

A misunderstood Robbins?

The role of the economist and policy action

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Abstract

When Robbins' *Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science* was first published, it was mostly criticized for depriving economists of an important professional market (policy advice) and for detaching economics from policy considerations. Most critics considered Robbins' *Essay* as the manifesto of a "technological" and "ivory-tower" concept of economics.

In fact, if we read through the lines of Robbins writings and *Autobiography*, we can see that such an accusation was misdirected. Economics is definitely an autonomous (from ethics and politics) science as a set of knowledge-methodology but it has a high-rank position for the very policy action. For him, economics is the tool box indispensable for responsible policy action.

Aim of the paper is to enquire into Robbins' concept about the relationship between economics and politics and to underline how and why his message was misunderstood in economic literature.

If we read the *Essay* beyond its crude language and as a step within a wider, longer, more complex but absolutely "time consistent" whole of considerations developed by Robbins from the Twenties until the Sixties, a completely different judgement emerges.

The paper goes back to earlier and further contributions to enquire into Robbins' concept of the role of the economist in society and policy action in the attempt to contribute to a reconsideration of the historiographical assessment of Robbins' work.

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