Society economized: T.R. Ashworth and the history of the social sciences in Australia*

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Among the various social sciences, sociology was the late starter in the Australian academy. At the two oldest universities distinct sociology programs were only established in the 1990s though sociology had been on offer much earlier in the century at both Sydney and Melbourne. This article investigates the circumstances and reasons behind this disjunction, linking it to the success of Australian economics in the interwar period and beyond. The fate of sociology at Melbourne is utilised to illustrate the connection. The writings of the Melbourne businessman, T.R. Ashworth and his enigmatically worded bequest to promote sociology at Melbourne are highlighted to underscore what was at stake: the leadership of the social sciences.

At the two oldest universities in Australia—the University of Sydney and the University of Melbourne—sociology has only recently become an independent discipline of study. While sociological studies had been offered in other departments for some time, it was only during the 1990s that distinct sociological programs were established at these two institutions. This contemporary development however has a long history. For a period of time after the Great War, sociology was offered as an undergraduate subject at the University of Melbourne. By the end of the 1920s however, sociology had all but vanished from the University curriculum. A similar story can be told about sociology at the University of Sydney though with an afterlife in the Department of Anthropology. Moreover, sociology as an independent discipline in the Australian academy only reappeared in the late 1950s with the establishment of a chair in sociology at the University of New South Wales. Yet this is not indicative of a lack of sociological research focusing on Australian society in the intervening period. Indeed, quite the contrary was the case. This is especially notable in regard to the impact of those intellectuals with social science inclinations in the planning and management of postwar reconstruction.

This article revisits the question of sociology as the odd discipline out in the Australian academy. Anthropology, economics, demography, political science and psychology began to find their disciplinary feet in the interwar years, even if the latter three only came fully into their own after the war. To the extent that history was considered a social science, it and economics began to flourish as distinct disciplines in the interwar period. The ascendance of economics in particular says a good deal about the cogency of its analytical capacities for the Australian predicament at the time.

By contrast, it would appear that the early efforts in sociology, especially at Melbourne, were analytically weak and conceptually deficient. But these inadequacies are only one, albeit important, aspect of the sociology story. The rise of economics is a crucial yet underexamined dimension in sociology’s belated history in the Australian academy. While this involves issues relating to the historical sociology of Australian development, the main concern of this article is to highlight the connection in terms of competing approaches to the
‘problem of society’. This entailed differing forms of conceptualisation and analytical reach as well as the grail of social science leadership.

These themes will be pursued with special attention to the fate of sociology and economics at the University of Melbourne in the interwar years. Economics at Melbourne epitomised the professionalisation of the discipline, while the brief experience of sociology soured the ground for many years. However the case for sociology was not completely forsaken. In 1935 a little known Melbourne businessman Thomas Ramsden Ashworth died leaving a bequest to the University. The terms of the bequest stated that the annual income generated be used to establish ‘a Professorship or Lectureship on some subject or subjects in connection with sociology but excluding economics’.7 Ashworth’s enigmatic caveat against economics summons a convoluted string of circumstances in which the two disciplines were entwined. But it also points to the rivalry between two different approaches to society, both of which linked together social scientific research, public policy and social development.

Sociology and Economics: a tangled story

Helen Bourke has traced the beginnings of sociology in Australia in the first decades of this century until its suspension in the late 1920s.8 She highlights the early calls for the teaching of sociology, especially those made by Professor Francis Anderson and Professor R.F. Irvine at the University of Sydney. On the eve of the First World War, Anderson and Irvine argued the case for sociology as a worthwhile addition to the University’s Arts syllabus. Both were imbued with the understanding of sociology as the integrating discipline of the social sciences, the ‘queen’ that draws the various social sciences into a unified science of society. The insight offered by disciplines like economics remained partial and inadequate unless incorporated into a broader science of society. While retaining a strong sense of its humanistic duties, Anderson and Irvine maintained that the collection and analysis of ‘hard’ social data should underpin sociology. The fundamental riddle for sociology was to explain the ‘fact’ of society, its genesis and future development.

In general terms, exactly what the scientific investigation of social development or social progress meant remained vague. In the Australian context, it was most certainly coloured by the sense of being inside a ‘social laboratory’, the experience of a progressive liberal experiment in ‘state socialism’ in the decade after Federation in 1901. Anderson, Irvine, and others rued the lack of analysis of this pioneering social experiment. While Australia had seemingly come to lead the way in practical social and political reform, it had failed to generate any systematic analysis of these reforms. If nothing else, this gap between progressive social action and the dearth of sociological inquiry begged Anderson and Irvine’s case for the propagation of sociology in Australia.9 By the end of the 1920s, a number of critical evaluations appeared, marking the beginnings of a genre now expansive albeit varied in quality.10 The fate of sociology as a distinct discipline was far less propitious.

Sociology was established as a course of study at Melbourne towards the end of the Great War under the auspices of the University of Melbourne Extension Board and the Workers Education Association (WEA). In 1918 Meredith Atkinson was appointed its first director. Atkinson had been director of WEA tutorial classes at Sydney University since 1914. When he assumed his position at Melbourne he became the first ‘self-styled’ professor of sociology in Australia. His conception of sociology was more concerned with the discussion of economic and political issues than with systematic sociological analysis.11 Atkinson’s time as director was not a success and he resigned in 1922. John Alexander Gunn was appointed to
replace him, arriving in Melbourne in 1924. Recollections by former students and colleagues report that the content of the sociology course in the 1920s was a jumble of wild generalisations and ‘second-hand facts’. Gunn’s approach was a mixture of political philosophy, rudimentary economic history, social psychology and eugenics. And like Atkinson before him, Gunn was not the most agreeable personality. The program was thus bedevilled with disaffection emanating from university staff and students, and its administration was troubled by University/WEA politics. It was finally taken over by William Macmahon Ball in the late 1920s, and transformed into a course on political philosophy. In short, sociology was in many respects stillborn in the pre-war period, the whole experience bequeathing ‘sociology’ a bad name in Melbourne circles for decades to follow.

Matching sociology’s fraught story is the rise of economics. From the 1920s onwards the economics discipline in Australia went from strength to strength, taking a leading role in social research and public policy. It was during this time that academic economists became renowned figures in public life, especially in public service on behalf of the Federal government. One of the most prominent was Douglas Berry Copland who was appointed to the newly established Chair of Commerce at Melbourne in 1924. Copland was an energetic promoter and publicist of the discipline of economics inside and outside the academy. A highly driven and ambitious man, he could impress with charm but also arouse hostility with his forceful personality. He played a leading role on numerous key government committees and commissions, state and federal, from the late 1920s onwards. He was appointed Australian Minister to China in 1946 and became the inaugural Vice-Chancellor of the Australian National University (1948-1953). Further foreign appointments followed and in his final working years he was a central figure the establishment of the Australian Administrative Staff College. In the interwar period he was the Australian representative (social sciences) for the Rockefeller Foundation, an important source of research funding at the time. His name was synonymous with the ‘Melbourne School’ of Economics, which became a major recruiting ground of graduates for the public sector and the Commonwealth Treasury in particular in the years following the Second World War. Copland’s importance to the immediate story is his role as ‘the entrepreneur of the social sciences’ in Australia in the interwar period.

In 1926 Copland made a study tour of England, Europe and the United States with the brief of surveying current trends in the social sciences and submitting proposals on their development in Australia. In his travels Copland took particular note of the state of sociology and found it wanting. In his published report in 1927, he concluded that sociology was underdeveloped as a social science, tending to work in the realm of unfounded generalisation and lacking empirical rigour. Referring to the limited resources of Australian universities at the time, Copland suggested that ‘economics, psychology, and political science are of greater importance’ than the establishment of undergraduate sociology courses. On the other hand, he intimated that he could see a role for sociology at a graduate level, though not by that name. A sociological subject could examine ‘the scope and method’ of the more focused social sciences and ‘encourage research into the general social environment’ that would build up the bank of social data. But Copland did not seem driven to act on this possibility, rather the contrary. In 1927 he headed a committee reviewing the subject offerings in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Melbourne. The changes it recommended came into effect in the following year, among them the discarding of Sociology.

Resistance within the University of Melbourne to establish a separate sociology department continued for many years, well into the 1970s. This was partly due to the earlier history, as
well as a traditionalist prejudice against sociology per se. It also involved the issue of disciplinary *lebensraum*. Indeed, while the discipline of sociology was eschewed there was no taboo against sociological research at Melbourne during this period. Wilfred Prest in Economics directed a major social survey of urban Melbourne in the early 1940s, a ‘notable pioneering venture in Australian urban sociology’. At the same time, a number of research studies in rural sociology were undertaken in the Agriculture Department. And not long after his appointment as foundation Professor of Psychology in 1946 Oscar Oeser initiated two wide-ranging social psychological studies of an urban and a rural community. There was a detailed social survey of the aged in Victoria undertaken in the early 1950s under the auspices of the Department of Social Studies. And from the mid 1960s the Institute for Applied Economic and Social Research under the direction of Ronald Henderson began its comprehensive study of living standards, generating the widely influential concept of the Henderson poverty line. Sociological approaches were also broached in other departments of the University, and most notably in the Political Science. However, it was not until the middle 1990s that a distinctive sociology program was established and housed in the Political Science Department, partially funded through the Ashworth Bequest.

In terms of Ashworth’s caveat against economics, several comments can be made. By the time of Ashworth’s death in 1935, Economics at Melbourne was flourishing, due in large measure to Copland’s efforts. And, indeed, a second Chair in Economics was established in 1927 and taken up soon after by L.F. Giblin. This would indicate that Ashworth was concerned to give assistance where needed, namely to the less developed social sciences and sociology in particular. In the mid 1920s Ashworth had lamented the absence of social sciences ‘faculties’—Sociology, Economics and the like—at Melbourne. While economics had become firmly established, sociology had not. Ashworth was obviously concerned that this was still the case up to the time of his death. But this is not the end of the story. Ashworth had additional anxieties concerning the newly elevated status of Economics. These can be discerned from a consideration of his published work.

Ashworth’s social philosophy

In a standard reference guide to Victorian history till 1939, there is only one citation of Ashworth’s writings and this is under the heading of anti-communist literature. The title listed is *The Communist Danger: a phase of the ultimate social problem* (1926), but closer examination reveals a work that is more than simply a denunciation of communism and local communist militants in the 1920s. It takes on a far broader brief, ranging from contemporary social and political trends through to the state of the social sciences and issues of social philosophy. This is indicative of Ashworth’s diverse activities and intellectual interests. In the years spanning from the 1890s to the middle 1930s, Ashworth ‘bobs up’ in accounts of the better known circles of intellectual and public life in Australia. Yet his appearance in these accounts is usually fleeting. Nonetheless, his active participation in Australian political life at all levels, municipal, colonial, state and federal, can be sensed from the pages of the *Victorian Parliamentary Debates*, the Melbourne *Age* and the Melbourne *Argus*, amongst others. His writings attest to a lively if at times eccentric interest in social and political affairs over a period of nearly forty years, reflecting an ongoing concern with both the theoretical and the more pragmatic aspects of social development and politics.

Ashworth appears to have kept up with contemporary developments in economics, sociology, politics and philosophy, and owned a substantial library. He also seems to have had a driving inclination to share his view of the world with audiences ranging from the Australasian
Association for the Advancement of Science through to the readers of the Melbourne Argus. At times Ashworth campaigned for politically ‘conservative’ causes: state fiscal restraint and contraction; the reduction of working class electorates; productivity-based wage rates rather than needs-based ones (determined by the Arbitration Court); and thrift (deflation) against ‘purchasing power’ (as a Depression recovery strategy). On the other hand, he argued a detailed case for greater Commonwealth government power in his minority report for the Commonwealth Royal Commission on the Constitution. He also promoted a kind of corporatism in which labour and capital would be reconciled according to binding ethical and rational principles. A strong critic of social Darwinism, he maintained that laissez faire capitalism and state socialism were both flawed, simply representing the opposite extremes of anarchic individualism and authoritarian collectivism. It is perhaps no surprise that Ashworth easily upset both sides of mainstream politics as well as bewildering his fellow members at the Victorian Employers Federation (VEF). While all this intimates a certain intellectual if not personal quirkiness, there is glimmer in Ashworth’s writings that suggests something approximating a social philosophy. Ashworth’s Communist Danger comes closest to offering a coherent insight into this perspective.

In this work Ashworth attacks local communists involved in a waterfront dispute at the time, referring to class warfare to illustrate what he describes as social ‘regression’. However the work is not an anti-communist polemic per se; rather the underlying argument is concerned with the issue of general social development. Ashworth discusses the work of a wide range of thinkers including political scientists (James Bryce), geographers (Griffith Taylor), contemporary social analysts (Edward Filene, Austin Freeman, G.V. Portus), ethicists (J.S. Mackenzie) and social philosophers (T.H. Huxley, W.L. Mackenzie King, Karl Marx, Herbert Spencer). He also revisits certain themes touched upon in his earlier book, Proportional Representation Applied to Party Government: A New Electoral System (1900), a work which amongst other things engages with Lester Ward’s programmatic vision for sociology.

In general terms the Communist Danger and Ashworth’s other writings are redolent of a form of social criticism that arose in response to the rise of class politics at the dawn of the twentieth century in Australia and elsewhere. Ashworth considered that the Australian political system had become debased in its subjugation to ‘base’ class self-interests. His target was not limited to the communists’ invocations of class hatred and class violence. The ‘selfish idle rich’ are condemned equally for aggravating the condition in which ‘savage’, ‘narrow group morality’ finds ground. However Ashworth did not consider that Australian society had become plagued by too much politics; neither did he lay blame on state action tout court. Rather, he argued that the ‘art of politics is suffering from its inadequate ethical and sociological bases’. Thus in some measure Ashworth was in agreement with Anderson and Irvine in the sense that there was a pressing need for sociological analysis and reflection on Australian society. In the Communist Danger communism and industrial unrest supply the topical pretext for Ashworth’s contribution to this kind of social criticism. Nonetheless they are illustrative rather than his prime focus. He states at the beginning of the Communist Danger that:

Communism is clearly a problem of social science, for it is concerned with the purposive interdependent actions of men in association. Sociology, however, has not yet advanced to the synthetic stage, so that complete pronouncements regarding its phenomena are lacking from the scientific side. These writings are intended to combine common sense conclusions with a measure of scientific analysis.
Ashworth envelops the specific case of communist agitation and the 1925 seamen’s strike into more general considerations on the processes of social evolution. According to Ashworth, social evolution is a complex process in which there is an ascending scale from the physical to the ‘psychic’, through the interactions of opposing principles. At lower levels of social evolution, ‘savages’ exhibit a group morality that inclines them to help each other but treat outsiders as enemies, often with physical violence. Moving to higher levels, the conflict of opposing principles shifts from ‘the physical to the mental plane’, and in the process social evolution is advanced. Citing W.L. Mackenzie King’s *Industry and Humanity*, Ashworth suggests that the resort to warfare and class strife arise from a mental blindness, an inability to appreciate opposing points of view. Aside from natural dispositions, he notes that this kind of psychological blindness arises out of our social experiences, especially in childhood. Nevertheless he does not suggest that we are bound to be caught in this myopia, neither at the psychological nor sociological level. Human beings have the capacity to generate new circumstances and institutions that reshape the human environment, which in turn shape human beings. The progressive or regressive nature of this type of refashioning is dependent entirely upon its moral quality and the purposes of those undertaking the task.

From Ashworth’s perspective, the revolutionary violence proclaimed by communism is nothing but a counsel of despair and socially regressive. The social sciences however offer the capacities to adjust means to new ends, to deal with ‘the conflict of interacting principles’ at higher, more civilised levels. In this sense Ashworth’s call for the need to develop the social sciences is more than simply an appeal for social analysis; he views it as *essential* for human progress and general social development.

In line with his more general notion of opposing principles, Ashworth characterises Australian capitalist society as a compound, a mixture, the interaction of socialism (étatism) and individualism (individual liberty). In isolation, he considers either to be detrimental to social progress: socialism tending to state despotism; individualism tending to the chaos of anarchy. The real question is thus where to draw the line, wherein lies a *via media* between these two interacting opposing principles? Once again, Ashworth petitions the development of sociology and the social sciences in general as leading the way towards some resolution of this question. In this connection he draws attention to developments in the United States, which he had visited in the early 1920s. Here, he cites impressive material progress but also notes that the social sciences were still trying to catch up. In particular, he mentions the economic scenario of Fordist modernisation in which mass production was integrally linked to mass ‘distribution’ (consumption). He is critical of the model precisely because of its exclusive focus on material prosperity, thus failing to address the more general issue of ‘social machinery’—the broad sociological civilising process.

Once cast in these terms, Ashworth’s sociological perspective is not quite as eccentric as it first appears. The far better known Australian social theorist and younger contemporary of Ashworth, Frederic Eggleston, engaged similar questions, grappling with the task of a general social philosophy adequate to contemporary times and problems. A number of Ashworth’s themes are also highly reminiscent of A.P. Elkin’s writings published during the 1930s and early 1940s. Elkin is perhaps better known as an anthropologist yet he was also a strong advocate for the development of sociology in Australia, notably through his promotion of the short-lived Australian Institute of Sociology. In this period, he cast his Durkheimian eye on society, and specifically on the theme of social harmony. Like Ashworth, he was concerned with the disintegrative effects of antagonistic group life in contemporary society, effects that could be addressed through scientifically informed social reform.
In his inaugural address to the Australian Institute of Sociology, Elkin took stock of the current academic research in Australia on the legal, political, psychological and economic aspects of social life. He also observed that ‘the study of society as a whole, of the search for its principles of cohesion and change, and of the study of its structure’ remained unexplored. Like Ashworth, Elkin held that ‘sociology proper’ is the basis of all types of social research, as the study of society according to scientific principles. Social research so conceived enables the dual insight: ‘to know thyself as a social being, and a social “order.”’ The individual social sciences are partial. Therefore if social research is to be the basis for reform there needs to be a recognition that the human subject is not merely ‘an economic cipher, political animal or religious spirit,’ but is ‘a complex social being who is striving, even though unconsciously, for integration’. While Elkin’s argument was somewhat more sophisticated than Ashworth’s, they shared a broad concern with the need for a comprehensive sociological approach to contemporary social problems.

Ashworth and the economists

Ashworth’s caveat against economics in his bequest can thus be read as more than simply a helping hand in the cultivation of sociology at Melbourne. Like Copland, Ashworth was perturbed by the underdevelopment of the ‘scientific side’ of sociology. On the other hand, unlike Copland, he considered the development of sociology as essential, especially in its role as the queen of the social sciences, as a ‘coordinating science’ synthesizing the specialised social sciences. In this sense, Ashworth’s conception and projection of sociology echoed Elkin’s sociological sensibilities as well as the earlier calls made by Anderson and Irvine. Copland’s antipathy to sociology was most certainly at odds with Ashworth’s sympathies. And Copland’s prime positioning of economics stands in direct contrast to Ashworth’s sense of the need to integrate the social sciences under a holistic sociology.

In line with his broader social philosophy, Ashworth would come to view the singular ascendancy of Copland’s economic science as only exacerbating what he regarded as the central problem of Australian society—regressive ‘tribal’ self-interest. Indeed, he became a lively public critic of Copland’s ‘purchasing power doctrine’ vis-à-vis Australia’s economic malaise in the Great Depression. According to Ashworth this doctrine was an ‘easy road to ruin’ pandering to sectional and entrenched interests. This points to an intellectual antipathy between Ashworth and Copland. But this does not seem to have always been the case. Ashworth was involved in the establishment of the Economic Society of Australia and New Zealand, an organisation very much the brainchild of Copland. Copland was the first president of the Victorian branch of the Society, Ashworth a founding committee member. Under the auspices of the Victorian Branch, they both presented lectures, at times sharing the same floor. However a falling out developed in 1930 over the approach to economic recovery, Ashworth advocating a radically deflationary solution to the crisis. Copland along with other members of the Society sought a more measured approach. These differences offer an obvious reason for Ashworth’s disaffection. Copland’s 1927 report on the social sciences and its proposals on the future of sociology at the University of Melbourne and elsewhere, would no doubt have strained their relationship as well. But underlying all of this is the more fundamental issue of the position of Economics in relation to the other social sciences: ‘who’ was best qualified to ‘scientifically’ guide society?

By end of the Great War and into the 1920s, Australian observers were starting to evaluate the progress of the Australian ‘social laboratory’. One body of thought that emerged was less than
sanguine in its judgement. The experiment had set out to avoid the evils of Old World industrial society—social disharmony and class conflict—in its nation-building efforts. However industrial unrest persisted and sectionalism pervaded the political processes. The political system had become compromised by its attempts to please all the special interests, while the state-sponsored institutions merely amplified social disharmony and courted unrealistic expectations of state action and state finances. The reliance on the state as the vehicle of social integration stripped social equity back to narrow self-interest and societal apathy. And on the economic side, Australia remained vulnerable to world primary commodity markets and had achieved limited industrial growth.  

These types of critical evaluations became all the more resonant in the closing years of the 1920s and in particular with the onset of the Great Depression in 1929. The deepening economic crisis opened up a space in which the Australian economists could make a significant mark. Views among the economists were mixed on the question of Australia’s experiment in ‘protective statism’. But the more apposite point is their ascendancy at this time and in particular Copland’s view on the role of the professional economist.

During the interwar period Copland was a tireless promoter of the importance of economics for public policy. He impressed upon all whom made his acquaintance—politicians, entrepreneurs and academics, especially the influential—the power and utility of economic knowledge. In part, this was a strategy to insinuate the fledgling economics profession into business and political circles, to secure a professional niche with the argument of economics’ relevance to the pragmatic side of everyday life. His aim was to ensure that the profession was positioned to the fore of commercial and political decision-making.

However, these manoeuvres were not simply strategic. They were also underpinned by Copland’s more fundamental views concerning the competencies of the properly trained economist. Copland ‘concurring with the Marshallian view that the economist was well equipped to deal with the influences which make for sectional and class selfishness and to act as a guide and adjudicator on the resulting conflicts between private and public interests’. His academic training in New Zealand imparted a conception of economics that extended beyond the purely theoretical to include the historical and geographical dimensions as well as an appreciation of the political possibilities of action. During the 1920s Copland emphasised that the time of the economist had come: the economist may at times draw on the insight of the other social sciences but in many problem areas ‘the economist is really king’. In place of the (unrealised) aspirations of sociology as the ‘queen of the social sciences,’ the economist-king could and would deliver the scientific guidance on the big problems of society. Indeed, the primary impetus for the pursuit of economic science was its promise of ‘fruit-bearing’ outcomes rather than simply offering enlightenment. Copland proselytised this view of economics and the economist, recommending the benefits for government and business, and emphasising the ability to modify the economic environment. In this promotional quest, he highlighted the realism of modern (quantitative) economics, the parlous state of knowledge about the Australian economy, and the need for sound and wide-ranging research. Copland’s view reflected the shared culture of the Australasian economics community in the 1920s. This culture was inculcated with an ideal of service: the economist as educator and as policy adviser. By the late 1920s, the reach of the economist in both guises was extending significantly.

The crucial points to headline in Copland’s conception are firstly the view that sectional interests are not the social problem per se, and can in principle be ‘managed’ by the informed
and prudent economist, the ‘economist-king’. Secondly, and linked to the first, is the notion that key societal problems can be addressed by more adequate economic knowledge and its pragmatic application in public policy decision-making. The 1929 Brigden Report on the Australian Tariff illustrates how this conception was enacted.

Professor J.B. Brigden chaired the informal committee on the Tariff that was set up in 1927 by Prime Minister S.M. Bruce. The other members of the committee were Copland, E.C. Dyason, L.F. Giblin and C.H. Wickens, and its findings were published in 1929 under the title *The Australian Tariff.* The report considered the issue of how wage and tariff protection affected Australia’s largely rural-based economy as well as the development of its fledgling manufacturing industry. The free trade critics of Australian state protectionism were in no doubt that the economic effects were adverse and that the market should be freed from government interference. However, Brigden and his fellow economists drew a more balanced conclusion. They agreed that protectionism had been utilised far too widely and indiscriminately, not merely in respect of manufacturers but also in subsidies to certain rural industries. Nonetheless, they recommended that the use of protection should be tempered rather than abandoned outright. On the other side of the equation, they commended the redistributive consequences of the tariff—a mechanism to effect ‘the social goals of population growth and high, stable, real wages’—yet with an accompanying caveat about the artificial inflation of real wage levels. In general then, Brigden and his fellow economists had left room for both manufacturing protectionists and hostile rural producers in the sway of their report, even if they did not satisfy the staunchest free traders.

The Brigden Report marks a significant signpost in the rise of the economists. Looking back after twenty odd years, Copland certainly saw this as one of its achievements. The report’s navigation between the competing interests and demands certainly resonates with Copland’s view of the economist endowed with Marshallian prudence. Moreover, the report signals a crucial moment when the economists—rather than social reformers of earlier generations—started to have a serious voice in Australian public policy. With the onset of the world economic crisis in 1929 this role intensified, though Copland tended to overstate their impact. The ideas of Alfred Marshall and his professorial successor A.C. Pigou had made a deep impression on Australian economic thinking. Marshall’s advice to his students to go out into the world with ‘cool heads and warm hearts’ captured the imagination of many Australian economists in the 1930s, as did the new Keynesian notion of macroeconomic management.

For Ashworth however, this rise to pre-eminence of economics per se, warm-hearted or not, could do nothing but aggravate the problem the economists were being called upon to remedy. Ashworth remained committed to the belief that the problem of interest-riddled society could only be resolved through the integration of the social sciences—a unified science of society which was concerned with the complexity of the human condition rather than just material interests. In part this echoed a turn of the century optimism in the prospects of a holistic sociology. But it was also motivated by a sense of the partiality of modern economics. Frederic Eggleston pushed for the development of sociology in the Australian academy over many years for not dissimilar reasons. Copland was fully aware of Eggleston’s broader horizon, noting in a retrospective that for Eggleston ‘economics was not enough’. While far better placed than Ashworth in terms of both government and mainstream intellectual circles, Eggleston like Ashworth lacked scholarly status inside the academy. Even Eggleston’s final efforts in this regard on the Interim Council of the Australian National University in the late 1940s were largely snookered by the professoriate. In the end, the best Ashworth could do
was to bequeath a large part of his estate to the academic development of sociology or the like but most definitely not economics.

Conclusion

In early twentieth-century Australia, social thinkers such as Anderson and Irvine rued the mismatch between the enactment of progressive social reforms and the lack of systematic social analysis. From the 1930s onwards Australian professional economists faced this challenge, injecting social scientific research and analysis into the formulation of public policy. In the process they started to play a significant role in the shaping of Australian social development, especially during and after the Second World War. In this same period, the Australian economics profession readily embraced a form of Keynesianism, one that viewed ‘purposive state action, backed by an appropriately qualified and well-informed bureaucracy,’ as ‘essential for the operation of a more efficient, more productive, more equitable and more secure economic system’. Left to its own devices, the unregulated market economy was inherently flawed and thus in need of state management. This was not simply an approach to economic policy but had far wider social and cultural ramifications. Indeed, the economists recognised that the success of state economic management was predicated on a transformation of people’s values into a more community-oriented mind-set, a new social consensus.

This was the guiding perspective of the Australian economics profession in government and in the academy until the middle 1960s. After this time the profession began to abandon ‘Keynesian meliorism’, shifting towards more market-based approaches. This occurred for an array of reasons. Nonetheless, there is a continuity here: in the 1990s and beyond, the professional economists still play a central role in public policy making and thus in the shaping of social development in Australia. Many of the critiques of neoliberal public policy—economic rationalism—miss this continuity, seemingly unaware of the earlier manoeuvring of Copland and his fellow ‘economist-kings’. One consequence is that these critiques tend to remain trapped within the economists’ general domain. Perhaps a better appreciation of the longer history could assist in rethinking social development in broader, more complex terms.
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1See the University of Melbourne Calendars from 1919 to 1931. In 1929 the subject Sociology is still listed under the Pass degree. In 1930, it has an ambiguous entry under the Honours Degree, i.e. as Political Philosophy, and no Pass degree entry. By 1931, Sociology is no longer listed in either the Pass or Honours level entries.


7University of Melbourne Calendar (1988), 746, Regulation 7.124—T.R. Ashworth Bequest. Also see Central Registry (hereafter UM/CR) files, no. 10-2-10 (T.R. Ashworth Estate, parts 1 & 2), and no.1-131-37 (Joint Committee of Council and the Professorial Board: Sub-Committee on T.R. Ashworth Estate), University of Melbourne. There were a number of legal and financial difficulties associated with the execution of Ashworth’s Will that delayed the implementation of the bequest for many years.

8Bourke, ‘Sociology’.

9Bourke, ibid, 26-30.


18 Groenewegen and McFarlane, 136  


21 Helen Bourke, ‘Sociology,’ 33.  


29 The key figure in Political Science in this regard was Alan Davies. Also see the description of the new Department of Criminology established at Melbourne in 1951 in *The Australian Law Journal* 26 (22 May 1952): 12-13; and the research entries under History in *The University of Melbourne, Annual Reports 1939-1946*, 106, 126.  

30 T.R. Ashworth, *The Communist Danger: A Phase of the Ultimate Social Problem* (Melbourne: Wellman, nd [1926]), 44. This work originated in a series of newspaper articles in the *Melbourne Age* (September-December 1925) commenting on the 1925 Waterside Dispute. In the mid 1920s, Frederic Eggleston expressed a similar opinion, advocating the establishment of departments of sociology and economics at the University of Melbourne. See Warren Osmond, *Frederic Eggleston* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1985), 119-120.
31 Joanna Monie, *Victorian History and Politics*, vol.1 (Melbourne: Borchardt Library, La Trobe University, 1982), 148.

32 Ashworth was born on 5 December 1864 in Richmond, Victoria, the son of Dr. Thomas Ramsden Ashworth one of the first medical graduates (1869) at the University of Melbourne. After spending a number of years at sea, Ashworth returned to Melbourne at age 17 where worked as a carpenter and builder, while studying architecture. In the 1890s he set up a real estate business developing land in the Middle Park-St.Kilda area. During this period, he served on the South Melbourne council and was a Melbourne Metropolitan Board of Works commissioner. An ardent critic of David Syme, he was President of the Victorian division of the Free Trade and Liberal Association in the years leading up to Federation. He ran for colonial and federal parliaments several times before finally winning the Legislative Assembly seat of Ovens in the 1901 Victorian state election. Ashworth’s parliamentary aspirations ended when he failed to win a seat in the 1904 Victorian election. From 1910 to 1917 he was chairman of the Canister Makers section of the Chamber of Manufacturers (Victorian division), a position arising from his canister business in South Melbourne. After practicing as an architect for many years he was elected a fellow of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects in 1916-17. In the early 1920s he designed the extant Church Street bridge at South Yarra. From 1920 to 1934 he was President of the Victorian Employers Association. He was the Victorian delegate to the first formally constituted meeting of the Central Council of the Economic Society of Australia and New Zealand in 1925, and a member of the Commonwealth Royal Commission on the Constitution convened between 1927 and 1929. Ashworth died on 23 August 1935. On Ashworth’s life and varied activities see *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol.7, 1881-1939, ed. Bede Nairn and Geoffrey Searle (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1979), 115-116; Phyllis G. Ashworth (niece), ‘Biographical Notes’ on Ashworth, n.d., unpublished, copy in file no. 10-2-10, UM/CR; Geoff Browne, *Biographical Register of the Victorian Parliament 1900-1984* (Melbourne: Victorian Government Printing Office, 1985), 5; Susan Priestley, *South Melbourne: A History* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1995); *Royal Victorian Institute of Architects, Proceedings*, vols.xiii-xxxiii, (1916-1935); E.H. Sugden and F.W. Eggleston, *George Swinburne* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1932), 89; Shirley Thomas, *Challenge: The First 100 Years of the VEF* (Hawthorn VIC: Victorian Employers Federation, 1985), 99-123.


34 Closer cooperation between employers and working people, between the VEF and Trades Hall seems to have been a constant theme pursued by Ashworth in his years as President at the VEF. See Thomas, *Challenge*, 102.

35 Ashworth’s advocacy of harsh wage cuts, rationing and the cutting of Government service pensions at the height of the Depression forced a ‘Nationalist’ correspondent to the *Argus* to write that Ashworth’s ‘Ultra conservatism has in the past done more to build up the Labour party than any direct advocacy of its case. Surely the [Employers] federation should check the misguided efforts of its president’. *The Argus* (Melbourne), Tuesday, 22 September 1931, 9.

36 There are certain similarities of outlook between Ashworth and his contemporary, and fellow Victorian, Herbert Brookes: a strong faith in science; a deep concern with ‘social questions;’ a disdain for the ‘leisured class;’ a respect for ‘honest’ labour; and a vision of a socially responsible productive business practice that would temper the evils of capitalism. In the 1890s Brookes found a home for these views in his attachment to the social gospel of Charles Strong and his Australian Church. While Ashworth cites with approval the work of W. L. Mackenzie King, a ‘Christian sociologist,’ his writings attest to a more ‘scientific’ sociology. See Peter Cochrane, ‘“How Are the Egyptians Behaving?”: Herbert Brookes, British-Australian,’ *Australian Historical Studies* 30, no.113 (October 1999): 303-318; C.R. Badger, *The Reverend Charles Strong and the Australian Church* (Melbourne: Abacada Press, 1971), 114. On Mackenzie King see Ramsay Cook, *The Regenerators: Social Criticism in Late Victorian English Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 207-213. On the Australian responses to turn of the century class conflict see John Rickard, *Class and Politics* (Canberra: ANU Press, 1976), 167-201.


Ashworth, ibid., 42-43.

Ashworth, ibid., 1-25.

Ashworth, ibid., 44.


A.P. Elkin, ‘The Need for Sociological Research in Australia,’ *Social Horizons* (July 1943): 5-15. Elkin was one of the founders of The Australian Institute of Sociology in 1942. The Institute gathered together academics and community figures with the aim of training sociologists, advancing research and promoting the understanding of sociological research as ‘scientific’—contra its detractors (Elkin, ibid., 13). The Institute’s life was brief and its only tangible output was the publication of the journal *Social Horizons* between 1943-1945. See Jerzy Zubczycki, ‘The teaching of sociology,’ 6.


Elkin, ibid., 10,12.


This is the general conclusion of Eggleston, *State Socialism*; Hancock, *Australia*; and Shann, *An Economic History*.


60 J.B. Brigden et al., The Australian Tariff (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1929).


62 Rowse, Australian Liberalism, 103-104; Capling and Galligan, 89-95.


64 See D.B. Copland, Australia in the World Crisis 1929-1933 (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1934). Compare Schedvin, 252-3, 374-5.


67 See especially Eggleston’s sustained critique of ‘political sectionalism’ and its sociological ramifications in Eggleston, State Socialism.

68 Copland, Inflation and Expansion, 11. Copland here also claimed that Eggleston exerted ‘a healthy influence on economists who thought…[economics] was enough’.

69 Osmond, 264-277.

70 Greg Whitwell, The Treasury Line, 79.

71 Whitwell, ibid.

72 Whitwell, ibid., passim.
