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## Foreword

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## 1 Introduction

Efforts to remove critical barriers that have impeded progress toward global sustainability and reach social and economic targets specifically related to climate change, have been hampered by the lack of agreement both on decisive topics and coordinated action at different levels of international governance. This underscores the practice of teaching outdated development models that continue to privilege individual symptoms rather than systemic causes and their interrelationships in a complex framework. Public policy has

not been able to encourage responses to cope with the planetary boundaries and achieve global sustainability. The current economics curriculum fails to address how institutional, economic, and behavioural changes might enable effective steps toward global sustainability.

Traditional epistemological theories have fostered an endless debate on dichotomies characterised by objectivism on the one hand and relativism/scepticism on the other. Taking into account the evolution of economics as a science, the need for a deep epistemological basis has been urged in the past. Schumpeter (1954[1987], p.487–473), for example, rejected economic thought that favoured deductive methods of inquiry – based on mathematical reasoning – because it generates analytical unrealistic results that are irrelevant to solving real-world problems. And John Maynard Keynes warned that the understanding of economic phenomena demands not only purely deductive reasoning, but also other methods of inquiry along with additional fields of knowledge, such as history and philosophy. His thoughts are worth quoting at length,

“The study of economics does not seem to require any specialized gifts of an unusually high order...Yet good, or even competent, economists are the rarest of birds. An easy subject, at which very few excel! The paradox finds its explanation, perhaps, in that the master-economist must possess a rare *combination* of gifts...He [sic] must be mathematician, historian, statesman, philosopher – in some degree.<sup>1</sup> He must understand symbols and speak in words. He must contemplate the particular in terms of the general, and touch abstract and concrete in the same flight of thought. He must study the present in the light of the past for the purposes of the future. No part of man’s nature or his institutions must lie entirely outside his regard.” (Keynes, (1933b[1972]), pp.173–174; emphasis in original)

Today, Schumpeter’s and Keynes’ criticism should be addressed to those economists whose beliefs ultimately privilege the adoption of a nominalist bias in economic inquiry, since the dialogue between economic theories and economic reality seems to have been abandoned not only in academic research but also in policy making.

Considering this background, the shift to pluralism in economic thinking can contribute to substantive epistemological insights in order to confront contemporary theoretical and methodological challenges. Here, it is crucial to reject the Cartesian narrative of the theorisation of knowledge under an anthropocentric, foundational model of rationality.

In the context of modernity, Descartes proposed the analytical-synthetic process of reasoning. With a deductive method of pure inquiry, human knowledge grows by a rigorous chain of ideas. Consequently, new thoughts arise while the individual applies deductive reasoning in order to create a chain of ideas that links the most simple to the most complex. In this attempt, true knowledge can be obtained. The Cartesian narrative extends the mathematical method of inquiry to all human knowledge in the form of the *mathesis universalis*. Indeed, this extension is at the centre of the a priori foundations of scientific knowledge in neoclassical economics. Fullbrook (2016, p.45), in his book *Narrative Fixation in Economics*, discusses how the Cartesian view of human reality has deeply affected how neoclassical economics theorises about the economic and social existence. Indeed, while emphasising the relevance of the pure thought of a disembedded human subject, neoclassical economics has reinforced the relevance of the Cartesian method of inquiry that moved scientific knowledge out of the general flux of experience.

As a matter of fact, the dialogue between economic theories and economic reality is complex, and a dialogical approach should be considered in any attempt to adopt a realist theoretical standpoint, which needs to include a non-anthropocentric approach; an ontology that is rooted in actual experience; an epistemological fallibilist standpoint; and, an evolutionary approach to sustainable institutions.

Given the relevance of these topics in economics education, the *IJPEE* continues to develop a realistic, non-anthropocentric economics to renovate the foundations of the economics curriculum. The previous issue (*IJPEE* Vol. 10, No. 1) published seven such articles, and due to severe space limitations, the current issue will complete this set and publish one more. As Jack wrote in the foreword to this special issue,

“Our goal is not to provide all the answers, nor ask all the questions (no single publication, no matter how large, can do so), but to fruitfully explore the intersection of complexity, pluralism, and sustainability, while offering practical lessons for educators and policy makers. How can we better conceptualise our teaching in order to live sustainability? How can we design an economic system that comports with sustainability? How can we reconceptualise a new sustainable economics? We hope this special issue stimulates debate and contributes to a global dialogue.” [Reardon, (2019), p.1]

This special issue (published over two issues) on teaching sustainability privileges the expansion, teaching and application of theories and ideas about real-world, social-ecological systems. We hope to bring these new and emerging ideas to a broader audience. Our hope is that it might serve as a platform for a greatly increased program of research, and a more effective basis for a pluralist approach to sustainable development. We are pleased to publish papers that promote pluralism, and that enable understanding the complex nature of the social-ecological systems in the context of sustainability.

## 2 Contents of the current issue

The paper ‘Teaching sustainability: notes from France’, by the French students Candice Fournier, Sophie Guillet, Julien Hallak, and Alizé Papp, investigates sustainability in the French university curriculum. The authors found that out of 64 university curricula, only 21 (33%) mention sustainability in their syllabus; and only one offers a class on sustainable development. Among the 21, just seven combine the three pillars of sustainability (economic, social, and environmental). The authors lament this narrow perspective on sustainability; and their findings reinforce an earlier *IJPEE* study that found a dearth of pluralism (both intra and inter-disciplinary) in French economics education (The Members of the PEPS-Economie Students’ Association, 2014). Pluralism and sustainability are two sides of the same coin. In addition to setting the stage, the student authors provide helpful, general suggestions.

The UN has proffered a much-needed recipe for sustainability via its 17 sustainable development goals, which, unfortunately, economics pedagogy has so far largely parried (not just in France but across the globe, and especially in the USA). This sad state of affairs must change if we are to at least attenuate the worst effects of climate change.

It is no coincidence that the contemporary movement to reconceptualise economics has also urged for a resuscitation of the history of economic thought (HET) since, “Knowledge of the past helps us to challenge dogmatic statements and sweeping generalizations [and] also warns of the dangers of assuming that there is only one

possible way of looking at one course of action” [MacMillan, (2008), pp.165, 168]. And needless to say, history of thought,

“is an ideal way to understand pluralism. [It] yields a rich harvest of plurality without necessarily considering the divide between traditional [neoclassical] economics and political economy which monism has created and perpetuated. Indeed, pertaining to the academic courtesy argument for pluralism, studying the history of thought discourages any presumption that modern economics is inevitably superior; rather, it increases respect for the past along with greater modesty for the present.” [Dow, (2009), p.48]

In their article ‘Recharting the history of economic thought: approaches to and student experiences of the introduction of pluralist teaching in an undergraduate economics curriculum’, authors Kevin Deane, Elisa Van Waeyenberge, and Rachel Maxwell offer a viable approach to introducing pluralism into an economics curriculum via a redesigned course on the HET. Their approach is especially effective in institutions where pluralist-minded professors are in the minority, (although given the absence of pluralism in the rest of the curriculum, it is not without unexpected problems). They also found that the traditional chronological approach to teaching HET does not work for students and they proffer a more effective thematic approach.<sup>2</sup> In addition, they also offer helpful suggestions spearheaded by student-led learning for the teaching of HET. Their paper should be required reading for all HET teachers.

The recent financial crisis underscored for the public what is wrong with economics and economics education, although many of us have known for quite some time that something is dreadfully wrong. In one of our favourite passages, Keynes, in discussing a long-lasting exchange of letters between the empirically-based Thomas Malthus, and the abstract, equilibrium-focused David Ricardo, lamented:

“If only Malthus, instead of Ricardo, had been the parent stem from which nineteenth-century economics proceeded, what a much wiser and richer place the world would be to-day! We have laboriously to re-discover and force through the obscuring envelopes of our misguided education what should never have ceased to be obvious.” [Keynes, 1933a[1972], pp.100–101]

In the world of business, if something is wrong with a product, the owner/proprietor would investigate the reason and then fix it. This is exactly what John Marangos and Marilou Ioakimidis did in their informative paper, ‘How introductory macroeconomics should be taught after the global financial crisis: data from Greek university students’. Given the inefficacy of economics education, the authors queried their students about the cause of the problem and their suggested solutions. Not surprisingly, the students wanted more focus on real-world problems (what does this say about our field when this is even mentioned?) and greater guidance discriminating between “authoritative sources that possess actual expertise in economic thought and judgment, and non-authoritative sources that together amount for the cacophony of voices that often only confuse.” The latter is not easy, but nevertheless highly important, since,

“in a world in which information, and attendant commentary is increasing at prodigious rates, we feel that economics professors must view themselves as necessary arbiters. Professors should teach their students how to opt out of the cacophony by becoming familiar with, respecting, and accessing resources that can help provide clarity in the difficult yet fascinating and inestimably valuable discipline of economics.”

The authors combine these findings with an informative review of the literature on economics pedagogy since the crisis, offering practical suggestions for all of us teaching economics in the real-world.

We were always baffled by the slavish devotion of neoclassical economics to Newtonian physics while it vigorously parried quantum mechanics. While there is nothing wrong, per se, with the former, its inability to explain the very large and the very small led to the development of the latter, which has revolutionised our understanding of reality. Newton's three laws of motion heavily influenced the conceptualisation of supply and demand which is the foundation for neoclassical economics. Ron Baiman, however, argues quite persuasively in his 'The profound implications of continuing to teach 'supply and demand' instead of 'demand and cost' in intro economics courses – an unequal exchange application', that the construction of supply and demand and its application are fundamentally in error both economically and logically. Thus, we should jettison these fictional and misleading tools, in favour of a demand and cost meme that better reflects economic reality,

“In the interests of constructing more just, humane, and sustainable national and international economic systems, these core doctrines need to be removed from the introductory economics curriculum...The logically consistent [alternatives] offer a truly scientific understanding of the economy based on classical political economics, demonstrating that price and quantity outcomes are objectively constrained, but subjectively determined and socially embedded choices, reflecting institutional and class power, resulting in unstable and generally non-optimal equilibrium price and quantity outcomes.”

Deep chasms exist within the discipline of economics, splintering it into separate “tribes [each with] a specific culture and specific habits, norms and rules” [Weehuizen, (2007), p.165]. But if we are to solve the problems of our generation, and at least attenuate the more severe effects of climate change, we need the active contribution of all the separate tribes of economics.

A founding objective of the *IJPEE* is to give voice to each tribe within a context of pluralist dialogue. Carmelo Ferlito contributes to our understanding of Austrian economics with his article 'A meaning discovery process: the unique contribution of the Austrian School of Economics and its relevance for contemporary economics curricula'. Adding to previous contributions in the *IJPEE*<sup>3</sup>, Ferlito highlights the uniquely helpful and inspiring approach of Austrian economics,

“linking economic analysis with the real world [and]emphasizing the role of active minds interacting with the surrounding reality in the realm of real time. This framework brings as a consequence a non-deterministic approach, based on the recognition of the dispersed and ever-changing nature of the knowledge possessed by individuals. The future, therefore, should be understood as radically open-ended.”

Unlike the other social sciences (and all of the sciences), economics and especially neoclassical economics has lazily clumped its subject matter together, content with the average (or representative) individual or firm. Partly, this is due to Adam Smith himself, as Schumpeter writes:

“Human beings seemed to him to be much alike by nature, all reacting in the same simple ways to very simple stimuli, differences being due mainly to different training and different environments. This is very important considering A. Smith's influence upon nineteenth-century economics. His work

was the channel through which eighteenth-century ideas about human nature reached economists” [Schumpeter, 1954[1987], p.186].

And partly due to the overly deductive, abstract, Ricardian modelling that has obfuscated clear and practical thinking. But recently, understanding how individual identity develops and changes has assumed increased importance across the social sciences, including economics. John Davis, in his article, ‘Explaining changing individual identity: two examples from the financial crisis’, acknowledges that,

“the standard conception of individual identity in economics is deficient, provid[ing] inadequate foundations for economics, ... assum[ing that] all markets operate in supply-and-demand terms, explain[ing] institutions only in terms of how they facilitate market activity, and treats all economic agents simply as rational maximizers.”

Given that a reconceptualised economics must recognise the diversity and heterogeneous nature of its subject matter, Davis introduces a useful conceptual framework to understand how individual identity develops and how it can change. He illustrates this framework in the context of the recent financial crisis. Davis notes that “an identity-based agency analysis connects naturally to more pluralistic normative foundations for economic policy; and an agent identity framework offers a rationale for a more pluralistic economics.”

Rounding out this issue is Dirk Ehnts’ review of the important book *Ricardo’s Gauntlet – Economic Fiction and the Flawed Case for Free Trade*, by Vishaal Kishore, a critical expose of David Ricardo’s theory of comparative advantage. It is difficult to disagree that “no other theorem is as firmly engrained in mainstream economics as that of comparative advantage” [Komlos, (2019), p.219]. First articulated in 1817 it is still widely taught as gospel today for the basis of trade. But not only is the theory an exercise in long-run, equilibrium logic, and anchored by unrealistic assumptions; it is heavily rooted in its time, emphasising nationalism while ignoring, for the most part, that individuals and firms trade with each other, rather than nations. While the theorem rightly belongs in the history of thought curriculum, it should not be taught as the basis for trade 200 years later.<sup>4</sup>

Kishore dissects the flawed case for free trade based on the theory of comparative advantage, writing that it “unnecessarily and dangerously limit[s] our understanding of what is right, and what is wrong, with current international and domestic policy and socioeconomic arrangements.” Ehnts feels that Kishore’s book is well written and theoretically sound, and strongly recommends it to anyone teaching international trade theory.

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## Notes

- 1 Unfortunately, economics has long actively parried the economic writings of women, especially during the 18th and 19th century, which unfortunately has continued more or less to the present time. See the important book, *The Routledge Handbook of the History of Women’s Economic Thought* (2018). While space precludes discussing Keynes’ views on women economists, he did include in his *Essays in Biography*, a sympathetic portrayal of Mary Paley Marshall (a first-rate economist and graduate of Cambridge University, and the wife of Alfred Marshall). Keynes wrote that “Mary Marshall deserves a record of piety and remembrance...without whose understanding and devotion his work would not have fulfilled its fruitfulness” [Keynes, (1933c[1972]), p.232].
- 2 This is also supported by Tavasci (2018, p.51). In addition, the book offers helpful perspectives/suggestions for teaching HET from a variety of perspectives.
- 3 See for example, Yu (2009); Yu and Shiu (2011).
- 4 The *IJPEE* has published two articles impugning the continued teaching of Ricardo’s theory of comparative advantage: Yu (2009); Fletcher (2011), the former from an Austrian perspective.