

Bob Sutcliffe – In Memoriam

Bob Sutcliffe, who died at age 80 on December 23, was an influential socialist economist over several decades. The publication that probably gained him the most attention was *British Capitalism, Workers and the Profits Squeeze* (1972), which Bob co-authored with Andrew Glyn, his close friend and frequent collaborator. The book became a classic among the growing movement of socialist economists in that decade, and, indeed, moved beyond radical circles to have a major impact on public debate.

Yet, Bob's life had a breadth and charm that went far beyond his professional accomplishments.

At age 15, Bob took off with a friend to tour the Continent. When they arrived at Chartres, Bob sat himself down, pulled out paper and pencil, and sketched the cathedral; he continued sketching, just for his own pleasure, throughout the years. Later in life, he wrote imaginative, funny limericks for his friends' children. And when in the 1990s he had a melanoma tumour removed from below his cheek, a surgery that temporarily deadened the nerve that controlled one side of his mouth, his greatest concern seemed to be that he might not be able to continue playing the clarinet.

And opera—which he certainly loved more than economics. In the mid-1980s while working in Nicaragua, Bob hosted a weekly radio show devoted to opera. Arriving at the radio studio to begin his show, Bob would be greeted by the aged office manager's announcement, "Es el profesor Británico de las operas!" The first opera he presented was *Madame Butterfly* because he saw its anti-imperialist message as especially appropriate for Nicaragua at that time. Bob also presented sections of his beloved *Ring Cycle*, not only commenting on its musical profundities but also drawing revolutionary political inferences from the plot.

Yet, Bob was an economist, a socialist and, as he once described himself, at least Marx-ish. Beyond his critique of the British economy, Bob concentrated most of his work on the economies of low-income countries, the impact of imperialism on those countries, and the great economic inequalities in and between countries. This concern was sparked by the time he spent in Zambia (then Northern Rhodesia), first while still an undergraduate at Worcester College Oxford and then after graduation.

After Oxford and Zambia, Bob spent two years in graduate school at Harvard University before returning to become a fellow at Jesus College Oxford. However, wanting to engage more directly with problems of economic development and, quite likely, having become dissatisfied with his privileged position, Bob resigned from Oxford at the beginning of the 1970s and worked on various international assignments for UN sub-agencies, including a stint in Cuba with the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization.

But in the mid-1970s, he returned to teaching and writing, taking a position at Kingston University (then Kingston Polytechnic). His publications in this period included, for example, *Hard Times: The World Economy in Turmoil (Arguments for Socialism)* (1983) and *The Profit System: The Economics of Capitalism*, co-authored with Francis Green, (1987).

Beyond academia, he also became engaged in left politics. In the late-1970s and into the early 1980s, Bob was active in the Trotskyist “Workers Socialist League.” When challenged by a friend as to why he would work in a group that had such sectarian politics and with which he had many disagreements, Bob responded with words to the effect that: “It seemed to me that an ‘independent socialist’ was an oxymoron. If I were to take my politics seriously, I had to be part of an organization. This one seemed the least problematic.” Nonetheless, this phase of Bob’s political life was ephemeral.

Not ephemeral was that by the 1980s Bob was fully “out” as gay. Like many people, Bob had not only hidden his sexual orientation but viewed it as a sickness. While at Harvard, he had gone to the university’s health care service, told them of his “sickness,” and asked to for help. He was told, in effect, yes, you’re sick, but we can’t do anything for you. By the 1980s, however, Bob had become proud of being gay—he even integrated it with his politics and economics, writing the articles “Insuring Profits from AIDS: The Economics of an Epidemic” (1986, with Mark McGrath) and “The Economics of AIDS” (2004).

As with Oxford, Bob resigned his secure appointment at Kingston. He taught courses at the University of Massachusetts Amherst over a couple of years, and then was off to teach (and run his opera show) in Nicaragua. After Nicaragua, Bob went to Spain, to the University of the Basque country in Bilbao. What started out there as a temporary position turned into a lasting appointment, with Bob working especially in the university’s Institute for International Cooperation and Development Studies (Hegoa).

Living in the small village of Ajangiz outside of Gernika and teaching and working with Hegoa in Bilbao, Bob turned his attention to a variety of issues connected to global economic inequality, writing on migration, hunger, public health, and measurement of world inequality. Especially valuable was his *100 Ways of Seeing an Unequal World* (1998 and 2nd edition 2002), made up of innovative graphs, accompanied by explanation, showing a multitude of inequalities in the world’s economy—a marvellous book for teachers in the classroom.

And Bob was a fine teacher. A Kingston student, providing answers to a questionnaire for the school’s graduates, responded to the question “Who was your favourite lecturer and why?” with: “Bob Sutcliffe – brilliant, provocative, a great lecturer, fun and a socialist.”

In 1984, writing a reappraisal of his 1971 book *Industry and Underdevelopment*, Bob saw many ways in which the intervening 15 years required modification of his argument. But one basic aspect of his approach had not changed, which he expressed at the end of the 1984 article: “As a caste development economists have been a very privileged stratum... I do not think this disentitles us from having views about the world. But it should disentitle us from recommending that the material suffering of anyone alive today should be regarded as acceptable in the interests of the abstraction of human progress. It should oblige us to contribute to the search for a more humane road to economic development than the rocky path represented by actually existing industrialisation.”

Robert B. Sutcliffe (June 7, 1939 – December 23, 2019) returned to the United Kingdom in 2015, as he became ill. He died of complications from Parkinson's disease. He is survived by his sister Mary Sanders of Melksham and his brother Tim Sutcliffe of Fleet, and was predeceased by his sister Susan Sutcliffe.

Arthur MacEwan
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