

A Survey of Progressive Economic Thought in Interwar Britain: Strengths and Gaps

Alan Booth

Abstract:

This paper looks at debates on the opposition to British government economic policy in the interwar years. It concentrates on the views emanating from the leading representatives of British industry and commerce and notes in the historiography a tendency to contrast a stream of progressive ideas in the 1920s with a more conservative approach in the following decade. This paper suggests that the contrasts may have been overstated and focuses on preliminary investigations into the series of lectures organised by B. Seebohm Rowntree throughout the interwar period. The article suggests that there were many continuities in business thought during the period, and that the main contribution of business to the 'planning debates' of both interwar decades was in the consolidation and systematisation of domestic and American ideas on management, especially the management of labour. The tendency to view participation of business leaders as contributions to economic policy, narrowly defined, is potentially misleading but our view of the scale of the planning debate of the 1930s needs to be revised to include significant changes in management theory.

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I Introduction

Approximately 25 years ago, my colleague Melvyn Pack and I were preparing a manuscript on the economic thinking of opposition groups of the 1920s and 1930s (Booth and Pack 1985). We were stimulated by the obvious parallels between the interwar years and the early 1980s. In both periods, we saw a vigorous opposition to government policies but which was apparently weakened by fac-

tionalism and division. Both periods seemed to us to show the fertility of radical-progressive economic thought and the weakness of centrifugal politics as groups preferred to emphasise their own distinctive brand of radical policies rather than the potential for common, central ground. As such, our thoughts were defined in opposition to the notion of an emerging consensus in the centre of British politics, which was best represented by Arthur Marwick's (1964) work on