Radical Hires in Economics at the University of Massachusetts/Amherst during the Early 1970s

by Donald Katzner

In the spring of 1973 five radical political economists, often referred to as the "radical package," were hired by the University of Massachusetts/Amherst for its Economics Department. The event was extraordinary – not because five persons in the same field were hired simultaneously. (This, of course, is somewhat unusual but, by itself, is not worthy of the term "extraordinary.") At the time, the field of radical political economy focused on economic inequality and imperialism, and the conflicts among societal groups relating to them. And the ideas of Karl Marx were central in analyzing and understanding these and related issues. This was at the height of the Cold War, when Marxian analysis was considered by many Americans to be both subversive and dangerous, and when politicians frequently attacked those who viewed the world from a Marxian perspective. Moreover, practically nothing investigated within the field of radical political economy, nor the methodologies it employed were considered to be relevant to economics by the economics establishment.¹ Clearly, then, the hiring of the radical package by a major public state university was, indeed, extraordinary.

Before summarily tracing the events that led to the hiring of the radical package, I want to address the question of why this event occurred at the University of

Massachusetts/Amherst and not at some other university. In my view, four elements came together to play an important role in producing this result:

1. The University of Massachusetts emerged from Massachusetts State College in 1947. But in relation to the size and quality of its faculty, it was a university in name only. Over the next quarter century, during what has been called the "golden age" for American universities, its faculty almost doubled and improved substantially. Although it was nearing the end of this expansionary phase in 1973, the University still had positions available that it could fill with economists.

2. The rejection of radical political economy by the economics establishment mentioned above made it relatively easy to recruit radical economists. Most radicals, if they had academic appointments, were isolated. Each was often the only radical economist in his or her Department and, due to other responsibilities and pressures, had considerable difficulty in teaching and doing research in the field of radical political economy. Many would have liked a more congenial environment. Moreover, it was the controversial denial of promotion and tenure to Samuel Bowles, one of the leading radical economists at the time, by the Harvard Economics Department that set in motion the process of establishing a substantial radical contingent at the University of Massachusetts.

3. The turmoil caused by civil rights and Vietnam War protesters on the Amherst campus during the two-year period 1972-1973, along with efforts by the university administration to accommodate student demands as much as possible (and thereby minimize the likelihood that the protests would get out of hand) were partly responsible

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for opening the administration to the possibility of hiring radical economists. Other factors contributing to this attitude of the administration were the facts that the students were also demonstrating in support of a radical economics faculty member who was threatened with termination of his appointment, and that the number of economics majors was very low suggesting possible student desires for a greater diversity of subject matter on the left. Thus, as long as academic standards could be maintained, the hiring of the radical economists could have been seen by the administration as a move that would win student approval. And it would certainly bolster the case for going forward to know that the students would be on the administration's side.

4. Finally, the State of Massachusetts left the University, a public institution, alone and did not, in the grand tradition of Massachusetts liberalism, interfere in the hiring and retaining of a sizable number of radical economists. In spite of the fear across the United States of Communism and the Soviet Union noted above, there was never a hint of disapproval or condemnation from the State government. This may be compared to the experience on the College Park campus of the University of Maryland where pressure from the Maryland governor and several state legislators prevented the hiring of Bertell Ollman as Chairman of the Political Science Department in 1978.

In order to understand the happenings that eventuated in the hiring of the radical package, it is necessary to go back as far as the mid 1960's. At that time the Department had no scholarly leadership, it was understaffed, its faculty did little or no research, and there was even some sentiment among its faculty members for dropping its Ph.D. program. Not surprisingly, the administration correctly concluded that Department had no stature whatsoever within the economics profession. The subsequent efforts by the
administration to turn the Department around set into motion a series of events that led

- to the creation of a significant Department with important neoclassical
economists recognized by the economics establishment,

- to passionately fought battles that left enormous tensions within the Department
  (this was before the hiring of the radical package was even considered),

- to the departure of the neoclassical economists who had brought recognition to
  the Department,

- and then to the hiring of the radical package.

All of this took place within the span of approximately five short years. In outlining this
story, I will, of necessity, omit many references and a large amount of detail.

The administrator who initially took the responsibility for building a respectable
Economics Department was the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Moyer
Hunsberger (a chemist). At that time the Department had an Acting Head by the name of
Bruce Morris. By September, 1968, after a two-year recruiting effort, ten new faculty
were added to the Department. The additions included Vernon Smith, a future Nobel
Laureate, and James Kindahl, a statistical economist known for his work on industrial
prices with George Stigler. Kindahl, who had arrived on campus as an associate
professor in September of 1967, had been promoted to full professor and Head of the
Department as of September 1968. Hunsberger and Kindahl had great admiration and
respect for each other and Kindahl was essentially given free reign with Hunsberger's
support to transform the Economics Department into a major scholarly institution.

During his first year as Head, Kindahl made 20 offers to economists at all ranks. But
only 4 at the lowest ranks were accepted.
Hunsberger, however, resigned from the Dean position in March of 1969 and was replaced by Acting Dean Seymour Shapiro (a botanist). Shapiro continued the support for Kindahl and the Economics Department initiated by Hunsberger. But two major changes in University structure and administration that would have considerable impact on the Department were in the works. First, the College of Arts and Sciences had become too large and was going to be split into three parts, and Economics was to be located in what would become the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences. Second, for some time the University faculty had been pressing the administration for more democracy and participation in University decision-making. The proposal under consideration would, in part, give a department the option, subject to Provost approval, of being governed by a Chair instead of a Head. In the case of a Head, the recommending initiative on administrative (including personnel) matters lies with him with advice from the faculty or a designated faculty committee. With a Chair, the recommending initiative is governed by a vote of the faculty or a faculty committee, with advice from the Chair. The democracy proposal was approved by the Trustees in April of 1970 and, in August of that year, they ratified the reorganization of the College of Arts and Sciences.

While this was going on, tensions were building in the Economics Department. Some faculty, especially those without tenure, may have felt threatened by the new emphasis on research and scholarship. Others, as part of the push towards greater democracy, wanted more faculty participation in Departmental decision-making. In any case, the Economics faculty immediately seized on the Trustee approval of the democracy proposal by voting 13-5 in May of 1970, over Kindahl's objection, to reduce significantly Kindahl's power by making him a Chair instead of a Head. But Dean

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3 In the fall of 1969, Kindahl had recommended that one faculty member be denied tenure.
Shapiro and the Provost refused. They asked the Department to wait until an outside Visiting Review Committee could be appointed to evaluate the Department and make recommendations for the future. After that committee had completed its work, the Department could then revisit the issue if it wished. Nevertheless, Kindahl's ability to lead the Department had been seriously weakened.

None of this turmoil diverted Kindahl from his efforts to build up the Economics Department. During the 1969-70 academic year he made 12 offers, 6 of which were accepted. Included in this group of acceptees were several microeconomic theorists with mathematical backgrounds of various strengths. The most impressive among them was Hugo Sonnenschein, a future president of the University of Chicago.

By September 1, 1970, the reorganization of the College of Arts and Sciences was in place and Dean Alfange (a political scientist) had been appointed as Dean of the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences. The promised Visiting Review Committee arrived on campus in the fall of 1970 and completed its report the following January. The Committee believed that the Department had made considerable progress and that Kindahl deserved enormous personal credit for it. They thought that it was now necessary for the Department to diversify and acquire faculty in fields such as macroeconomics that were not adequately represented. Finally, they stated that, due to the turmoil in the Department and the damage it had done to Kindahl's ability to lead, Kindahl should eventually be replaced as Head. However, until a new Head from outside the Department could be found, the administration should continue to back Kindahl fully.

But there was another matter that was to have even greater significance on Kindahl's and the Department's future. During his first year as Head, Kindahl had hired
Michael Best, a new Ph.D., as a nontenured assistant professor. Best joined the Department in the fall of 1969 on a two-year appointment. He was an outstanding teacher and immediately became very popular among the undergraduate students. However, although his doctoral dissertation employed standard analytical techniques, it turned out that Best was a radical economist. And he was up for reappointment during the 1970-71 academic year. The Department Personnel Committee advising Kindahl, now dominated by the newly hired faculty, did not think that Best's work was up to current standards. Kindahl concurred and, perhaps wanting to use Best's position to further his goal of rebuilding the Department, recommended a one-year terminal reappointment which would require Best to leave in June of 1972.

But Alfange, the new Dean (along with some Economics faculty members), thought this to be both unusual and unfair. In his view, new Ph.D's should be given the fullest opportunity over the standard six year period to amass a record worthy of the granting of tenure. He therefore recommended a two-year reappointment without prejudice of either further reappointment or termination. At the same time, Best's popularity as a teacher set off a series of student protests and articles in the student newspaper supporting him and complaining about the University's reappointment policies. Eventually the Provost chose a compromise between Kindahl's and Alfange's positions and approved a one-year reappointment without prejudice of either further reappointment or termination.

However, before that compromise was reached, sometime in late January or February of 1971, both Smith (who had been deeply involved in the rebuilding process) and Kindahl had come to the conclusion that they had lost the support of the
administration that they had enjoyed under Hunsberger and Shapiro in their efforts to create a first-rate Economics Department. As of yet, no statement backing Kindahl as recommended by the Visiting Committee had been forthcoming. It is not clear if Smith and Kindahl knew of Alfange's position on the Best reappointment at the time. But they were aware of the pressure for Best's reappointment coming from the students and some faculty members and, if they had not yet heard from Alfange on the matter, it would likely have been interpreted as a further lack of support. Smith told Kindahl that he intended to resign from the Department as soon as he could decide where to relocate, and Kindahl submitted his own letter of resignation from the Head position on February 25. Sonnenschein would stay one more year before leaving for the same reason. The departure of other Kindahl hires would follow. But Kindahl would remain as a faculty member.

With tensions near the boiling point in the Department, Alfange immediately formed a Search Committee to find an outside replacement for Kindahl. John Culbertson was the Committee's choice. But with only a little more than half of the Department supporting him, Alfange asked the Committee to look further. The Committee's next choice was Simon Rottenberg, a well-known "Chicago-School" economist. Department support for Rottenberg was not much greater than that for Culbertson. But Alfange thought that Rottenberg was the best candidate available and that he could heal the tensions in the Department. Rottenberg was appointed and assumed the duties of Head on September 1, 1971. A recruitment effort was begun that fall and a number of economists were invited to campus. But the effort produced no results because Rottenberg resigned as Head before any offers could be made.
Two events played a major role in Rottenberg's resignation. First, as noted (in part) earlier, Samuel Bowles, a leading radical economist, was going to be up for tenure at Harvard during the 1972-73 academic year and did not want to be present then while his tenure was being considered. Bowles let it be known that he would be receptive to a visiting appointment in the UMass Economics Department for that year. But Rottenberg, the Chicago-School economist, and the Department Personnel Committee (this was, recall, an advisory committee to the Head), which had as its members many of the same faculty who had supported Kindahl, demurred. Alfange, who was enthusiastic about the appointment and who had received support for it from several highly distinguished economists outside the Department, was not willing to force Bowles on Rottenberg, and Bowles wound up with a one-year visiting appointment in the University's Labor Relations and Research Center. But the experience left Alfange and Rottenberg separated by a gulf of distrust. Alfange thought the denial of the appointment to Bowles was politically motivated, while Rottenberg thought he was only upholding established standards in economics and defending them against an onslaught by a political scientist who did not understand them.

This development of distrust was important in the second event that led directly to Rottenberg's resignation. Michael Best, the radical who had been given only a one-year reappointment the previous year, was again up for reappointment. This time the Department Personnel Committee voted unanimously against him and Rottenberg's own evaluation, based on his view of current economics standards, was negative and led to a recommendation of non-renewal. Already distrusting Rottenberg and believing this recommendation to be politically motivated and unfair, it was again reversed at the
Dean's level, and Best was given a three-year reappointment that would take him through his tenure-decision year. Rottenberg immediately resigned his Head position. And the tensions in the Department that Alfange had hoped that Rottenberg would heal were as acute as ever.

Needing a Head or Chair for the Economics Department, and having no possibilities acceptable to a reasonable percentage of the economics faculty in sight, the Provost appointed the Dean, Alfange, as Acting Head in July. Alfange, in turn, appointed Norman Aitken as Administrative Officer to handle the day-to-day operations of departmental administration.

In September, Bowles took up his visiting position in 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 effect was to give Alfange a free hand in all personnel matters relating to the Department.

Bowles was denied tenure by the Harvard Economics Department that fall and Alfange immediately raised the possibility of a tenured appointment in Economics at UMass. But Bowles said that if he were to accept, it would have to be as part of a package of perhaps five radical economists. Alfange agreed to recommend the idea of a package provided that Bowles could find four additional scholars of recognized stature who would be willing to move to Amherst. The four that Bowles came up with were Richard Edwards (a recent graduate student at Harvard), Herbert Gintis (first a graduate student and then an assistant professor at Harvard), Steven Resnick (an associate
professor at City College in New York) and Richard Wolff (an assistant professor at City
College in New York). The five radicals met at Bowles' house in Ashfield,
Massachusetts and agreed that they would only commit to joining the University of
Massachusetts' Economics Department as a group – all or nothing – and, should the
offers be forthcoming, remain there for at least five years.

Not surprisingly, there was opposition in the Economics Department to the hiring
of the radical package. The same reasons for denying Bowles a visiting appointment and
Best reappointment, namely, resentment that Alfange, a political scientist, was following
through without regard to what some faculty members 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. But Alfange again thought the opposition was
politically motivated. He also believed the appointment of the radical package was an
unusual opportunity to give the Department considerable strength, visibility and diversity.
And he was supported in this by several highly distinguished economists outside the
Department.

The radical package was approved by the higher university administration and, for
those who were appointed with tenure, by the Board of Trustees. Edwards, Resnick, and
Wolff joined the Department in the fall of 1973, and Bowles and Gintis moved to
Amherst in time for the start of the fall semester of 1974. Shortly after the hiring of the
radical package (and the hiring of several other economists – including Leonard Rapping,
who was at that time considered to be radical but not part of the radical package) Alfange
gave up the Acting Head position. Norman Aitken became Department Chair on