
Plurality to pluralism in economics pedagogy: the role of critical thinking

Ioana Negru

Anglia Ruskin University,
Ashcroft International Business School,
East Road, Cambridge, CB 1PT, UK
E-mail: Ioana.negru@anglia.ac.uk

Abstract: The current financial crisis has prompted a widespread critique of existing conventional economics and deep dissatisfaction with varying aspects regarding the economics profession including teaching techniques. Of course, these criticisms are not new (see Colander and Klamer, 1987; Krueger et al., 1991; Colander, 1998). A reform of teaching practices within economics needs to be pre-requisites on intellectual diversity and a curriculum that is characterised by both plurality and reflexive, critical skills. As an orientation, pluralism is essential for becoming a critical and reflexive thinker. This paper argues that although plurality can be perceived as a first step in achieving pluralism in economics, economists – both mainstream and heterodox – need to go beyond a plurality of perspectives in order to concentrate on developing critical and reflexive skills amongst their students.

Keywords: critical thinking; plurality; pedagogical pluralism; economics.

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Biographical notes: Ioana Negru is a Senior Lecturer in Economics at Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge. She has published articles on philosophy and methodology of economics, especially on pluralism, economics of gift and philanthropy, institutional economics and Austrian economics. She has recently presented papers on pluralism and varieties of ecological economics and also on land and sustainable development.

1 Introduction

The current financial crisis has prompted a widespread critique of existing conventional economics while disparaging the profession for failing to anticipate it. The crisis has prompted a call for humility and modesty regarding how much economics can achieve as a science, but at the same time, has fomented an intellectual excitement, by opening the possibility for profound debate and deliberation. The crisis represents an opportunity for reflection within the economics profession, and the search for a *broader* economics in both *scope* and *method*.

The crisis has also served to bring back into focus older critiques of economics such as the lack of pluralism in teaching economics. Deep dissatisfaction with varying aspects regarding the economics profession, including teaching techniques and content have been

prevalent since the 1980s (see Colander and Klamer, 1987; Krueger et al., 1991; Colander, 1998).

To improve economics pedagogy requires a pluralistic outlook both within the economics profession and within the economics curricula. We need to question accepted economic thinking, and debate both *what* and *how* we teach economics. Furthermore, we must introduce and engage students into a pluralistic form of economics education. Nevertheless, engaging students in a wider range of economic perspectives is highly problematic especially when their mindset is often to find the ‘right answer in the right textbook’ in order to complete an exam or assignment. The issue therefore is how to develop a curriculum that is *pluralist* in its objectives, content and assessment. In other words, how can we produce economic graduates as critical thinkers and cognisant of a plurality of perspectives? How can we help students become pluralist thinkers?

The aim of this paper¹ is to explore the issues surrounding the offering and delivery of a pluralist orientation within the teaching of economics. The paper commences with an attempt to find a specific pluralism to underpin a pluralist orientation. Then, the paper explores how this pluralism fits into economics pedagogy. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of the link between pluralism and critical thinking.

2 What kind of pluralism are we trying to achieve?

A recurrent theme in the literature on economics methodology is that discussions on progress, methodology and pluralism are the outcome of three factors:

- a challenging the uniformity that has characterised economics in the past
- b the quixotic quest within economics for the ‘right’ and ‘correct’ type of science
- c the consequences of accepting that no economic phenomena can be adequately explained by one single approach or method.

The recent pluralism debate² is arguably now more important given the increased fragmentation in mainstream economics during the past 20 years (Dow, 2006; Davis, 2008) – which mirrors the fragmentation rife in various branches of heterodox economics. Various justifications such as the fallibility of knowledge, the absence of (conclusive) empirical grounds for theory appraisal, the inappropriateness of a singular logic, theory or method to offer explanatory insights, a world complexity that cannot be accounted for, have often been invoked for advancing pluralism in economics.

The economic literature abounds with discussions of various types of pluralism (Salanti and Screpanti, 1997; Sent, 2006; Garnett et al., 2009), and how it can be applied in the differing contexts of theory, method, methodology, models, etc. Paraphrasing McLennan (1995, p.25), pluralism echoes a preference for diversity over uniformity. Such a preference reflects the belief that a diversity of perspectives is intellectually and socially beneficial. A pluralism of research paradigms is crucial, for instance, for ‘creativity to emerge’ in the scientific realm (Callon, 1994). Pluralism may provide the means to avoid confused controversies that might not lead to progress, and to emphasise the partiality of knowledge and the existence of a diversity of scopes and purposes for scientific enquiry (Kellert et al., 2006). For the *persuaded* pluralist, such an idea has the

status of a self-evident truth. For the *cautious* researcher, pluralism – with the dilemmas that it brings – can be interpreted as being just another radical and nihilist doctrine.

Recognising, approving of, and tolerating diversity, however, represents three potentially different orientations. Recognising the existence of plurality is to acknowledge the multitude of theories, methods, and approaches in explaining phenomena – although recognising diversity is not devoid of certain normative and ideological connotations. Whether we approve of diversity and tolerate it (and at what levels) leads to a position of introducing potential justifications of *plurality* and why it is important.

Irrespective of the reasons, approving and tolerating diversity are minimum tenets of a pluralist position. Such an orientation will reflect how committed we are to the pluralist project and what kind of pluralists we are. Even a monist might recognise the existence of plurality (of models, theories and methods, etc.) in economics, and might concur with some justifications for pluralism, such as the incompleteness of science. But a monist would also agree that there might be ways to integrate a plurality of accounts in the scientific inquiry or to achieve a single comprehensive account in science (see Kellert et al., 2006). In this respect, pluralism and monism can be perceived as overlapping rather than simply contrasting modes of thought or ways of mirroring the world.

This continuum from *recognition* through *approval* to *tolerance* reflects a similar progression from *plurality* (i.e., the description of a diversity of approaches and theories) to *pluralism* (i.e., a normative endorsement of difference and tolerance) as suggested by Mäki (1997).³ Allowing theories and methods to inform our pedagogy is a consequence of at least an awareness of such diversity required in explaining and investigating phenomena.

If we recognise the presence of diversity within economics, does this constitute the pluralist project in economics? The consideration of *pluralism* as a concept and framework is relatively recent in economics (Negru, 2009). This is not to say that economics in the past has not been characterised by a plurality of perspectives and critical conversations or debates.⁴ Morgan and Rutherford (1998), for example, argue that during the interwar period, economics was characterised by pluralism. Pluralism, in their view, implies not just a variety of ideas and approaches but also an attitude to share a positive quest for scientific investigation and debates on method.⁵ Debates regarding the nature of political economy at the turn of the century, and the ‘capital controversy’ to name just two, illustrate that from time to time, economists have attempted to engage with one another.

This limited engagement with the *concept* of pluralism cannot be distilled to a conception of economics as homogeneous and/or monistic. To the contrary, economics is blessed with a diversity of approaches such as Institutionalism, Feminism, Austrian, Green, etc. As Van Dalen (2003) argues, the risk is that our pluralist project can become such that “each and every school seems to be in conversation with each other, but in actual fact the only thing they share is ‘an agreement to disagree’”. We have diversity and plurality in economics, but without consistent and open engagement between different schools. Currently, fragmentation exists in economics, but not pluralism (Bigo and Negru, 2008).

McCloskey (1985, 1994) has warned economists not to build isolated ivory towers and alternative conversations that would not benefit economics. Far too often, however, ideas are discriminated based on their epistemological and ideological origins.

McCloskey worries that openness to ideas is often sacrificed when groups of economists harden their own stand and use these positions to exclude other economists from conversations.

Few economists would disagree that a plurality of theories and method accurately describes contemporary economics. Some economists may be defined as theoretical pluralists or even pluralists in terms of method (such as using both qualitative and quantitative methods, see Downward and Mearman, 2010). But if we agree that pluralism is much more than a showcase for plurality and the presence of diversity, and accept that it represents an attitude of tolerance towards diversity (at different levels) and one of engagement and critical conversation between economists, we can anticipate the difficulties in implementing a *pedagogical* form of *pluralism*.

Economic discourse reflects dilemmas around certain issues related to pluralism brought to the fore by postmodern philosophy and its critique of modernism. McCloskey (1994) again, was very clear in assuring economists that deeming superfluous the search for ‘good science’ and ‘truth’ does not imply a renunciation of science. The obsession to consistently demarcate good from bad science was rightly coined by McCloskey as a futile debate – as the attempt to ever solve the puzzle of epistemology:

“The crux, then, is that nothing can provide the ‘Knowledge’ defined by epistemology. This ‘Knowledge’ – as distinct from small-k knowledge – is ‘whatever it is that is in the mind of God’ or ‘what we will know at the end of history’ or ‘what we will never, ever come to disbelieve’.” [McCloskey, (1994), p.91]

Among the many reasons to be sceptical about pluralism, one in particular, will be mentioned here, that of relativism. Many economists value coherence as a primary criterion for evaluating economic perspectives and thus perceive pluralism as a threat to achieving uniformity within the discipline (Negru, 2006). How far should economists go in adopting pluralism? Economic methodologists agree that a radical form of pluralism can easily degenerate into ‘anything goes’, and hence a very atomistic doctrine that could easily lead to indeterminacy.

Methodologists such as Samuels, Dow, Caldwell and Mäki have warned that methodological and epistemic pluralism cannot be grounded on relativist ontology of the type ‘anything goes’. Instead, it should be motivated by our limited knowledge and fundamental uncertainty of the world and economy. Hence, pluralism is not a normative endorsement of heterogeneity for its own sake. Pluralism, as opposed to monism, holds that economics is “an organ of enquiry comprising a vast set of tools and instruments used in probing and telling stories about the economy” [Samuels, (1998), p.303].

Thus, pluralism should not be equated with *relativism* or ‘anything goes’, which in the extreme implies an agnostic position towards validating all stances. This is certainly not a desirable situation since “individuals will be insulated and isolated, having no possibility of communicating with one another, nor in the end the capacity to understand and evaluate other cultures” [Bigo and Negru, (2008), p.132]. Dow (2004), for instance, has argued in favour of establishing certain limits to pluralism in order to have meaning, i.e., structured pluralism. We suggest for economics a pluralist interpretation of a science that exhibits a plurality of theories, approaches, etc. What is therefore required from economists is both openness and tolerance of diversity, *and* engagement in critical conversation.

3 Back to pragmatic issues: pluralism and the teaching of economics

Having considered the distinction between *plurality* and *pluralism*, and the potential limitations and advantages of accepting pluralism, the key question now is the implications of pluralism on the actual teaching practices of economists. The issue is how to transform the teaching of economics and achieve the delivery of an economics curricula that subscribes to the form of pluralism outlined above. Embedding such a pluralist philosophy in economic pedagogy requires recognising both the limits and the benefits of including elements from various approaches in economics. It also involves developing a pluralistic outlook amongst diverse students who have their own values, aims and expectations. The myopic attitude, “I just want high grades and a good job” or “I just want to pass my exams” discourages us from delivering a more diverse economics, but also in adopting more radical ways of assessing student capability for building critical thinking skills.

A monistic approach to teaching economics presupposes this can be done in a single ‘right’ way. Students are exposed to only one mode of thinking, along with homogeneous curricula regarding the content of delivery and/or a lack of diversity in assessing pluralism as an educational output. Unfortunately, this is the norm. Teaching only mainstream economics runs the danger that students will “take mainstream economics for economic reality itself and that they fail to appreciate that mainstream economics represents or simplifies a certain approach to economic reality” [Vromen, (2007), p.13].

Returning to our question of how to introduce pluralism into pedagogy, several authors emphasise inadequate and uninspiring textbooks that impede the process (Lee, 2010; Petrick, 2009). In addition, the inability of students to cope with alternative modes of thinking, and the dilemma of choosing the ‘right’ moment to introduce heterodox elements into the curricula are issues of concern.⁶ Introducing alternative viewpoints during the final year not only devalues heterodoxy, but may also cause students to question the usefulness of their previous studies. A more appropriate approach is to introduce parallel perspectives (in which no one view is correct), rather than competing views (where one view is assumed correct) at the outset of their studies (e.g., McDonough, 2008). This underscores how out of kilter economics is compared to other social sciences, where it is inconceivable not to have courses on the history of the subject and the presentation of alternative ideas.

Many authors committed to pluralism emphasise the introduction of additional theories and methods in teaching of economics which contributes to an added dimension of knowledge and the building of needed reflexive skills. For instance, McDonough (2008) and Kinsella (2010) suggest methodologies to introduce *plurality* under various guises. Vromen (2007) advocates a version of *moderate plurality*, i.e., teaching students the dominant paradigm but recognising possible caveats to teaching students only mainstream economics. Vromen (2007) argues that any respectable economics programme must have a decent course in the history of economic thought.

Furthermore, Van Dalen (2003, pp.16–19) argues that the primary implication of creating a pluralistic economics curriculum should be the realisation of students practicing *reality economics*, whereby students are introduced to courses such as philosophy and methodology of economics, and are taught history of economic thought and economic history modules in tandem. Lee (2010) offers a historical method of introducing a heterodox micro course within a heterodox economics degree.

When designing and validating economics degree programmes, we often identify critical thinking among our students as a key skill, but achieving this objective in practice is often elusive. The implementation of pluralism has, of course, its own limitations which we must be cognisant of when developing it as an underlying ethos within economics pedagogy. I have argued elsewhere (Negru, 2007, 2009; Bigo and Negru, 2008) that pluralism is an attitude of tolerance and an orientation of openness towards a diversity of approaches, methods and interpretations.

If pluralism then is about introducing students to an open, reflexive and different way of *thinking*, this makes the pedagogical task difficult. Since we cannot teach everything about the economy, choices must be made. Implementing pluralism in the classroom means that students should be exposed to at least two contrasting modes of thinking (for example, neoclassical and Marxian economics), each highlighting different views about markets, government policies, equilibrium, etc. Such an approach means students must engage in different ways of explaining the functioning of the economy, whilst lecturers must be knowledgeable about various perspectives, and openly teaching from various texts they do not necessarily agree with. This is the essence of pluralism.

The general ethos in the literature is that introducing pluralist methods of teaching and learning will instil a more critical view of the conventional economic wisdom. Introducing students to contrasting modes of thought will challenge students to find inner mechanisms of reflecting and evaluating these ideas. Often, students themselves are locked in their own paradigms of ideological and normative values that might help or hinder the reception of *plurality*. Sometimes, the better we teach certain perspectives the more we persuade our students. If asked for a position, students can either agree or disagree depending on their feelings and attitudes towards ‘authority’ or just based on simple feelings such as liking or disliking a lecturer. But should not we be motivated to develop methods to genuinely help our students develop independent and creative minds?

Introducing *pluralities* results in a diverse education, with students more knowledgeable of different schools of thought and methodologies within economics. But this will not necessarily create *pluralist* economists. Teaching economics in a pluralistic way will not necessarily produce pluralistic economists – the values, beliefs, prejudices, previous knowledge (both of the students and of their teachers) will impinge on what they choose to believe.

Pluralism as an orientation, however, is essential in order to become a critical and reflexive thinker (e.g., O’Donnell, 2009). We should pursue intellectual diversity within the economics profession and create an economics curricula characterised by diversity. Any attempt to endorse pluralism will need to carefully consider how to avoid the introduction of alternative views that merely seek to establish the validity of their own truths. As pluralists, we cannot deny access to alternative ideas, but equally we cannot impose alternative histories. Furthermore, we will need to avoid a radical interpretation of pluralism that ends up resembling a *dogmatic* stance whereby in seeking to oppose other dogmatic views, pluralism becomes a kind of dogmatism in itself (Mitchell, 1986).

4 Conclusions: ways forward for pluralism?

Introducing a plurality of perspectives and methods within economics pedagogy is an important precursor to achieving pluralism within economics. The narrowness of the scope and content of economics is evident in the economics curricula around the world,

which is characterised by increasing mathematisation, and the jettisoning of history of economic thought and economic methodology courses.

So, why bother with pluralism given all the difficulties in its implementation (e.g., Garnett and Butler, 2009)? Introducing pluralism in economics is an ethical way to engage students with alternative theories rather than the alternative of simply digesting mainstream economics without question. If, as has been argued in this paper, pluralism implies tolerance towards a diversity of viewpoints and critical engagement with ideas, just exposing students to a diversity of ideas will not in itself produce either pluralist economists or better critical thinkers. Of course, students will understand that multiple answers exist about various economic phenomena, but their evaluative capacity will by no means be improved and their openness towards alternative ideas will remain underdeveloped. Plurality is therefore just a first step in achieving pluralism in economics. Economists need to go beyond a plurality of perspectives in order to concentrate on developing critical and reflexive skills amongst their students.

Rejecting universalism/monism is a different educational output and probably best developed via methodology courses which can develop different forms of enquiry. Also, students must be exposed to different perspectives and schools throughout the curricula, which have greater chances to contribute towards an open and reflective education. Methodologists and philosophers of science will need to clarify concepts and rethink possibilities to investigate and explain economic and social phenomena. Our job as methodologists is thus to continue efforts to clarify pluralism and to identify the practical solutions to the technical aspects of implementing pluralism in economics.

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Notes

- 1 This paper is based on a presentation made at the workshop on Pluralism in Economics: Rethinking the Teaching of Economics, organised in October 2008 at City University (available at <http://www.staff.city.ac.uk/andy.denis/pluralism.htm>) and on the paper Delivering Pluralism within the Economics Classroom – presented at the Economic Network’s Conference (Cardiff), September 2009.
- 2 Recent contributions are numerous, but see especially McCloskey (1985, 1994), Salanti and Screpanti (1997), Longino (2002), Kellert et al. (2006) and Negru (2009).
- 3 These ideas have been accompanied by debates whether orthodox or heterodox groups and/or economists can in any way be deemed to be pluralistic (Sent, 2003; Dow, 2006; Davis, 2008).
- 4 See Davis (2008) and Lee (2009) for two different interpretations of pluralism historically in economics.
- 5 Morgan and Rutherford (1998, p.4) state that “Pluralism meant variety, and that variety was evident in beliefs, in ideology, in methods, and in policy advice. We are used to thinking about the institutionalists as difficult to pin down because of their varied interests and practical approaches”.
- 6 For helpful suggestions see Nelson (2009).