FOUR REASONS FOR PLURALISM IN THE TEACHING OF ECONOMICS

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ABSTRACT

Can a pluralist approach be the basis for a curriculum that provides an alternative to the standard university economics course? This paper argues that it can, but that the alternative needs to reflect the reasons for embracing a pluralist approach. It begins with a brief discussion of economic orthodoxy before turning to four arguments representing pluralism: as a response to the underdeveloped state of economics knowledge; as a recognition of the essentially political character of the discipline; as a prerequisite for progress in economic analysis and research; and as a pedagogy that fosters students’ capacities for critical and comparative judgements. Potential problems when teaching within a pluralist curriculum are then addressed, leading into discussion about whether the four arguments are compatible, and how they can be synthesised in developing an introductory unit of study.

Keywords: pluralism, orthodox economics, methodology and pedagogy, alternative curriculum


1. INTRODUCTION

There is a recurrent tension in the teaching of economics. The subject is typically presented to students as a means of understanding the essentially timeless economic principles shaping the world in which they live – or at least the market economy aspects thereof. Students are inculcated into ‘thinking like an economist’ (Mankiw 2005). What they get, however, is only a sub-set of a broader array of possibilities for understanding the economy in practice. So what is going on in orthodox economics courses may be considered to be ‘training’ rather than education. It is certainly effective, judging by research into how students’ outlooks are shaped by studying economics (eg. Frank, Gilovich and Regan 1997). Their personal values become more aligned with the individualist, competitive ideologies of the market economy.
These aspects of conventional economics teaching have been frequently criticised. Indeed, recent years have seen a particularly significant groundswell of dissident students and teachers arguing for a more challenging approach. The ‘post-Autistic Economics’ movement, originating in France in 2000, and now having global reach, is one such expression of dissent (Benicourt 2003). Books with titles like *Debunking Economics: The Naked Emperor of the Social Sciences* (Keen 2001), *The Crisis in Economics* (Fullbrook 2003) and *A Guide to What’s Wrong with Economics?* (Fullbrook 2004) echo concerns expressed in a longer tradition of critical publications (such as Ward 1972; Cole, Cameron and Edwards 1991; Ormerod 1994; and Self 2000).

Is an alternative economic pedagogy possible? Can students be introduced to the subject in a manner that is more conducive to developing their breadth of understanding and their capacity for critical inquiry? It is the contention of this article that this is indeed possible. The key to its achievement is the adoption of a pluralist pedagogy, i.e. a teaching practice that explores a plurality of different ways of understanding how the economy works. Students are thereby exposed to the competing currents of economic thought, e.g. classical, neoclassical, Keynesian, Marxian and institutionalist. Feminist, environmentalist and other perspectives can also secure a significant place in the curriculum once the principle of pluralism is accepted. Pluralism is the principal antidote to the reproduction of a narrow orthodoxy in the discipline. It is a means of encouraging students to see the different ways of looking at economic processes, problems and policies.

Take an issue like unemployment, for example. Are people out of work because institutional rigidities (e.g. trade unions, minimum wage legislation) prevent the price mechanism from carrying out its normal ‘market-clearing’ equilibrating function? Is unemployment better explained in terms of the recurrent tendency for the aggregate demand for goods and services to be less than the economy’s productive capacity? Or does it result from capitalism’s systemic need to have a ‘reserve army of labour’ in order to ensure conditions conducive to capital accumulation? Here are three different interpretations – neoclassical, Keynesian and Marxian – of an economic problem. By looking at the analytic underpinnings of these – and other – competing explanations, the inherently controversial character of economic inquiry is revealed. Students come to see why economists commonly differ in their policy prescriptions, e.g. advocating greater labour market ‘flexibility’; macroeconomic policies, a role for government as ‘employer of last resort’ or as manager of more comprehensive incomes, labour and industry development policies.
Pluralist teaching is not a matter of simply presenting different schools of thought: it is about understanding how those competing bodies of analysis developed and how they relate to each other. It bridges between the study of the history of economic thought and a problem-based approach to teaching. The pluralist alternative is no panacea though, generating its own intrinsic challenges. These concerns are considered in this article, emphasising the link between the various reasons for adopting a pluralist pedagogy and the particularities of curriculum design.

The article begins with a brief discussion of economic orthodoxy and its critics before turning to a consideration of four arguments for a pluralist alternative. These four arguments represent pluralism:

a) as a response to the underdeveloped state of economics knowledge;
b) as a recognition of the essentially political character of the discipline;
c) as a prerequisite for progress in economic analysis and research;
d) as a pedagogy that fosters students’ capacities for critical and comparative judgements.

Potential problems to be encountered when teaching within a pluralist curriculum are then addressed, leading into discussion about whether the four arguments for pluralism are compatible, and whether they can be effectively synthesised in developing an introductory unit of study.

2. ORTHODOXY AND ITS CRITICS

The existence of an orthodoxy in economics education is relatively uncontroversial. Of course, individual teachers commonly pride themselves on the particularities of their own teaching styles and course content. However, the core curriculum has some almost universally standard features: micro and macro theory courses, supplemented by ‘applied’ options that build on these micro and/or macro foundations. It is an orthodoxy that has been enshrined in a series of textbooks characterised by the relatively minor product differentiation that is necessary for commercial success. These books include the numerous editions and country-specific adaptations of standard textbooks by leading figures in the economics profession, e.g. Samuelson and Nordhaus (1998), McTaggart, Findlay and Parkin (2005), Mankiw (2005) and Stiglitz (2006).

Looking further back into the history of the discipline, the existence of an orthodoxy defined by a standard text is not novel. One thinks of J. S. Mill’s *Principles of Political Economy* (1848) and then Alfred Marshall’s
"Principles of Economics" (1890) as the key texts for students in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century respectively. A turning point after the second world war was Paul Samuelson’s "Economics" (1948), proclaiming the ‘neoclassical synthesis’ and ushering in the era of distinctive micro-macro syllabus standardisation. The main changes since the first appearance of Samuelson’s text have been greater emphasis on ‘the micro foundations of macroeconomics’, ‘rational expectations’ and ‘new classical economics’, together with a shift from closed-economy to open-economy macroeconomics. These changes have had the effect of purging the textbooks of much of their original Keynesian character. Even the neo-Keynesian element – what Joan Robinson pejoratively termed ‘bastard Keynesianism’ (Harcourt 2001:303) – now has a relatively peripheral status in an orthodox syllabus whose contours are defined by neoclassical theory.

It is this orthodoxy that has been subject to recurrent challenge over many decades. The textbooks themselves have provoked counter-texts, like "The Anti-Samuelson" (Linder 1977) and "Beyond Establishment Economics: No Thankyou Mankiw" (2002). More generally, some of the academic critics of orthodoxy have emphasised problems with the internal consistency and concepts used within neoclassical theory (eg. Harcourt 1972, 2001a; Keen 2001). Others have emphasised fundamental problems of methodology (eg. Hollis and Nell 1975; Katouzian 1980; McCloskey 1985). The lack of relevance to the analysis of contemporary capitalist institutions is yet another thrust emphasised by economists in the institutionalist tradition (eg. Galbraith 1974; Hodgson 1999, 2001). Post-Keynesians deplore the failure to embrace the array of political economic concerns raised by Keynes, Kalecki and Sraffa (eg. King 1995, Harcourt 2001b). Marxists emphasise a quite different class-based analysis of the capitalist economy, castigating orthodox economics as ‘bourgeois ideology’ (eg. Jaleé 1977; Hands 2000). Attempts to deal with these concerns have been reflected in the contents of ‘alternative’ economics texts (eg. Robinson and Eatwell 1973; Hunt and Sherman 1990; Clark 1998; Tabb 1999; and Stilwell 2006). The Robinson and Eatwell book was the subject of an interesting article reflecting on its demise (King and Millmow 2003) – a failure that, to my mind, derived fundamentally from its not adopting a pluralist approach.

Meanwhile, the mainstream syllabus seems to have been unaffected by the concerns expressed by the critics of orthodoxy. At most the concerns appear as incidental matters, usually considered as asides in lectures and footnotes in textbooks, not substantially impeding the development, refinement and application of the neoclassical orthodoxy. It
is the continued unquestioning commitment to that orthodoxy in the face of these critiques that is so frustrating for the dissidents.

An attractive alternative beckons – to teach economics in a pluralist manner that acknowledges the critiques and recognises the potentially valuable insights arising from other schools of thought within the discipline of economics. Some of the newer ‘alternative’ texts listed above take this approach. Neoclassical theory is taught as just one way of understanding a modern economy, to be compared and contrasted with other approaches - Marxian, institutional, and post-Keynesian, for example. In this way students are exposed to alternative ‘ways of seeing’ economic issues.

3. PLURALISM AS A ‘WAY STATION’

One reason for adopting the pluralist approach is the pre-scientific (some say inherently non-scientific) nature of the discipline of economics. This view emphasises the underdeveloped state of economic analysis and the need for some modesty in the claims made on its behalf. From this perspective, pluralism is a ‘way station’ on the road (hopefully) to a more incisive and comprehensive understanding of the economic characteristics of the world around us. Because we cannot reasonably claim to have discovered the universal ‘laws of motion’ determining how the economy functions as a system (or even if it is a coherent system), we should keep an open mind for alternative possibilities. Students need to be introduced to the study of economics as a process of exploration. Pluralism then is the appropriate pedagogy for a discipline that seems to be continually struggling in the attempt to provide clear guidelines for understanding a complex and changing world.

Whether this inadequacy of the economics discipline is a temporary situation or a permanent state of affairs is understandably a matter on which reasonable people can reasonably disagree. The aspiration to make progress through the application of scientific methods is of long standing. Neoclassical economics was driven from the outset by that aspiration. Indeed, the use of the term ‘economics’ in place of the older ‘political economy’ signalled the concern to emulate the scientific status of physics (Toohey 1994: pp. 6, 19). The continued mathematicalisation of the discipline – evident both in the professional journals and in the teaching syllabus – is also indicative of this on-going ambition. As Mirowski (1989) emphasised, the attempt to formulate economics as ‘social physics’ was fraught with contradictions from the outset. Its achievements to date have been notably modest, judging by both the explanatory capacity and the predictive power of orthodox economic models (Fullbrook 2004).
It is doubtful that economics can ever be a science in the same sense as the physical sciences. This is partly because of the interdependence between the behaviour of subject and object – between the observer and the observed – throughout all of the social sciences. Moreover, as McCloskey (1985) has pointed out, economic inquiry in practice actually proceeds by way of ‘conversations’ in which an eclectic mix of modes of investigation and argument is adopted. If this is indeed ‘what economists do’, it is appropriate that students be introduced to the discipline by looking at a plurality of possible approaches through which further progress may be sought.

4. PLURALISM AND THE POLITICS OF ECONOMICS

A second argument for pluralism is rather different, emphasising the essentially political character of economics as a discipline. Of course, the existence of political elements in the development of economic thought is not a novel observation: the distinguished Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal was expounding that view half a century ago (Myrdal 1969). Contrary to the view presented by mainstream textbooks, value judgements and political ideologies pervade economic thought, influencing the topics selected for investigation, the nature of simplifying assumptions and the uses made of economic analysis. In that sense, economics always has been political economy, notwithstanding the change in the preferred label for the discipline. That being the case, the best way of introducing students to a thorough economics education is by a frank acknowledgement of this inexorable link between economics and politics.

In practice, this means teaching neoclassical theory as a body of analysis representing the market economy in a manner that aligns with the principles of economic liberalism – emphasising methodological individualism, self interest as the principal driver of economic activity, competitive markets as the ideal economic environment, and caution about (if not antipathy to) a substantial role for the state in economic affairs. This neoclassical stance can be contrasted with the Keynesian approach which rests upon a more aggregated view of the economy and a more positive view of the capacity of the state to act as an instrument for social betterment (O’Donnell 1999). The different values and assumptions embodied in institutional and Marxian analyses of the capitalist economy can then be discussed in the process of developing students’ understandings of those alternative, and more unsettling, ‘ways of seeing’ or ‘thinking like a (different type of) economist’. In this way, students can be introduced to conservative, reformist and radical viewpoints in the discipline of economics. They come to see that particular modes of analysis lead to
conclusions and policy prescriptions that mesh with different political ideologies and interests.

Given that the dominant economic orthodoxy currently has such a strong association with the political practices of neoliberalism, the advocacy of pluralism has an obvious association with the politics of the left. The case for pluralism, from this perspective, has a counter-hegemonic rationale, challenging the theoretical underpinnings of neoliberal ideology and policies. Academic economists of a radical inclination might even regard it as a ‘second best’ to an economics curriculum more comprehensively oriented towards, say, institutionalist or Marxian political economy. However, one cannot properly resolve the current problem of right-wing political bias by substituting a different bias. Any curriculum dominated by a single perspective – whether neoclassical theory in capitalist nations or Marxism-Leninism in the former USSR – invites the accusation of dogmatism. Pluralism is the antidote: it is the hallmark of education in an ‘open society’.

5. PLURALISM AND DISCIPLINARY PROGRESS

A third set of arguments for pluralism in economics centres on the nature of progress in the discipline itself. This is different from the two preceding arguments because it represents pluralism not as a means of coping with the inadequacies of ‘economics as a science’ but, more positively, as a means of improving it. The core proposition, as Fullbrook (2003, p.118) succinctly puts it, is that “real science is pluralist”. So, pluralism in teaching is a prerequisite for pluralism in research methods which, in turn, is conducive to disciplinary progress.

This position is not universally accepted. As Screpanti (1996, p.298) argues, both realist and post-modernist approaches to social science should reject methodological pluralism as desirable in principle. From both of these perspectives, the case for pluralism is more pragmatic. Realists, believing in some notion of objective reality, would say that pluralism has to be reluctantly accepted only as a second-best because of the pre-scientific status of the discipline. Postmodernists, on the other hand, reject the advocacy of pluralism as a methodological precept because “it is not possible, from outside science, to …. say that many methods are better than just a few” (Screpanti 1996, pp.304-5). So, as Samuels (1996, p.75) argues, “the rationale of methodological pluralism is that, in the absence of meta-criteria by which one methodology can be shown unequivocally to be superior to all others, analyses should not be rejected solely on the basis of methodological considerations.” On this reasoning, pluralism is necessary
because openness to alternative methodologies is more conducive to developing an understanding of the world around us.

The case for this inclusive methodological stance is buttressed by observations about how progress in knowledge actually occurs. One influential view has been Thomas Kuhn’s notion of a dominant paradigm characterised by ‘normal science’ that undergoes periodic revolution when confronted with an accumulation of anomalies (Kuhn 1962). As Fullbrook (2003, p.120) points out, however, “in social sciences conditions rarely, if ever, exist for a revolution in the way Kuhn describes.” Rather, changes in social, political and economic conditions – what Galbraith (1974, p.283) calls “the march of circumstances” – are likely to be more influential. The challenge in practice is to create a professional practice whereby those changing circumstances are subjected to critical scrutiny from different perspectives. For this purpose one must learn to think in diverse analytical frameworks, continually juxtaposing them, judging their effectiveness in explaining what needs to be understood, and forging new concepts and analyses in the process. This is the case for regarding economics, or indeed any discipline, as “not a body of doctrine but an activity… [whose] work consists essentially of elucidations” (Wittgenstein, quoted in Fullbrook 2003, p.121).

The key issue then becomes how to prepare for that activity. A pluralist education can be seen as a necessary, albeit not sufficient, condition. In other words, the required fluidity and flexibility of thought for progress in analysis and research is more likely to derive from an introduction to alternative ‘ways of seeing’ rather than from studying a more monolithic orthodoxy. The additional requirements of capacity for synthesis, innovation or sound judgement are a ‘tall order’ in any context, of course, but more likely to be fostered in an educational environment in which students are encouraged from the outset to address analytical puzzles in an open-ended manner, rather than to solve ‘set-piece’ puzzles within an established orthodoxy.

6. PLURALISM AND PROGRESSIVE PEDAGOGY

The fourth argument for pluralism is the most directly connected to pedagogy. This is the argument that only a pluralist approach is conducive to the development of students’ capacities to think constructively and critically. Economics is a distinctively ‘taught’ subject, where the undergraduate curriculum effectively defines the discipline and what its practitioners regard as central to it. So if ‘economics is what economists teach’ it is doubly important that it be taught in a manner that expands
students’ intellectual capacities. Such concerns are reflected in U.S. debates about whether the character of PhD training in economics is the source of poor undergraduate teaching (Barber 1997). Yet more fundamental are the criticisms of orthodox economics teaching as ‘autistic’ (Rankin 2002) and as producing ‘tunnel vision’ (Stilwell 2005). All teaching involves forms of social reproduction, but it is important that education not be reduced to ‘cloning’. A pluralistic curriculum is the principal defence against that tendency.

A corresponding danger must be acknowledged though. This is potential for pluralism to produce a relativist approach to learning in which understanding of different viewpoints effectively supplants a concern with the critical engagement necessary for disciplinary (or interdisciplinary) progress. As Sapij (2003, p.60) puts it, an uncritical pluralist approach can produce “the simple addition of competing points of view without any means to critically assess them, or even the understanding that some are not compatible with others”. This is what can be called the problem of the ‘patchwork effect’. It is particularly pertinent in the context of teaching, because the pluralist method may be perceived as a ‘take your pick’ approach to economics. Students may simply choose between rival explanations of how the economic system works according to their own prior political inclinations or value judgements. To combat this possibility, progressive pedagogy requires emphasis on discussion of the criteria by which judgements can most effectively be made and how progress in the discipline can occur. Subject to that proviso, a pluralist approach provides a more sound basis for creating constructively critical capabilities than does an orthodox curriculum that conveys the impression that progress comes only through further refinement of the existing paradigm.

7. PROBLEMS OF PLURALISM

The preceding four arguments create a strong case for pluralism in the teaching of economics. Some caveats have already been acknowledged. It is also appropriate to consider the more general problems that need to be faced in translating the principles of pluralism in economics into the classroom. Even those sympathetic to pluralism in principle may be apprehensive about actually teaching in this manner because they regard the pluralist approach as: (i) a big challenge for teachers; (ii) not necessarily welcomed by students; and (iii) a source of specific dilemmas for curriculum design. Each of these concerns can be considered in turn.

Can teachers cope? Of course, it is always a challenge to develop confidence and competence in teaching other than what one was taught
oneself. Teachers embracing the pluralist approach commonly have to educate themselves in the alternative schools of economic thought before introducing them into the classroom. Inertia and/or laziness stand in the way of any such enterprise. Such considerations may explain a common reluctance to embrace change. Therein lies a potentially major obstacle, not only to innovation in teaching, but to progress in the discipline more generally. If teachers introduce only minor modifications to the curriculum on which their own education had been based, that is not a recipe for disciplinary and inter-generational progress. However, the alternative – of embracing self-education in tandem with wide-ranging curriculum reform – can be a source of considerable intellectual excitement. It takes professional commitment to its logical conclusion – embracing challenges that can produce more rewarding outcomes, both for teachers and students.

Can students cope? This is a rather different matter. The question raises issues about students’ willingness and capacity to embrace a curriculum that emphasises uncertainty and contingency in the state of knowledge. Indeed, a pluralist curriculum may not be welcomed immediately by those students who have been conditioned to accept education as a tidily packaged process requiring little original thought and critical engagement. It is commonly said that this characteristic is particularly pronounced among international students from non-English speaking source countries, having to cope with new ideas in their second language. The problem is more general though. Peter Earl (2003), for example, reports encountering some resistance from students when he sought to introduce a more pluralist curriculum when teaching economics in New Zealand. He explains this partly in terms of ‘dualistic’ thinkers “who have a hard time seeing what value student arguments could have in a class discussion, so they keep quiet and wait for wisdom from the teacher” (Perry 1970, cited in Earl 2003, p.93).

The key issue in practice is how to get the students to progress from a rigid outlook to one in which they accept that knowledge is provisional and debatable. Not surprisingly, this transition is made harder by prolongation of the original state. As Earl puts it, “the dominance of mainstream economics in the first year [of university studies] locks students’ expectations into continued faith in dualistic modes of learning about economics, making pluralistic teaching at intermediate and advanced levels more of a struggle” (Earl 2003, p.93). One may sensibly infer that, when it comes to the introduction of a pluralist approach into the curriculum, the sooner the better, ie. in the introductory first year unit of study.

Getting down to the practicalities of curriculum design, other specific concerns arise. First, how many competing schools of thought can
one reasonably deal with in an introductory unit of study? Second, should these competing ‘ways of seeing’ be introduced in the chronological order of their development (as in Stilwell 2006), or in order of their current influence (eg. beginning with neoclassical theory and then turning to the critiques and challenges posed by alternative schools of thought)? Third, how much time needs to be accorded to each - in neoclassical, Keynesian and Marxian interpretations of capitalism, for example? Fourth, how much time should be spent dealing with the ‘mechanics’ of theory construction within each school of thought, as distinct from their comparative ideological aspects and policy implications? There are trade-offs to be considered, eg. breadth of understanding across competing schools of thought versus depth of knowledge in any one school of thought. There is also a delicate balance to be found between emphasising the political economic integrity of each of those schools of thought and the pursuit of disciplinary progress through their juxtaposition and vigorous interrogation. Other concerns include the appropriate form of student assignments and assessment methods. A mixture of short answers and longer essay topics can be an appropriate means of testing students’ knowledge of basic ‘building blocks’ and their capacity to ‘compare and contrast’ alternative schools of economic thought.

These various concerns must be systematically addressed in the context of preparing the materials for teaching and learning in a particular unit of study. In a previous article in this journal (Stilwell 2005), I drew on the experience of doing so in the unit of study called ‘Economics as a Social Science’ at the University of Sydney. Student enthusiasm for that unit, measured in terms of quantitative scores on students’ feedback questionnaires, has been consistently high over the many years it has been taught. So, in answer to the question (posed by one of the referees for this article, and presumably building in the minds of many readers) ‘is this a realistic proposal for a first-year course?’, my own answer is ‘yes it can be done, and it has been done’. Of course, individual teachers need to make their own judgements about what suits their particular circumstances, but there is practical experience as well as ‘in principle’ arguments from which to draw.

8. TOWARDS A SYNTHESIS?

Does this all add up to a coherent case for a pluralist approach to economics education? A case for pluralism resting on four different and not necessarily compatible arguments, and ending with an acknowledgement of some dilemmas in curriculum design is not necessarily persuasive. There is a reassuring element of consistency
though. It is not just that the arguments for a pluralist pedagogy dovetail with other arguments relating to pluralism in economic theory and methodology (eg. King 2002; Anderson 2004). It is that, notwithstanding some differences of emphasis, the four arguments for pluralism presented here have a discernable sequential logic. This can be expressed in various ways, but perhaps the simplest is the 4,2,3,1 sequence. Argument 4, emphasising a pedagogy that provides an invitation to controversy, leads into argument 2, showing students the nexus between current controversies in economics and competing political philosophies. That then leads into argument 3, explaining why future progress in the discipline requires engagement with those competing points of view. Argument 1 reappears at this point – as a reminder that we still have a long way to go, struggling to make progress in a subject that seems to suffer perpetual underdevelopment. The four arguments together add up to a powerful case for pluralism in economics education.

A tidy conclusion such as that does not imply a settled set of arguments. Nor does it signal the likelihood of an imminent change in the teaching of economics in practice. So far, orthodox economics has shown a remarkable resilience in the face of recurrent critiques and demonstration of constructive alternatives. Evidently, matters of institutional structure are as important as logical arguments in shaping outcomes, as I have indicated elsewhere (Stilwell 2006, Ch. 40; 2006a). The contest of economic ideas and pedagogic principles always takes place in an institutional context shaped by power relationships. However, an engagement with the arguments for an alternative, more pluralist, pedagogy is appropriate for both the critics and defenders of the prevailing orthodoxy.

REFERENCES


