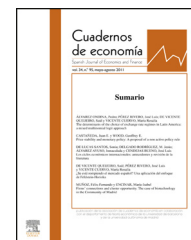




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ARTICLE

A New View on Robbins's Definition of Economics: the Notions of *Real* and *Formal* Scarcity

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Abstract This article analyses Robbins's famous definition of economics. It shows that this definition was introduced by the author to solve long-standing problems regarding the subject-matter of the science that were associated with some of the existing definitions. The article also draws attention to some confusion that surrounds the way Robbins understood the (new) subject-matter and which also slid into his definition. To escape the ambiguities caused by Robbins's confusion, we propose a more precise way of understanding the subject-matter of economics. The insight gained reveals that Robbins's definition really contains two sub-definitions: one that describes the subject-matter (*real scarcity*) and another that describes the method of the science (*formal scarcity*). This finding sheds light on some analyses and interpretations of this definition in the literature.

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Una nueva interpretación de la definición de Economía de Robbins: los conceptos de escasez real y formal

Resumen Este artículo estudia la conocida definición de Economía propuesta por Robbins. En él se muestra, primero, que este autor propone su definición en un intento de resolver algunos problemas inveterados relacionados con la noción de esta ciencia. Seguidamente, el artículo destaca algunas confusiones contenidas en los textos en que Robbins alude a dicha definición. Para resolverlas, se propone aquí un modo más preciso de entender el tema de la ciencia económica. El estudio realizado revela que la definición de Robbins contiene, en verdad, dos sub-definiciones: una que describe el tema de la ciencia (o escasez real) y otra que

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describe el método de la ciencia (o escasez formal). Este hallazgo permite entender las distintas interpretaciones (a veces contradictorias) de esta definición que existen en la literatura.

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1. Introduction

Robbins's *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science* (denoted hereafter as *Essay*)² is probably the best known and most widely quoted work on the methodology and philosophy of economics of the last century, as Corry (1987: 207) and Backhouse (1985: 268) point out. As the latter author explained, one of the major themes of this book was the subject matter of the science. When Robbins dealt with this issue, he provided a definition of economics which, according to Backhouse and Medema (2008; 2009b: 225), is still the most currently accepted definition of the science – perhaps due in part to the lack of interest that economists have recently exhibited regarding the task of defining their science (Backhouse and Medema, 2008).

Nevertheless, the fact of its general acceptance should not mask the fact that there are certain aspects of Robbins's definition that still need to be clarified, despite a vast literature on the subject. To the possible surprise of the reader, the first and most important question to be elucidated is what this definition refers to. Although it is obvious – and therefore, undisputed – that Robbins was defining economic science, it is still an open question which aspect of the science he was defining. This difficulty has passed unnoticed up to the present, possibly because the content of the definition seems to be evident from the way in which Robbins informally referred to it, i.e. "the definition of the subject matter of the science".³ This is definitely the way some contemporary authors have interpreted Robbins's definition, e.g. Lawson (1997: 95–97; 2003: 143, 151). However, the literature on Robbins definition also more or less implicitly advances the view that it describes the method of the science.⁴ The question of which of the two former inter-

pretations is correct cannot be dismissed by simply stating that the latter authors misread Robbins, because this second reading of his definition can be derived from the message and the ideas explained in the *Essay*.⁵

The popularity and the approval gained by Robbins's definition are also indirect signs that it has played and continues to play a key role in shaping the modern conception of economics. Stronger evidence of this influence can be found in the writings of authors who explicitly defend the view that this definition dismissed the conception of the science implied by the old designation of "political economy" and instituted a new one under the label of "economics".⁶ The controversies this definition immediately raised – which have been documented by Backhouse and Medema (2009a) – bear testimony to the change in the conception of the science it induced. In particular, some of the negative reactions to Robbins's definition are evidence of the influence it exerted on the subsequent conception of the science: Backhouse and Medema (2009b: 225) highlighted that this definition was simultaneously accused of being too broad (because it failed to divide economics from other social sciences) and too narrow (because it favoured theory against empirical analysis). Several decades later, it was Kirzner (1976: 119–124) who, distanced from these passionate debates, pointed out in a more disinterested and objective way the two main implications of Robbins's definition: its "breadth", i.e. the widening of the scope

that economic theorists were then doing at the time when they did economic science (...) the 'it' being defined was not inclusive of all that economists did in their role as economists (...) [but] included only the economic science portion of what economists did" (438). A few pages later, Colander concluded: "(...) in his definition of economics Robbins focused on constrained optimization" (441).

⁵ In some passages of the *Essay* Robbins's assertions seem to imply that the main subject of the *Essay* is the method of economics. To quote only three: "[this essay] seeks to arrive at precise notions concerning the subject matter of Economic Science and the nature of the generalisations of which Economic Science consist" (xiv); "(...) in the main, my object has been to state, as simply as I could, propositions which are the common property of most modern economists" (xv); "It is the object of this essay to arrive at conclusions which are based on the inspection of economic science as it is" (72).

⁶ See Groenewegen (1991: 556) or Milonakis and Fine (2009, especially pages 224–228). This view is more explicitly stated by Harcourt (1979: 243) who wrote "the great leap forward occurred, evidently, when the discipline ceased to be political economy and became economics (...) which was favoured by Wicksteed and Robbins". A similar idea is expressed in Hodgson (2001: 23, 33, 183, 207ss, 233) or Berstein (2003: 157).

² The specific version of the *Essay* I have used is Robbins (1962). In the following, references to this work will be made by writing the abbreviation of this work followed by the number of the page in brackets.

³ Robbins described his definitions in these terms at least in *Essay* (24), Robbins (1938: 344), Robbins (1953: 105), Robbins (1971: 147) as well as Robbins (1981: 1).

⁴ For example, Parsons (1934) critique of Robbins's *Essay* completely revolves around methodological issues, to the extent that Milonakis and Fine (2009: 218) suggested that Parsons "(...) perceived Robbins as defining a *method* and *not a subject matter*" (italics in the original). In a similar line, Backhouse (1985: 268) explained that, in his *Essay*, Robbins was simply "(...) making precise the nature of the already firmly established generalizations of which economics consisted". Finally, Colander (2009) explicitly argued that Robbins's definition "(...) reflected what he believed

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