
Foreword

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Biographical notes: Jack Reardon is a Professor at the School of Business at Hamline University. He is an Adjunct Professor at the University of Science and Technology of China in Hefei, China. He also lectures frequently at Beijing Institute of Technology, Mansfield College (Oxford), Dr. Gaur Hari Singhania Institute of Management and Research, Kanpur, India and Visva-Bharati University in Santinikentan, India. His research interests include energy and the environment, economic education and labour economics. His most recent book, *The Handbook of Pluralist Economics Education*, was published by Routledge in 2009.

A persistent, yet ill-founded criticism of pluralism is that it presents a cacophony of incompatible and confusing ideas. The lead article of the current issue of the *IJPEE* will hopefully lay this argument to rest. Peter Söderbaum of Mälardalen University (Sweden) and Judy Brown of Victoria University of Wellington (New Zealand) argue that diversity “is a natural phenomenon and indeed something to welcome”. Not only is pluralism consistent with a democracy of ideas and a democratic society, but democratic interaction can lead to a ‘transformative dialogue’.

A major objective of the *IJPEE* is to create a ‘transformative dialogue’ between the social sciences. This issue continues our series with two articles on sociology. Our objective is to find commonalities and entry points that will facilitate dialogue between the social sciences. Anne Cross, a sociologist at Metropolitan State in Minneapolis, provides a useful primer on sociology. According to the American Sociological Society (ASS) sociology seeks “an overarching unification of all studies of humankind, including history, psychology, and economics.” This emphasis on interconnectedness underscores the myopic focus of neoclassical economics, even suggesting it as a narrow subset of sociology, while at the same time validating sociology as a natural ally of pluralist economics.

The ASS defines sociology as “the study of our behavior as human beings, covering everything from the analysis of short contracts between anonymous individuals on the street to the study of global social processes.” Although, as Anne notes, “this definition may appear ambitious or even audacious, it reflects the challenges inherent in studying the social world in all its interconnectedness and ever-changing dimensions.”

Professors Adel Daoud and Bengt Larsson of the University of Gothenburg (Sweden) provide a fascinating discussion of ‘new economic sociology’, a sub-discipline of sociology which blends old sociology with an in-depth focus on markets, prices, money and corporations. New economic sociology “focuses on power, solidarity, and the integration of economic processes in society [and thus] tries to understand the internal

social constitution or even the social construction of the economy.” This sub-discipline has several commonalities with many disciplines of economics including institutionalism, feminism and Marxism.

Both articles highlight sociology’s reverence for its founders. In perusing their books, I was struck by their acuity, clear diagnosis of economic and social conditions and their continued relevance. Both papers provide a bevy of helpful resources for the interested reader.

This issue continues our special series on measurement and conceptualisation in economics with an article comparing measurement techniques between particle physics and economics. Jeff Turk, of the Scientific Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts in Brussels, notes that unfortunately the two disciplines remain far apart. Particle physicists constantly strive to inject reality checks into theory construction leading “to profound and exciting developments in our understanding of the physical world. An essential part of that development has been the concurrent development of measurement techniques and concepts that have provided a basis for reality checks that have played such a crucial role in guiding and constraining theoretical developments in particle physics.”

Needless to say such reality checks are missing from economics. Can economists emulate particle physicists? What lessons can we draw from Turk’s article?

Several years ago I wrote that “the argument for pluralism has been successfully made” [Reardon, (2009), p.8]. Perhaps I argued prematurely, for this claim must still be vigorously made. Nevertheless, if pluralism purports to advance knowledge and increase liberal thinking, we need to test its efficacy. Unfortunately no ready-made recipe exists. The *IJPEE* hopes to encourage an ongoing debate on the empirical testing of pluralism. This issue publishes the first of what we hope will be a long series of papers.

John Harvey of Texas Christian University tested students’ attitudes towards pluralism over three semesters. He found that students were “enthused and confident [and] not a single person was less excited about learning economics, with almost 80 percent more excited.” While this paper provides some support for pluralism, we have a long way to go before a definitive case for pluralism is made. Harvey elaborates on the much-needed work to be done,

“This paper focused on discerning students’ attitudes and *not aptitudes* (emphasis added). Further research on attitudes is welcome, as is research analyzing the concrete effect of those perceptions on learning ... Are such individuals better able to identify the core elements of Marxism and Austrianism, distinguish between them, and use logic, reason, and context to decide which applies? Such a study would be fascinating and extremely helpful to those of us pursuing economic pluralism in the classroom. This would involve both surveys (as conducted in this paper) and classroom assignments and would require that the researcher be able to see which student test grade (for example) corresponded to each survey.”

Harvey also noticed that students might be potentially biased towards the professor’s ideology. This is a perennial challenge for pluralists who want to instil in our students a healthy respect for alternative views, yet not push them in any one direction. To expect professors to master every alternative in order to present an unbiased account to their students “is a recipe for madness” [Reardon, (2009), p.7]. Instead we should teach openness and toleration while fomenting an intellectual excitement within a milieu of alternative views.

Contrast Harvey's concern with neoclassical economists' frequent exhortation for students to think like economists. Not only does this assume that all economists think alike, but it sends a clear message that if you want to succeed you must conform to the majority standards.

Our profession has much to learn from the financial crisis. What we learn and how we learn it will determine how we move forward in making the world more humane and equitable. The *IJPEE* will continue to publish articles on the crisis. The final section of the *IJPEE* contains two such papers.

Constantine Passaris of the University of New Brunswick raises several important issues that will be expanded in future articles, including an undue emphasis on quantitative research. We believe that a healthy dose of qualitative research along with more appropriate quantitative methods can elucidate many of our pressing problems while bridging the gap between the social sciences.

Passaris also suggests that "economics instructors, in the course of defining and explaining theoretical concepts and constructs identify the name of the economist associated with that theoretical innovation, their overall contributions to the economic discipline and articulate the significance of this theoretical parenthesis to the evolution of economic science." A good suggestion, but this requires instructors to be knowledgeable of economic history, which has been largely jettisoned from the mainstream curriculum.

Both papers emphasise the importance of pluralism in moving economics education forward. Passaris notes that "such work can provide historical depth, cultural sensitivity, social context, policy focus, ethical implications, statistical inquiry and much more." And Professor Rossi of the University of Fribourg (Switzerland) notes that "any [one] approach cannot but illuminate a limited part of reality: this is why pluralism in macro and financial economics has to be promoted rather than combated by the various, and often irreconcilable, strands of economic thinking."

Unfortunately, any movement forward will take time as Rossi notes, "this intellectual progress will need at least two decades before it can have some relevant impact on economic systems, as it has to concern first the current generation of academic researchers and lecturers, who will have to understand the essential causes of the 2007–11 crisis before accepting and being able to reorient economics toward a more fruitful avenue."

Acceptance of pluralism takes time; how to quicken and expedite its acceptance is a central goal of the *IJPEE*.

References

Reardon, J. (2009) *The Handbook of Pluralist Economics Education*, Routledge, London.