
Editorial: When will economics become pluralist?

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1 Introduction

Certainly economics (or political economy) used to be more pluralist than it currently is, and certainly economics is less pluralist than an envisioned ideal, and certainly we are progressing in that direction. But when will economics become pluralist?

When I founded the *IJPEE* in 2009, a preponderant goal was to offer a dialogue, a sounding board for all interested educators, students, teachers and policy makers to make economics more pluralist, knowing full well that pluralism is a multi-faceted word like freedom or democracy, meaning different things to different people. I never established a timetable; on the contrary, I knew that the obstacle-filled road ahead was arduous, requiring a multiplicity of effort, far beyond the purview of any one individual.

In the introduction to my 2009 book on implementing pluralism, I naively boasted that “the argument for pluralism has been successfully made” [Reardon, (2009), p.8]. I was wrong; I spoke too soon. Perhaps, I should have written that although the case for pluralism has been made, the case for accepting it has not, and that those of us committed to pluralism have a lot of work to do.

Eight years later, I remain optimistic. I am 100% certain that economics will become pluralist, for unlike previous attempts to make economics pluralist, (Lee, 2009; *passim*) thanks to the hard work of so many people, especially Edward Fullbrook, and the student-led reform groups, we will see a pluralist economics.¹ Soon. We have reached a bifurcation point, a point of no return, a point where we can never return to the dominance of intolerance.

In 2015, we published a ‘Roundtable dialogue of pluralism’ (Reardon, 2015). The consensus was that although progress has been made, significant work remains; Sheila Dow’s response was typical,

“Without doubt progress has been made, most notably in the form of the rethinking economics organization and its various local chapters. They and others are building up an impressive bank of materials for pluralist education. It has to be said that mainstream economics continues oblivious, or at best not appreciating what is implied by pluralism. But the pluralist community is much stronger now in my view, even if it has to operate in the shadow of the mainstream. Further, it may require a new generation of economists to affect change, so the student movement is the most hopeful development.”
Reardon, (2015), p.291]

Indeed, formidable obstacles on the road to pluralism exist, reinforced by the deliberate parrying of pluralism (in all its dimensions: methodological, epistemological, ontological and pedagogical²) by neoclassical economists. And unfortunately as Fullbrook (2010, p.94) has noted, “the generals of [the] mainstream status quo, along with middle ranks, show no signs of giving ground or even of feeling the need for appeasement”.

After we published the Roundtable, two additional questions have emerged:

- 1 If the argument for pluralism has been made, and the need for pluralism has been accepted by at least some of us, why not plow ahead, doing our own thing, unconcerned by the lack of response from neoclassical economists.
- 2 Are there any insights from other disciplines about the timetable and process of becoming pluralist?

The attempt to answer both questions led to the writing of this editorial.

Question 1 Should pluralists plow ahead and/or convert any stalwarts?

Ostensibly this is a simple yes/no question, but at the same time it obfuscates many subtly nuanced and important questions: how much neoclassical economics should we teach; how should it be integrated into a pluralist curriculum; when should it be taught, etc. While these questions are all well and good, the central question here to be discussed is how we should relate to a neoclassical economics that stubbornly remains anti-pluralist, especially pedagogically: should we attempt to make it pluralist? Arguing against is the late Fred Lee³ (2009, p.206) who wrote that heterodoxy (and pluralist economics) must plow ahead on our own, and the best way to repulse the neoclassical attack is to,

“be teaching heterodox economics to more students, producing more doctoral students and becoming professionally active by attending conferences and publishing in heterodox journals” [And most importantly] “heterodox economists [must] challenge the research assessment exercises, subject benchmark statements, and the mainstream ranking of journals and departments.”

Of course for Lee and many others, pluralism has never been a two-way street, since “heterodox economists... extend the value of pluralism and its corollary to mainstream economics, but [they] generally do not reciprocate” [Lee, (2009), p.283, note #26].

While we must plow ahead anyway in order to progress a pluralist economics as a discipline, I respectfully disagree with Fred, and argue that all economics must become pluralist. If not, then neoclassical economists will continue to do damage pedagogically, writing textbooks that mislead; discriminating and excoriating heterodoxy and pluralism; blithely proffering government officials naively misguided policies based on a 19th century map for understanding 21st century problems. Perpetuating a separate neoclassical economics is to perpetuate a negative externality affecting all of us. We must redress the externality *a forte* rather than deal with the invidious consequences *ex post*, which can only be done with a reformation of all economics.

In order to solve the problems of our generation, of which there are many, we need a healthy economics, a political economy⁴ that recognises, tolerates and thrives on diversity. A bifurcated economics, no matter how isolated it is, or becomes, will perpetuate rather than solve our problems.

A helpful example, at least for me living in the USA, is the concerted desegregation that intensified during the 1950s. Initially precipitated by Rosa Parks refusing to

relinquish her seat on a Montgomery bus in 1955, the movement coalesced into a city-wide boycott with the goal, not a separate but equal city, but a healthy and whole city – a goal which could not transpire if whites were treated separately from blacks [Briggs and Peat, (1999), p.49]. Martin Luther King exhorted at a rally, “We are seeking to improve not the Negro of Montgomery, but the whole of Montgomery” [Briggs and Peat, (1999), p.49].

While this example certainly underscores the difficulty in any revolutionary paradigm change, along with its long-simmering after-effects, it also underscores that desegregating economics and making all of it pluralist is our only option. Why attempt to time-freeze a dysfunctional and counterproductive status quo?

So what to do? Certainly, “to do nothing is not an option” [Lee, (2009), p.226]. In order to make economics functional, we must continue to strive to make all of economics pluralist. Our effort must be multi-dimensional, multi-faceted and global. We need to identify and to penetrate as many entry points into the neoclassical citadel as possible (Reardon, 2004). Efforts must be global, national, regional, and individualistic. We must support and welcome student-led movements, national curriculum reforms, university curriculum reforms, while empowering students, educators, and public policy makers. The *IJPEE*, of course, has been deeply immersed in all of these activities and many more.

While we must recognise all dimensions of pluralism, special effort must be directed to pedagogical pluralism, since “it is essential in the entire equation of pluralism; it educates; it puts into practice through teaching the principles of pluralism; it develops the minds and souls and behavior of younger generations; and it shapes the future” (Negru and Negru, 2017).

Question 2 Helpful advice from elsewhere?

One of the most damning criticisms of neoclassical economics was written by Steve Keen (2011, pp.168–169),

“students at the beginning of the 21st century are receiving much the same instruction about how firms set prices as did their counterparts at the end of the 19th century... Think of the many revolutions in our understanding of the physical world which have occurred in the twentieth century; from Mendelian genetics to DNA and the human genome; from determinism to chaos theory. Any scientist from the 19th century would be bewildered by what is commonplace today in his [sic] discipline – save an economist.”

Part of the problem was the attempt by neoclassical founders in the 19th century to emulate contemporary physics, which they successfully did. But as physics, its world view, and its modus operandi changed (providing us with a vastly different world view, and how we understand ourselves and our place in the universe) neoclassical economics did not. So much has changed in all the sciences, especially physics, but economics continues to adhere to the binary, mechanistic, linear world view of 19th century physics. Ironically, Wheatley (1999, p.160) writes,

“I am struck by how much we in the social sciences want to be seen as scientists ... We strain for respectability, using the methodologies and thought patterns of 17th century science, while the scientists, traveling away from us faster than the speed of light, are moving into a universe that calls for entirely new ways of understanding. Just when social scientists seem to have gotten the old math down, the scientists have left, plunging ahead into the vast ‘porridge of being’ that describes a new reality.”

In chaos theory, a limit cycle system is defined as a system cut off from the external world with the inhabitants devoting their energy to “resisting change and perpetuating relatively mechanical patterns of behavior” [Briggs and Peat, (1999), p.40]. Sounds a lot like neoclassical economics⁵; indeed, Marshall’s (1890, pp.770–771) description of so-called specialists is certainly apropos of today’s neoclassical economists who,

“never look beyond their own domain [and] are apt to see things out of true proportion; much of the knowledge they get together is of comparatively little use; they work away at the details of the old problems which have lost most of their significance and have been supplanted by new questions rising out of new points of view; and they fail to gain that large illumination which the progress of every science throws by comparison and analogy on those around it.”

Briggs and Peat (1999, p.40; emphasis added) expand on the modus vivendi of a limit cycle system,

“To survive in such rigid and apparently closed systems, everyone must resign a little – or often a great deal – of their individuality by blending in...[They] make us feel powerless. They are the ones we want to change but can’t because they *appear* to resist all our efforts. These systems are everywhere in society.”

The key word is ‘appear’ since,

“Chaos [theory] says that treating such systems as if we were separate from them is being blind to the truth. But if it’s true that repetitive, power-obsessed systems are held together by our own collusion within the coupled feedback of the limit cycle, then that implies our own influence must be enormous. It suggests our influence could be used in a positive way to bring about a more open, creative environment.” [Briggs and Peat, (1999), p.41]

Enter the butterfly effect: the power of one, and the cumulative effects of nonlinear action to effectuate and contribute to change. Such was the exemplar of Rosa Parks; and such is the power of individual action⁶ vis-à-vis the ostensibly irrepressible obstacle of neoclassical economics,

“Butterfly power underlines just how deeply influential ordinary individuals can be in society. But it also points to the fundamental humility necessary to exert this influence in a positive way...We can never be sure how important our own individual contribution will be. Our action may be lost in the chaos that surrounds us, or it may join with one of those many loops that sustain and replenish an open, creative community. On rare occasions, it may even be taken up and amplified until it transforms the entire community into something new. We can’t know the immediate outcome. We may never know if or how or when our influence will have an effect. The best we can do is act with truth, sincerity, and sensitivity, remembering that it is never one person who brings about change but the feedback of change within the entire system... We’re all a part of the whole. Every single element in the system influences the direction of all other things in the system.” [Briggs and Peat, (1999), pp.49–50]

While I hesitate to call economics a science, thereby questioning the direct applicability of Kuhn’s (1962[2012]), *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, nevertheless, the book provides many illuminating kernels of truth. One such kernel is that scientists shift paradigms only when offered a clear, alternative choice; but even then, facts, experience, observation and proof are insufficient to change one’s mind since, “an apparently arbitrarily element, compounded of personal and historical accident, is always a formative ingredient of the beliefs espoused by a given scientific community at a given

time” [Kuhn, (1962[2012]), p.4]. And to resist paradigm change (all too common) is, as Kuhn (1962[2012], pp.150–151) writes, not a violation of science but a testament to human nature,

“Scientists, being only human, cannot always admit their errors, even when confronted with strict proof. I would argue, rather, that in these matters neither proof nor error is at issue. The transfer of allegiance from paradigm to paradigm is a conversion experience that cannot be forced. Lifelong resistance, particularly from those whose productive careers have committed them to an older tradition of normal science, is not a violation of scientific standards, but an index to the nature of scientific research itself.”

But here’s the rub: How can neoclassical economics accept an alternative theory when their own training constricts their view and renders illegitimate any proffered alternative? This underscores the importance of economics education to educate students within a pluralistic milieu of alternative paradigms, while substantiating Sheila Dow’s earlier claim that progress “may require a new generation of economists to affect change, so the student movement is the most hopeful development”.

The failure of neoclassical education to embrace pluralism compels us to go beyond the confines of the discipline to the public, thus violating a sacred precept of scientific activity. Kuhn (1962[2012], p.167) explains,

“one of strongest, if still unwritten, rules of scientific life is the prohibition of appeals to heads of state or to the populace at large in matters scientific, [since] the group’s members, as individuals and by virtue of their shared training and experience, must be seen as the sole possessors of the rules of the game or of some equivalent basis for unequivocal judgments.”

Sadly, this statement underscores how far economics is from a science: attempts to renew and reconceptualise economics from within have failed; thus we have no choice but to take our case to the public.⁷ Pluralism must be recognised, nurtured, and protected; and like other forms of diversity “will disappear unless we actively support it” [Braungart and McDonough, (2009), p.14]. And for this to happen we need the active support of the public.

2 Conclusions

In 1879, Henry George (1879[1948], p.559) wrote,

“Political Economy has been called the dismal science, and as currently taught, is hopeless and despairing. But this, as we have seen, is solely because she has been degraded and shackled; her truths dislocated; her harmonies ignored; the word she would utter gagged in her mouth, and her protest against wrong turned into an indorsement [sic] of injustice.”

But with his own explication of the “laws governing the production and distribution of wealth”, George (1879[1948], p.559) optimistically wrote that political economy is on the mend, “Freed, as I have tried to free her – in her own proper symmetry, political economy is radiant with hope”.

More than 150 years later, the same can still be said about neoclassical economics: it is hopeless and despairing.⁸ But thanks to the concerted efforts of so many across the globe, and the wisdom of the sciences, political economy is once again radiant with hope.

We have passed a crucial bifurcation point: economics will become pluralist, and will never again be the same; but at the same time, we can never rest on our laurels.

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Notes

- 1 Of course this does not denigrate earlier attempts at pluralism in economics, which have provided a foundation upon which the current move to pluralism will succeed. For elaboration see Lee (2009, passim).
- 2 For elaboration, see Negru (2009), Heise (2017) and Negru and Negru (2017).
- 3 Fred Lee died of lung cancer in October 2014; I struggle to use the past tense given his ubiquitous, pervasive and ongoing influence.

- 4 The choice of ‘political economy’ is deliberate. Bowles et al. (2005, p.51; emphasis in original) write, “We prefer to use the older term *political economy* (rather than *economics*) to describe our approach because one cannot understand contemporary societies very well unless politics, economics, psychology, and the other social science disciplines are all brought together to study the complexities of modern life. Another way of describing the *political economy* approach, then, is to say that it is *interdisciplinary*”.
- 5 Even a modicum of understanding of chaos theory would greatly reconstitute neoclassical economics beyond recognition. Perhaps this is why neoclassical economics has assiduously parried it? For an interesting and quite readable introduction to chaos theory see Briggs and Peat (1999).
- 6 Also known as ‘butterfly power’ in reference to the Chinese adage that a butterfly’s wings can be felt on the other side of the world [Briggs and Peat, (1999), p.31].
- 7 See the accompanying editorial in this issue by Henry Leveson-Gower.
- 8 Indeed start with Keen’s (2011) *Debunking Economics*, and then Hill and Myatt’s (2010) *The Economics Anti-Textbook – A Critical Thinker’s Guide to Microeconomics*.