants of mathematical physicists, the Neo-Classicals have succeeded at least in making themselves into cyphers of the condition of cosmologists who, while frequently in error are never in doubt. Acquaintance with the history of economic thought remains “a good inoculation against charlatanism” (Robbins 1955, 589), so much of which is paraded by winners of the *faux* Nobel Prize in *soi-disant* Economic Science.

The history of economic thought requires an historical materialist treatment since a set of ideas cannot have a history in the same sense as does the self-expansion of the kind of capital peculiar to capitalism. Yet, every school has its endogenous lines of development, for example, among the Austrians Carl Menger to Ludwig von Mises (Oakley 1997). Moreover, all ideas take shape within assumptions about the natural world and social life, of deductive or inductive logic, of Thomist or Utilitarian ethics (Redman 1997). Not even Marginal Utility could be born out of the ear of an elephant. Instead of seeing the Classical or Neo-Classical traditions as perpetual-motion machines, we must take our lead from Marx, Dobb, Groenewegen and McFarlane by asking what social practices is the author hoping to resolve, or to conceal, often achieving both, even without always realising what he, and still rarely she, is doing, and still less how they are doing it.

Without making ourselves cognizant of economic history and the history of economic thought as twin spheres of practice and knowledge, will we be able to so much as glimpse how concepts and actualities affect, and can effect each other, or why the Australian schools of economics might have had their day?

## Interpreting Change

On 1 July 1, 2016, Bruce turned 80. Surviving three strokes, he is living in Christchurch, New Zealand, where he completed his survey of the ASEAN economies and assembled his essays on Southeast Asia in the hope of finding a publisher.

Each week, we exchange letters. His combined annotated bibliographies in response to any author or topic I mention, along with a flow of suggestions for defending working people against the needs of capital, most recently to prepare to fight governments even before they claw back every cent they are pumping out to preserve the economy from imploding in the coronavirus crisis. Those prospects are being added to our draft on how much Marx and Engels reveal about cycles, circuits and crashes. A further example of how we engage has been around my chapter on the future of labour-times for a volume which Joe Collins is editing about the contemporary relevance of *Capital*. We puzzle over the big question: will there be any labour-time? If only half the predictions about automation and robotics come to fruition, how much will the expansion of capital (past labour) call for the variable capital in living labour? What prospect then even for Ricardo's 93% labour theory of value? (Stigler 1958). Such questions have not fallen out of the sky any more than their answers are innate in our minds (Mao 1966, 134). Both discoveries are "the work of history" (Marx 1976b, 125).

Instead of putting in the hard yards necessary to understand how exploitation works under capitalism, megaphone Marxians try to conceal a failure – if not their refusal – by misrepresenting Thesis Eleven. The point is to change the world, they screech, not to interpret it. Marx's final thesis has to be interpreted through the materialist dialectics that he sketches in the preceding ten theses, elaborates in the opening 90 pages of *The German Ideology* (Marx 1976a, 23–93), and in the "Introduction" to the *Grundrisse* (Marx 1973). We interpret the world through changing it and can change it towards greater social equality only by re-interpreting it while criticising our activism.

In that spirit, Bruce sent me a telegram late in 1963, after I had been elected editor of the student newspaper at the University of Queensland: "Do things about which others may write and write things for others to do." Bruce McFarlane has always done both. True, he is not the full-time revolutionary intellectual for whom Lenin appealed, but he has been as close to being one as anyone in Australia. He has done the things about which he has written. His critiques of political economy are practical and conceptual, as courageous as they are penetrating. He has put his body on the line and his brains on the line in the service of working people, standing forever with the weakest and the poorest across the globe.

For the forthcoming collection on Marx's *Capital*, Bruce contributes a chapter on "Engels – the first Marxist", partly in honour of his father who set him on the Left path with *Socialism Utopian and Scientific*. Bruce's concluding lines, however, can be applied to him:

Furthermore, the roles that Engels over-filled as organiser, economist and polemicist in the development of Western labour movements illumine how we can best honour his memory and his contributions to *Capital*. In the words of one biographer, Engels "wanted no monument other than the coming socialist revolution."

## Disclosure Statement

The author reports that, like the subject of this tribute, he persists in his lifelong conflict of interest with the corporate warfare state.

## Notes

1. Gifford's wife, Leila Thomas, wrote the first postgraduate thesis on Australian labour history in 1918, which the Society for the Study of Labour History produced in 1962 (Thomas 1962).
2. Around 1930, an Adelaide remittance man, Roger Jose, secured a Carnegie Endowment for a library of 3,000 books in the Gulf settlement of Boorooloora, where a dozen alcoholics held Sunday -morning seminars (Jose 2012, Chapter V).
3. That rough handling is as nothing compared to the scandal of Ian Hunt's (2010) entry on Marxism in *A Companion to Philosophy in Australia & New Zealand* which spends a page on Flinders, where he was on the staff, without mentioning that the department, under Brian Medlin, whose name is nowhere in the *Companion*, was a hotbed of Maoist activism where philosophy was a revolutionary practice, linked to the Worker-Student Alliance, and giving birth to Redgum, a chord which its lead singer, John Schumann, has severed. When did he last perform *Red Raggin*?
4. ANU lecturers dismiss the labour theory of value by pointing out that children labour on mud pies which then have no value. Despite the staff's addiction to the price mechanism, it seems not to occur to even one of them that should those mud pies be commodified as face-packs, they will acquire not only a value but a considerable price: "On the level plain, simple mounds look like hills; and the insipid flatness of our present bourgeoisie is to be measured by the altitude of its 'great intellects'" (Marx, 1976b: 654).
5. Titmuss turned down Harold Wilson's offer of a peerage, as had that other champion of equality, R. H. Tawney, whose message of refusal asked Clement Atlee: "What have I ever done to harm to Labour Party?"
6. That avoidance does not account for why Harvey supposes that the sale of a commodity will realise as profit all of the surplus-value present in it (Harvey 2013,: 37).

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