The Transition to Radical Political Economics

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Abstract and Keywords

Simon Rottenberg, who was hired from Duke University to replace Kindahl as Department head, resigned from the head position during the spring of his first year in office. Tensions were raw and the Department was in turmoil. The provost then appointed the Dean of the Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences, a political scientist, as acting head of the Economics Department. And it was this dean who added six radical political economists to the Department's faculty in addition to several other appointments. Subsequently the Dean relinquished his acting head position and Norman Aitken became Department chair.

Keywords: radical package, Samuel Bowles, Michael Best, Simon Rottenberg, political economics, Norman Aitken
Kindahl's resignation caught Dean Alfange by surprise. It came (barely) early enough for him to appoint a search committee with the charge of recommending a replacement (as either head or chair) in sufficient time to make an offer by May 1, 1971. The committee was made up of seven persons, four of whom were members of the Economics Department faculty. Now, in the wake of Kindahl's resignation, the Department was badly split between those who had favored Kindahl and his policies and those who had not. Because it was, therefore, clear that no internal faculty member would have the support of most of the Department, the committee had to look outside for a head or chair. Names of potential candidates were solicited from various sources, five were brought to the campus for interviews, one withdrew, and the committee was left to choose among four candidates. Of the four, two monetary economists had the most support: John M. Culbertson of the University of Wisconsin and Daniel Orr of the University of California at San Diego. However, the existing divisions in the Department were represented on the committee and, although the committee as a whole voted five-to-two in favor of Culbertson, the four economics faculty members were evenly divided two-to-two between Culbertson and Orr. Those supporting Orr had also sided with Kindahl in earlier disputes. The majority view, of course, prevailed and the search (p.106) committee report of April 15 recommended Culbertson. However, observing the split among the economics faculty members on the committee, Alfange asked the full Department to vote on the four candidates. The result was fifteen for Culbertson and eight for Orr, with four abstentions.

In the face of this dissension, Alfange was unwilling to accept the April 15 report of the search committee. Instead, he asked the committee to look further and to try to come up with additional possibilities. Several candidates who were previously not considered were found, and two of them visited the campus. The second report of the search committee recommended Simon Rottenberg of Duke University to be the new head or chair. In this case, the vote on the committee was five-to-one in favor, one of the committee members having resigned in the interim. The subsequent Department vote recorded nine dissenting ballots, many of which had probably come from faculty members who were allied with Kindahl and who had previously backed Orr. Tensions in the Department
were running high. In a letter, dated May 17, to those who had
dissent from the Committee's recommendation of Rottenberg, Alfange refers to meetings with “. . . members of the Department that were intended as means of alleviating tensions, but which proved to have the opposite effect . . . .” At this point, however, Alfange accepted the committee's report and Rottenberg was appointed head of the Economics Department. Alfange believed that Rottenberg would be an effective head in spite of the tensions, and that he was the best candidate available, given the Department's needs. Alfange also hoped that Rottenberg would be able to bring a period of calm and healing to the Department.

Simon Rottenberg was a distinguished economist with publications in a variety of areas. He was considered to be a member of the Chicago School of Economics. Apart from its

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were invited to the campus for further consideration. I was one of the (p.108) latter. At the time, I was an untenured, full professor at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada and was doing and had a reputation for work in mathematical microeconomics. The fact that I was given serious consideration suggests that Rottenberg had nothing against the hiring of mathematical economists and, probably, had gained acceptance and support among those who were allied with Kindahl and had initially voted against him. But no offers emerged from this recruitment effort because Rottenberg resigned from the head position before any could be made.

There were two events that played a major role in Rottenberg’s resignation. First, as indicated in Chapter 4, Samuel S. Bowles, who was then a well-known associate professor at Harvard and who, after doing work that was highly regarded by the economics establishment, became a leader in the radical political economy movement (his approach to economics was described in Chapter 1), was going to be considered for tenure at Harvard during the 1972–1973 academic year. He thought tenure would be denied, was certain that there would be a bitter battle in the Harvard Economics Department over it, and wanted to be away from Harvard during that time to avoid the unpleasantness he thought likely to arise from interacting with those who were engaged in that battle. Early in the fall of 1971, Bowles contacted Best on the University of Massachusetts’s Amherst campus economics faculty and told him that he (Bowles) would be receptive to a visiting appointment at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst for the following academic year. Best informed the Economics Department at a Department meeting and the matter was referred to the Department’s personnel committee. The latter rejected the idea. It is likely that Rottenberg was involved in the personnel committee’s discussion and concurred with its decision. There the matter might have rested were it not for a chance encounter between Best and Alfange somewhere on the (p.109) Amherst campus. Best told Alfange what had happened. The latter was elated at the possibility that an economist as visible as Bowles might be induced to spend a year at the University and approached Rottenberg with the proposal that Bowles be given a visiting position in the Economics Department for 1972–1973. This time, Rottenberg consulted with colleagues outside of the Department for whom he had considerable
respect (including an editor of the *American Economic Review*) and with the Department's personnel committee. The answer that came back to Alfange was negative. Rottenberg believed that Bowles “... was very bright and charming and technically competent, that his earlier work had been promising, but that he no longer did serious scientific work.”

Alfange, who had consulted with a different group of prominent economists (including three future Nobel laureates) and had received glowing reports of Bowles's work and promise from them, thought that Rottenberg's refusal was ideologically and politically motivated and not based on academic standards. In spite of this, Alfange was unwilling to force Bowles’s appointment on an objecting Department. At that point, Harvey L. Friedman, who was then the director of the University’s Labor Relations and Research Center and who had heard of what was going on from Best, offered to give Bowles a visiting faculty appointment in his Center. This was not unappealing to Bowles due, in part, to the close intellectual ties between radical economists and the labor movement. Consequently, Bowles spent the 1972–1973 academic year as a visiting professor in the Labor Center. (p. 110)

It is not hard to understand where Rottenberg was coming from. His adherence to the Chicago School has already been noted. Given that as the basis for his approach to economics, it is natural to expect that Rottenberg would believe that Bowles's then-current work did not fall in the realm of what he (Rottenberg) considered to be (scientific) economics.
and did not, therefore, meet current professional standards. Alfange, on the other hand, had the support of the administration and genuinely believed that the radical challenge to the dominant establishment orthodoxy was intellectually viable and significant, and ought to be represented in the Department. This divergence of views also mirrored, although not as unequally, the lopsided split in the economics profession at the time previously described in Chapter 4. The large majority of economists and the economics establishment would have shared Rottenberg’s view, whereas the small minority would have backed Alfange and the administration. The two men were unable to bridge this gap, distrust grew between them, and each was seen by the other as lacking credibility with respect to administrative judgments.

The unfortunate development of distrust was important in the second event that led directly to Rottenberg’s resignation. Working now in the field of radical political economy, Best, who had been given only a one-year reappointment the previous year, was again up for reappointment. Again he received strong support from the students. This time the Department’s personnel committee unanimously advised against reappointment. Rottenberg’s own evaluation of the case then led to a recommendation from him of nonrenewal (perhaps for reasons similar to those on the basis of which he had rejected a visiting position for Bowles). However, the personnel committee of the Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences (which makes advisory recommendations to the dean on all personnel actions relating to faculty in the College) voted to override Rottenberg’s recommendation and favor renewal. Rottenberg then asked for, and was granted an opportunity to meet with the College personnel committee to present his case. During that meeting, he persuaded enough committee members to change their minds so that the committee vote now concurred with his recommendation. However, a committee member who was unable to attend that meeting demurred, demanding a third vote—this time of the full committee. Meanwhile, student activity in support of Best heated up and culminated in a meeting between two protesting students and Randolph Bromery who was then chancellor of the Amherst campus. In the end, with Alfange
and the administration distrusting Rottenberg and believing that the Department's decision was (p.112)

ideologically and politically motivated and unfair, it was reversed. Best was reappointed for a period of three years, long enough to take him through his tenure-decision year. Rottenberg immediately resigned the head position, remaining in the Department as a faculty member. The split and high tensions in the Department that Alfange had hoped Rottenberg would heal were, respectively, as wide and acute as ever. Needing a head or chair for the Economics Department, and having no possibilities acceptable to a reasonable percentage of economics faculty in sight, Provost Gluckstern appointed Alfange as acting head of the Department in July. The latter responsibilities were in addition to his obligations as dean of the Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences. Alfange, in turn, appointed Norman D. Aitken, a tenured assistant professor in the Department who had just spent the previous academic year on leave in England doing research at the London School of Economics Library, as (p.113) administrative officer to handle the day-to-day operations of departmental administration.6

Alfange (before he was appointed acting head of the Economics Department) and Bowles had a number of discussions that spring, mostly relating to the Economics Department's refusal to offer Bowles a visiting appointment. Somewhere along the way, Bowles suggested to Alfange that,
if, as anticipated, he were denied tenure at Harvard, he might be interested in a permanent move to the Economics Department at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst provided that some sort of package of radical economists could be put together.\(^7\) Informal discussions continued during the summer. The two even met on a chicken farm on Mt. Desert island in Maine where Alfange happened to be while Bowles was living for a month in return for working in a local shipyard doing maintenance and repair on the chicken-farm owner’s boat.\(^8\)

September came and Bowles took up his visiting position at the Labor Center. University policy required every department to vote at the start of the semester on the constitution of a personnel committee to deal with hiring and other personnel matters during the coming academic year. At this point, and with no abatement of tensions over the summer, the Economics Department voted to have no personnel committee. The Department was so deeply and evenly divided that each side probably feared that the other would capture the committee and make decisions hostile to its interests. However, the effect of that vote was to give Alfange a totally free hand in all personnel matters. And the opportunity for action was considerable. The University was still growing by 100 new faculty positions each year, many of which were allocated to the Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences to be distributed by Alfange, the dean. With this as background, Alfange informed Department members of the procedures he would follow as acting Department head on hiring and other personnel actions in a memo dated September 26, 1972.

As expected, Bowles was denied tenure by the Economics Department at Harvard that fall. Alfange immediately raised the possibility with him of a tenured appointment in the Economics Department of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. But Bowles was reluctant because he had witnessed other radical economists, who had taken appointments as token representatives of their approach in other departments, become isolated and marginalized. If Bowles were to accept, it would have to be, as he had suggested to Alfange earlier, as part of a package of perhaps five radical economists. Due to substantial allocations of faculty positions in other departments in Social and Behavioral Sciences during preceding years, none had significant need for new appointments. Alfange was thus free to assign to Economics...
enough of the new positions he had been given for the 1972–1973 academic year to make such a package possible.\textsuperscript{9} Thus, he agreed to recommend the idea of a package provided that Bowles could identify four additional radical scholars of recognized stature who would be willing to move to Amherst.

Bowles set out to do just that. Two persons at Harvard, Richard C. Edwards (a recent graduate student there) and Herbert Gintis (p.115)

(a graduate student at Harvard and then an assistant professor there\textsuperscript{10}) were obvious choices. Bowles had worked closely with both of them and had very high opinions of each. Bowles also called Steven A. Resnick (an associate professor) and Richard D. Wolff (an assistant professor), both at City College in New York, whom he knew less well but respected enormously. Although Wolff had been a graduate student at Yale while Resnick was an assistant professor there, the two did not meet until Resnick moved to City College in 1971. Thereafter they came to know each other well because (p.116)
they regularly commuted by train together between their homes in the New Haven area and New York City. All four were interested in Bowles’s proposal. That winter they arranged to meet as a group with Bowles at his home in Ashfield, Massachusetts to discuss the possibility of jointly moving to Amherst. The meeting was a great success. In addition to becoming better acquainted with each other and with the differences in their approaches to radical political economy (precursors of what was described in Chapter 1), there were discussions about the kinds of research that would be undertaken in Amherst, the nature of courses that would be taught, and the structure of a graduate program in radical political economy. The idea of a radical group of this size in the Amherst-campus Economics Department was attractive for a number of reasons: (1) The University of Massachusetts was a state school and was, therefore, more identified with the middle- and lower-income classes—populations with which the radical economists wanted to interact. (2) The radicals would no longer be lone (p.117)
and isolated aliens in a traditional department. They would have positions of power and could read and explore Marxism and other parts of radical political economy as they wished.

(3) It would be much easier to teach Marxism under such conditions than at more traditional departments where courses in that subject often met with considerable faculty resistance and, when they were offered, sometimes had to be taught in excess of standard teaching loads. And (4) there would be a unique, heterogeneous graduate program in radical political economy (heterogeneous due to the differences in approaches among them) that would be unlikely to exist in the same form elsewhere. All agreed that they would commit to joining the University of Massachusetts’ Economics Department only as a group—all or nothing—and, should the offers be forthcoming, remain there for at least five years. This was the radical package that was presented to Alfange. Bowles and Resnick were to be tenured at full rank. Gintis and Wolff would have tenure at (p.118) the associate rank. Edwards, essentially a new PhD at the time, would be an assistant professor on a tenure track with a three-year appointment.

Subsequently, Edwards, Gintis, Resnick, and Wolff visited the Amherst campus. (Bowles was already on campus at the University's Labor Center.) Given what had recently transpired in the Department, it is not surprising that there was opposition to the hiring of the radical package. The same reasons for denying Bowles a visiting appointment and Best reappointment, resentment that Alfange, a political scientist, was following through without regard to what they considered to be the standards of the economics profession, and the feeling that Alfange had usurped the rights and powers of the
Department, fueled the opposition. However, in a memo to the Department dated February 26, 1973, Alfange argued that he had acted appropriately. The Department had ceded all power over personnel matters to him. Although he had requested faculty input along the way, he did not receive it from all quarters. He regarded the opposition as politically motivated. Moreover, Alfange was, by these appointments, hoping for a large “. . . increase in undergraduate interest in economics . . .”—an interest that, at that time, was not commensurate with the size of the economics faculty. He thought of these appointments as an unusual opportunity to give the Department considerable strength, visibility, and diversity. And he (p.119) was supported in this venture by several well-known and prominent economists outside the Department, in addition to those originally supporting the Bowles visiting appointment as described earlier.

Remember that this was a time of activism on campus stemming from the anti-Vietnam-War movement. As described earlier, the students had already protested on each occasion the two separate attempts in two successive years by the Economics Department to terminate the radical Best. The attitude of the University administration during this period (as suggested in Chapter 3) was seen as being sensitive to student concerns and willing to take them into account whenever it was possible and reasonable to do so. Because the radicals in the package were all known as excellent and even, in some cases, inspiring teachers and scholars, because the administration wanted, as previously indicated, to pique student curiosity in economics, because student interests during that period often tended to be oriented toward issues on the left, and because, apart from the classroom, the radicals were sympathetic to, if not at that time, fully engaged in the antiwar movement, the hiring of the radical package could, therefore, be seen as providing the additional benefit that it offered evidence of the administration’s willingness to heed student views.

Provost Gluckstern and Chancellor Tippo had some reservations about the ramifications of hiring so many radical economists. However, their reluctance faded in the face of the outside support referred to earlier, the implied enhancement of the academic standing of the Economics Department, and the all-or-nothing ultimatum presented by the radicals. Moreover, they had concluded (as previously mentioned) that
the refusal of the Department to give Bowles a visiting appointment, despite the strong endorsements he had received from some of the nation's most outstanding economists, was based on ideological and political, rather than academic, (p.120) criteria. But whereas offers of appointment are bestowed by the provost, only the University's trustees can grant tenure. And without tenure for all four radicals appointed at the associate and full professor ranks, the deal that would bring the radical package to the University would collapse. Once again, it was additional support from the same group of highly visible economists outside of the University that made the difference, and tenure was awarded to all four. Thus, in Alfange's words,13

The radical package had become a reality—somewhat to the surprise of at least some members of the package who expected that the proposal to hire them would be derailed by conservatives. The latter, they thought, would make a public issue of the fact that a state university was planning to appoint a large group of economists who took the ideas of Karl Marx seriously, and would put pressure on the legislature and the Trustees to prevent that from occurring. That could easily have been done. Why it was not done, I do not know. I only know that throughout the entire process, I received no warnings of public disapproval. I did get a call from a reporter for the Boston Globe who had heard of the proposal to hire Marxist economists. I told him that it would be helpful if the issue were not prominently publicized. He said he recognized that. All that subsequently appeared in the Globe was a brief innocuous and noninflammatory item on an inside page.

There is some irony here in that Kindahl was defeated in his attempt to build a significant Economics Department (Chapter 5) by forces favoring intradepartmental democracy whereas Alfange, who also (p.121) believed in that democracy, succeeded by acting as a nondemocratic head.

Alfange's motivations in hiring the radical package were set out in a memorandum to the members of the Economics Department dated February 26, 1973. He apparently was aware that the radicals had many detractors among prestigious members of the economics profession. However, as previously noted, he had also been told by other prestigious members how highly qualified as economists the radicals
were. Alfange regarded their appointment as “... an unparalleled opportunity ... to make a major step forward in terms of the professional excellence of the department.” He also thought that “... the department needed to be broadened ... in order to reflect more widely the professional views that ... [were] held in the discipline at [the time].”

Moreover, in light of the specific fields within economics that the radicals represented (e.g., economic development, economic history, industrial organization, and the economics of education), the appointment of the radical package would be “... a means of redressing the imbalance of the past” as identified in the visiting review committee report of January, 1971.

Alfange also made a number of other offers of positions in the Economics Department to individuals he saw as nonradical economists who were intended to counterbalance the radical appointments. Several of those were accepted. In addition to three assistant professors, a visiting full-professor appointment for fall of 1973 was agreed to by Leonard A. Rapping. At that time, Rapping was a professor of economics at Carnegie-Mellon University. He was known, in part, for his work with Robert E. Lucas, Jr. (a future Nobel laureate) on the macroeconomics of employment, wages, and inflation. Although nothing ever came of it, Kindahl and the Department Personnel Committee had considered Rapping for an appointment to the Department in the fall of 1970. But Rapping had been (p.122) radicalized by the Vietnam War and his approach to economics had shifted accordingly. This fact was probably not known to either Kindahl or Alfange.14

At the same time, many of those who had sided with Kindahl were looking for positions at other universities. Smith had already left, although his official resignation would come later. Sonnenschein had accepted an appointment elsewhere. The latter had decided to leave before the hiring of the radical package became a significant possibility because, like Smith, he thought that the Department had lost the support of the administration in its efforts to build a significant faculty. The exodus continued for several more years.

Shortly after he became acting head, Alfange appointed a search committee to find a permanent head or chair of the Department. On January 25, the Department met to consider the committee’s recommendation to appoint Aitken, the
Department’s administrative officer, to that position. The vote was eleven in favor, eight against, and three abstentions. The committee did not think that this support was strong enough to bring its recommendation of Aitken to the dean. So the committee continued its work, and, on April 11, 1973, it voted to recommend Rapping, who was already on board as a visiting professor for the following fall, as Department head. Along with the head position, Rapping would be given a full professorship with tenure. At a Department meeting on April 19, a vote was taken in which thirteen supported the recommendation, one voted against it, and there were four abstentions. Subsequently two faculty members who did not attend the meeting voiced their support. An undated second report by the head of the search committee to the Department, in which Rapping is recommended, suggests (p.123) that the committee thought of Rapping as a nonradical economist who could bridge the gap between the radicals and the remainder of the Department. Apparently they had not realized that Rapping had recently become a radical himself. However, in a memorandum dated May 24, 1973, Rapping indicated that, after first accepting it, he was declining the offer as Department head because, upon further reflection, he felt that he was not up to the job. Rapping, moreover, asked if he could still accept the tenured, full-professor part of the offer. That request was granted and Rapping moved to Amherst in time for the start of the fall 1973 semester.

At this point the search committee went back to its earlier recommendation of Aitken, who was then installed as Department chair (not head). Aitken faced a daunting task. Animosity and distrust abounded in the Department. There was also the fear that, upon their arrival, the radicals would impose their own brand of orthodoxy (as, some believed, the neoclassical economists had when Kindahl was head), isolating and marginalizing certain nonradical faculty. (p.124)

Notes:

(2.) Rottenberg’s feelings in this regard were spelled out some years later in a letter to James E. Cathey dated January 23, 1979.

(4.) The views of Rottenberg and Alfange on this, the (second) reappointment of Best, and the hiring of the radical package (both of which will be considered momentarily) are clearly expressed in exchanges between them that appeared in the May 1974 (pp. 3, 5) and September 1974 (pp. 3–5) issues of Measure, a publication of the University Centers for Rational Alternatives.

(5.) It is ironic that the Economics Department at the University of Chicago had shown interest in adding Bowles to its faculty on two previous occasions—first as a new PhD and second when he was fired from Harvard for not signing the loyalty oath required by Massachusetts law (recall Chapter 4).

(6.) Aitken joined the Department as an instructor in the fall of 1964 and became an assistant professor upon completion of his PhD degree at the University of Tennessee in 1967. On the basis of one paper published in the American Economic Review and one of publishable quality later appearing in the same journal, Kindahl recommended and Aitken was granted tenure in 1970, although he remained at the assistant professor level. Aitken was not promoted to the associate level until 1976, one year after he had left the chair position in the Economics Department to which he was appointed (as indicated later) in 1973.

(7.) The phrase radical package was coined by Kindahl later on.

(8.) As Bowles put it, this was just post the 1960s and one did not have to be too weird to do things like that.

(9.) As it turned out, and as will be noted later, Alfange actually made a total number of eleven offers that year. Not all, but more than just the five in the radical package, were accepted.
(10.) Gintis began graduate school as a student in the Mathematics Department at Harvard University in 1961. But the political turmoil of the 1960s described, in part, in Chapter 3, had a profound affect on him. Around the time of President John F. Kennedy's assassination in November of 1963, Gintis decided that "... mathematics was not sufficiently in tune with the events of ... [the] times," and switched to economics. Although never having taken an economics course, "... a friend who had studied Marx [had] told ... [him that economics] was a good field because ‘economics determines everything else’." (P. Arestis and M. Sawyer, eds., A Biographical Dictionary of Dissenting Economists, 2nd ed. [Cheltenham: Elgar, 2000], p. 226.)

(11.) Tenure for Wolff raised a special problem. According to University of Massachusetts standards at the time, he had not been out of graduate school long enough for tenure to be granted. However, since he had just been approved for tenure at City College and, therefore, would have been in a tenured position had he remained there, Wolff indicated that he was unwilling to move to Amherst without it. The University's tenure rules did not appear to cover such a situation but, in any case, Wolff's tenure was approved.

(12.) Recall that one of the recommendations of the visiting review committee's report of 1971 was that new appointments to the Department should add diversity. In addition to their radical perspectives, individuals in the radical package represented the fields of economic development, economic history, industrial organization, and the economics of education.

(13.) As recorded in a document attached to a letter dated August 4, 2003, and edited by me. Reproduced with permission.

(14.) One of the assistant professors in this group of new recruits was also listed as a radical in the Department's classification scheme developed later on.