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Pleas for Pluralism

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Pleas

The first stage of the movement that led to the establishment the Post-Autistic Economics Network involved a group of economics students in France publishing a petition in June 2000 under the banner “autisme-économie.”¹ Their plea was supported by an appeal from some economics teachers in France. The second stage was launched in September 2000 by the appearance of the first issue of the email newsletter you find in your inbox. By its second issue, the Post-Autistic Economics Newsletter had subscribers from 36 countries, and it currently has over 5000 subscribers from over 100 countries. In November of 2000 <http://www.paecon.net> went in the air, ushering in further international interest. In 2001, 27 economics Ph.D. students at Cambridge University in England who have come to be known as the “Cambridge 27” issued a petition entitled “Opening Up Economics.” The third stage is where we are now and at which this contribution carefully considers pleas for pluralism that have featured prominently during the previous two stages, as well as before the establishment of the Post-Autistic Economics Network. As Wade Hands (1997b, 194) observes: “The plea for pluralism in economics has been a frequent refrain throughout the history of modern economic thought. This refrain has usually been voiced by those who were outside, or critical of, the mainstream in modern economics.”

Eight years before the first stage mentioned in the previous paragraph, in 1992, a group of economists issued a “Plea for a Pluralistic and Rigorous Economics” in an advertisement in the *American Economic Review*, calling for “a new spirit of pluralism in economics,

involving critical conversation and tolerant communication between different approaches. Such pluralism should not undermine the standards of rigor; an economics that requires itself to face all the arguments will be a more, not a less, rigorous science.”² The announcement had been organized by Geoffrey Hodgson, Uskali Mäki, and D. McCloskey, and signed by forty-four illustrious names amongst which were Nobel laureates Franco Modigliani, Paul Samuelson, Herbert Simon, and Jan Tinbergen.

In 1993, the International Confederation of Associations for Pluralism in Economics (ICAPE) was founded as a “consortium of over 30 groups in economics” that “seeks to foster intellectual pluralism and a sense of collective purpose and strength.”³ Its 1997 resource list contained 30 professional associations, 32 academic and policy journals, 11 publishers, 16 departments, 16 centers, and 9 special projects, not all of which were formally affiliated with ICAPE. The consortium’s statement of purpose suggests: “There is a need for greater diversity in theory and method in economic science. A new spirit of pluralism will foster a more critical and constructive conversation among practitioners of different approaches. Such pluralism will strengthen standards of scientific inquiry in the crucible of competitive exchange.” ICAPE’s first conference on “The Future of Heterodox Economics” will be held during the Summer of 2003.

The “autisme-économie” petition mentioned before, published in 2000, favored a pluralism of approaches in economics.⁴ The French students wrote: “We want a pluralism of approaches, adapted to the complexity of the objects and to the uncertainty surrounding most of the big questions in economics....” The petition of the economics teachers in France also stressed the need for pluralism, focusing mostly on theories.⁵ They concluded: “Pluralism must be part of the basic culture of the economist. People in their research should be free to develop the type and direction of thinking to which their convictions and field of interest lead them. In a rapidly evolving and evermore complex world, it is impossible to avoid and dangerous to discourage alternative representations.”

The proposal for reforming economics entitled “Opening Up Economics” issued by the “Cambridge 27” in 2001, ends as follows: “We are not arguing against mainstream methods, but believe in a pluralism of methods and approaches justified by debate. Pluralism as a default implies that alternative economic work is not simply tolerated, but that the material and social conditions for its flourishing are met, to the same extent as is currently the case for mainstream economics. That is what we mean when we refer to an ‘opening up’ of economics.”⁶

Implicit in all these appeals is the observation that economics lacks pluralism. The pleas are defended by means of an assortment of arguments, such as discussions of the complexity of the economy, evaluations of the restrictions inherent in modeling, and assessments of the cognitive limitations on the part of economists. The advertisement in the *American Economic Review* also employs a reflexive strategy: “Economists today enforce a monopoly of method or core assumptions, often defended on no better ground than it constitutes the ‘mainstream’. Economists will advocate free competition, but will not practice it in the marketplace of ideas.”⁷ The remainder of this contribution highlights some problems with the pleas for pluralism, in an effort to open up ways for strengthening them further.

Pluralism?

Since pluralism itself is a reflexive doctrine — there can be more than one kind of pluralism — problems occur in using pluralism as an organizing principle. First, the nature of pluralism in the various pleas differs. A distinction needs to be made among theories,

methods, methodologies, approaches, perspectives, models, explanations, and so on (see, e.g., Salanti and Screpanti 1997). Whereas the French students stress approaches, their teachers focus more on theories, and the British students emphasize methods and approaches. Somewhat troublingly, ICAPE's statement of purpose appears to confuse methods and methodologies, for instance when it notes: "One conspicuous consequence of the homogenization of economics has been a loss of methodological pluralism." Now, pluralism about methodologies involves adopting a pluralistic position towards one's own understanding of the multifaceted enterprise of economics, borrowing from a wide variety of "shelves," including history, literary criticism, philosophy, and sociology (see, e.g., Hands 2001). This is not what ICAPE's reference to methodological pluralism intends to address. Instead, it is concerned with pluralism about methods, which involves types of models, reasoning, and so on upon which economics relies (see, e.g., Dow 1997, 2002).

Second, the source of pluralism varies. It could be ontological, epistemological, pragmatic, historical, sociological, heuristical, political, and so on (see, e.g., Salanti and Screpanti 1997). Whereas the French students focus on complexity and uncertainty, their teachers emphasize a wide range of contextual matters, and the British students are not explicit about the source of pluralism. Let us take a closer look at the mechanisms outlined by the teachers: "Pluralism is not just a matter of ideology, that is of different prejudices or visions to which one is committed to expressing. Instead the existence of different theories is also explained by the nature of the assumed hypotheses, by the questions asked, by the choice of a temporal spectrum, by the boundaries of problems studied, and, not least, by the institutional and historical context." The argument that theories vary across different scientific contexts (domains, times, interests, et cetera) raises the question whether for every phenomenon, question, and so on there would be a single, best account. If so, then this view seems to reduce to monism, which foreshadows the arguments of the subsequent sections. Before moving there, we will make one more observation concerning pluralism.

Third, not much thought seems to have been given as to the classification of pluralism. The various objects of pluralism could be translatable or not and might be compatible or not. Reflexivity concerns should keep one from casting the classification in terms of complements and substitutes (see, e.g., Mäki 1999). The French students, their teachers, and the British students all seem to view heterodox and neoclassical economics as neither translatable nor compatible. This, again, introduces the possibility of a reduction to monism, as elaborated in the following sections.

Monism!

Most importantly, despite these apparent appeals to pluralism, upon closer scrutiny, the pleas seem to be inspired by monism about theories. This motivation is evidenced, for example by the observation that the first conference of the International Confederation of Associations for Pluralism in Economics (ICAPE) is on the future of heterodox economics, while orthodox economics is considered to be "vapid, exclusionist, and detached from its social and political milieu." The French students write about neoclassical economics: "We no longer want to have this autistic science imposed on us." And their teachers concur: "Neoclassicalism's fiction of a 'rational' representative agent, its reliance on the notion of equilibrium, and its insistence that prices constitute the main (if not unique) determinant of market behavior are at odds with our own beliefs."

Using a label introduced by Ronald Giere (forthcoming), the appeals to pluralism on the part of heterodox economics may be seen as an instance of strategic pluralism. Though advocacy of pluralism by the French students, their teachers, and the British students may be couched in metaphysical or epistemological terms, could be primarily inspired by efforts

to achieve professional power and dominance. John Davis (1997, 209; original emphasis), therefore, concludes that the motivation of heterodox economists “is not that their own theoretical approaches are *also* correct — a theoretical pluralist view — but rather than neoclassical economics is mistaken and misguided in its most basic assumptions, and that their own approaches remedy the deficiencies of neoclassicism — a theoretical monist view.”

Also against the spirit of pluralism, heterodox economists appear to be offering a rather monist reading of the mainstream. The French students “oppose the uncontrolled use of mathematics,” their teachers “denounce the naïve and abusive conflation that is often made between scientificity and the use of mathematics,” and the British students dispute the “commitment to formal modes of reasoning that must be employed for research to be considered valid.” Which mathematical formalism do they oppose (see, e.g., Hands and Mirowski 1998; Mirowski and Hands 1998)? Is it that of the University of Chicago Economics Department (in particular Milton Friedman and George Stigler), of the Cowles Commission at the University of Chicago (especially Kenneth Arrow and Gerard Debreu), or of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (most notably Paul Samuelson)? Or is it the mathematical formalism of the game theoretic approach of John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern, or of John Nash? And how about efforts to incorporate bounded rationality approaches, behavioral insights, chaos theory, complexity approaches, and experimental methods? As Sheila Dow (2002, 7) suggests: “[M]ainstream economics gives the appearance of a moderate form of pluralism.” By monistically equating orthodox economics with mathematical formalism, therefore, heterodox economists ignore the fragmentation of the mainstream and manoeuvre themselves in a vulnerable position.

Concluding Comments

If heterodox economists are serious about their advocacy of pluralism, as we hope they are, they need to carefully consider the nature, source, and classification of pluralism.⁸ And they need to confront the charge that pluralism inevitably leads to an “anything goes” view. They also need to beware of sliding into monism. For instance, an ontological perspective that stresses the patchiness of the world runs the risk of being reduced to monism because it might be consistent with the idea that for every phenomenon there is a single, best account. An epistemological view that involves the hedging of bets may reduce to monism if the long-term goal is a single comprehensive account. An epistemological view that relies on the cognitive limitations of economists may reduce to monism if the limitations are merely delaying the development of a single, complete, and correct theory. If heterodox economists desire pluralism, they need to honor its spirit when offering interpretations of the mainstream. If heterodox economists employ appeals to pluralism strategically in an effort to achieve monism, they leave themselves vulnerable to criticism. Finally, they need to ensure, as stressed by the British students, that the material and social conditions for the flourishing of pluralism are met.

Notes

1. A brief history of the Post-Autistic Economics Network is available at <http://www.paecon.net/>.
2. The advertisement appeared in *American Economic Review* 82 (2): xxv.
3. Information on ICAPE can be found at <http://www.econ.tcu.edu/econ/icare/main.html>.
4. The text of the French students’ petition is available at http://www.btinternet.com/~pae_news/texts/a-e-petition.htm.
5. The text of the professors’ petition circulated in France can be found at http://www.btinternet.com/~pae_news/texts/Fr-t-petition.htm.
6. The open letter of the 27 Ph.D. students at Cambridge University may be accessed at http://www.btinternet.com/~pae_news/Camproposal.htm.
7. One of the organizers of the plea, Uskali Mäki (1999), clarifies that some economists who are supporters of free market (object-)economics refused to sign, whereas some economists who are less enthusiastic about free market (object-)economics did sign. He conjectures that “when economists talk about the ‘free market’ of ideas, they do

not use the expression in the sense in which it appears in their theories of the goods market" (504). This enables consistency, but eliminates full self-referentiality.

8. Some of these observations draw on a very insightful list of questions about scientific pluralism that was drawn up by Stephen Kellert, Helen Longino, and Kenneth Waters in preparation for a workshop on scientific pluralism. The list is available at http://www.mcps.umn.edu/pluralism/outstanding_questions.html.

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