

## **The demarcation of economics in Robbins's Essay: a key to escaping economic imperialism**

This paper investigates why Robbins's Essay is associated with economic imperialism given that his definition of economics is not a necessary condition for this, as some authors have recently pointed out. In his book Robbins uses his analytical definition for classification (to delimit what kind of questions lie inside and outside economics) which, I suggest, paved the way to economic imperialism for two reasons. First, it leaves scarcity as the only element that is relevant in the act of choice and, consequently, "economizing" becomes the only criteria to choose. Second, by separating economics from technical sciences, it indirectly invests economic models with the character of formal theories of human action, thereby raising economics to the level of anthropology.

Next, I analyse whether Robbins's arguments regarding demarcating economics are valid. These arguments rely heavily on his clear-cut means-ends distinction, which has been criticised by many authors (e.g. Rivett, Kizner). With the aid of the theory of consumer behaviour, I critically examine this drastic categorization and show that the existence of "intermediate ends" (which is admitted by Robbins) complicates this division. Consequently, the boundaries of economics – as defined by Robbins – become vague, because: (i) when the "intermediate ends" are "means" to other (alternative) ultimate ends, the choice of "ends" becomes an economic problem; (ii) when the "intermediate ends" are "means" to a unique final "end", the economic problem becomes a "technical" problem.

I conclude that Robbins offers a good characterization of economic activity that, being analytical in character, helps to understand its anthropological foundations, but cannot be used to delimit the scope of the science. If interpreted in this way, Robbins's Essay does not contribute to the confusion and lack of identity of economics (as Buchanan suggests) but, on the contrary, it serves to unify the different and competing views in this science.

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