

Hugh Stretton: Selected Writings edited by Graeme Davison

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Tim Battin

University of New England

Few intellectuals are recognised as having the effect that Hugh Stretton (1924–2015) exuded in the social sciences and humanities. Indeed, when one assesses his influence on generations of academics, intellectuals and practitioners in the fields of history, urban and town planning, politics, sociology, economics, political economy and the philosophy of social science, Stretton is in a league of his own. In this fine selection of Stretton's writings, Graeme Davison, an urban and social historian, has emphasised, naturally enough, some of Stretton's ideas on urban and housing policy. What is particularly impressive about the selection is the connection with Stretton's more general political outlook, which was, if we are confined to one word, egalitarian. There is something here for everyone: works on social democracy, ownership and distributive justice, the questions of equality, and much more.

Stretton's first academic love was history, which he commenced at Melbourne in 1942. After having his degree interrupted by his Second World War military service, on which he insisted on undertaking, and to which he declined a commission, he completed his study of history at Oxford on a Victorian Rhodes Scholarship. His entry point to social science (sociology, politics and economics) was at Princeton in 1948 while he was waiting to take up his new fellowship at Balliol. The stint at Princeton—the experience of positivist, purportedly value-free, approaches to social science—had a big effect on Stretton ('the most serious educational year of my life, probably'¹) and laid the fundamental ideas for his philosophy

1 Hugh Stretton, interview by Rob Linn, 14 November 2006, interview no. OH760/4, transcript, JD Somerville Oral History Collection, State Library of South Australia, Adelaide, South Australia.

of social science. He would work through his ideas about the study of the social sciences and the humanities for the next 20 years until he was ready to publish them in *The Political Sciences* (xiii–xv).

His approach was to make explicit one's political and social values, especially in teaching. For Stretton, this was not just about honesty, though it was certainly about that; it was just as much about better social inquiry—and the same principle extended to policy advocates: 'Since planners can't in fact be neutral, they might as well work for whatever they believe to be right and good' (77). Academics, in addition, should restore the great questions of social purpose and justice to their proper share of the curriculum—which he thought to be about half (194).

Stretton's teaching and writing was clear, direct and authoritative. As if taking a leaf from Einstein, he practised the adage that 'everything should be as simple as it can be, but not simpler'. He made writing and his subject look easy, which is the mark not only of an excellent writer but someone so steeped in their own subject they know how to distil the essence of their message. If one cannot explain their conceptual stance simply they do not know it well enough. Stretton had a gift for communicating directly with the reader (cf. xxiii–xxiv). Those who knew him would say that you could sometimes hear him speaking when reading his work.

Stretton tended not to refer to himself as a socialist, yet there is a good case to be made that his was the most practical kind of socialism. His erudition, and his reluctance to dismiss any plausible and non-doctrinaire point of view, would more often than not give rise to a breakthrough in a debate (273–289). His entry into the debate between welfare universalists and selectivists, for instance, recast the terms of the argument (for this reviewer anyway) so that it was possible to draw on the best aspects of both. There is nothing more universal, or at the same time progressively selective, than a full-employment society in which household capital is as equal as possible and where the redistributive effect of mixed suburbs and sophisticated urban design is predominant. When you have achieved that, there is not quite as much at stake in a choice between the two conventional positions defended by welfare advocates. For those not familiar with Stretton's work, this might sound like a mild-mannered or soft social democratic stance. Certainly the manners were mild, but the stance was as committed to the socialism of a Tawney, a Titmuss, an Attlee, Bevan or Chifley as you could hope for. Stretton would sometimes say: 'the more radical your aims, the more helpful it is to keep your appearance conservative'.

In 1976 he was ahead of his time in his thinking about the significance of the domestic economy and unpaid work. In many ways, policy—and the conceptual framework from which policymakers work, for that matter—has not caught up: we obsess about the need for high economic growth, but mature economies with large domestic sectors will be *low* growth (113–136). In 1978, well before the personal computer and the internet, he was again ahead of his time when he analysed the industrial and social implications of technology (156–170). A gradually reduced working week could and should be brought about, and, for a time, it was. But from the late 1980s, just a decade after Stretton outlined his argument for sharing the gains of technological development, Australia began to throw away the means of distributing those benefits, by diminishing the historic role of the industrial tribunal.

Stretton's commitment to the study of history was clearly reflected in his teaching of it; he would sometimes claim he had not written any history (211). But one method he sometimes employed, especially when he wanted to focus politically the mind of his audience, was to tell 'history' from a future vantage point. An example of this, titled 'Some Australian Options', fictionally written in 2006, appears at the end of Stretton's 1987 *Political Essays*. The piece is not among those selected for Davison's book, but the various themes enunciated in the collection make the reference to it here worthwhile. Reading those three 'histories'—a Right, a muddle-down-the-middle, and a Left path—is instructive. Particularly sobering, then and even more so now, is Stretton's right-wing history, which he thought would not have much chance of coming about, and, if it were to eventuate, would trigger a colossal backlash.

The accuracy of Stretton's predictions, made more than 30 years ago, is eerie. There are too many neoliberal changes to list (and many of them do not need listing); but one worth singling out is Stretton's prediction that the ABC would be privatised, called for in June 2018 by the Liberal Party Federal Council. More interesting still are examples of where a development has turned out even worse than the prediction, such as the various means of suppressing industrial rights, or the spin-off effects of neoliberalism, such as the culture wars, and the cruelty to refugees and asylum seekers. So the real history is, if anything, uglier than Stretton's 'nightmare'. We can only hope, then, he was somewhere near the mark about the counter-movement.

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