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AUTISTIC ECONOMICS ?

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In June 2000, a group of economics students at one of France's leading tertiary institutes, the *École Normale Supérieure*, revolted. They were objecting to the obsession with abstract mathematical modelling that dominates economics education worldwide. The newspaper *Le Monde* gave some publicity to their cause, and a surprising number of economics teachers supported them. The outcome of the revolt was the formation of the post-autistic economics (PAE) network (www.paecon.net) which, within a few months, had spread into a number of other countries, including Australia and Canada.

One of the most important initiatives were students' and teachers' petitions to reform the teaching of economics. The 'Ivy League' (American) version of the students' petition contained a preamble to the standard form. The teachers' petition (eg the Australian version) went into much more detail about the pedagogical crisis that the hegemony of neoclassical economics has brought about. (In Australia, the PAE movement links back to a huge schism in the 1970s and 1980s that took place within the Economics Department of the University of Sydney, and that led to the creation of a separate discipline of Political Economy which set out to teach a radical programme of alternative economics.)

Before examining what is autistic - or allegedly autistic - about neoclassical economics, I should note that the use of 'autism' as a metaphor might be regarded as inappropriate by many of those whose lives are touched by autism, or who are researchers of autism.

Autism is a condition that appears in (mainly) boys from about 18 months of age. It seems to involve an alternative 'wiring' of the brain, and has a number of symptoms, not all of which are necessary to give a

diagnosis of autism. Thus persons suffering from autism vary both in the symptoms that they display and in the extent to which their alternative mental traits are disabling. Autism - what could be called a variation of the embryology of the mind - is one of the most baffling (and under-researched) mysteries of medical science.

The particular autistic symptom that the PAE movement has latched onto is 'disengagement from reality'. The charge is that (neoclassical) economics as a discipline is unduly detached from the real world. Rather than engage in the pursuit of open-minded learning about reality, as other sciences and social sciences purport to do, neoclassical economics withdraws into an abstract world defined by its own assumptions. In doing so, it has adopted the language of mathematics (to the exclusion of English, French etc), thereby making its indulgences meaningless (though threatening) to persons who cannot or will not adopt its linguistic norms. In other words, economics, it is alleged, suffers from *scientism* ("the uncritical application of scientific or quasi-scientific methods to inappropriate fields of study or investigation" according to my Collins Dictionary), otherwise known as formalism, *apriorism*, or rationalism. Indeed, it is long accepted within the profession that neoclassical economics suffers from 'physics-envy', meaning envy of nineteenth century Newtonian physics.

The corollary of 'disengagement' in persons with autism is the absence of socialisation, and in many cases, the absence of language, which is the *sine qua non* of socialisation. Hence autistic traits of neoclassical economics include its individualism, its glorification of the private domain at the expense of the public domain, and its preference to use a private kind of language that has the effect of stifling rather than facilitating conversation. (The promotion of economics as a 'conversation' was in fact one of the important reactions in the 1990s to the excessive formalism of 1980s' economics.).

Autistic persons can be intelligent, but that intelligence is usually obsessive and extremely narrow in its focus. Thus the metaphor of autism helps us to gain an insight into the culture that emerged in, for example, the New Zealand Treasury in the 1980s. The use of language that created barriers, the single-mindedness, the lack of any substantial concept of a *society*, the refusal of the Treasury itself to countenance

competition (while advocating competition for everyone else) and the rhetoric of TINA ('there is no alternative') all suggest that ideological neoliberalism is as autistic as the formalist mathematical economic models that pass as research. Closed-minded technocrats, like autistic children, can be 'control freaks'.

It is important to note that the new movement is post-autistic rather than anti-autistic. At least the teachers' petition emphasised the need for economics (and therefore economics education) to move on rather than to turn on itself. Mathematical model-making is a useful intellectual discipline. But it's only a small part of the scientific study of economics and economic phenomena. The problem is that *a priori* mathematical economics has a way of suppressing enquiry into the ways that economics actually work (and have actually worked in the past). The other problem is that those who derive all their truths from premises rather than from observations understand policy in utopian terms. For them, good policy involves re-engineering humankind, so that our behaviour conforms to the rationalist premises of 'economic man'.

Post-autistic economics suggests the opposite - that economics should emphasise the way the world does work, and not how it might work in a private property/perfect competition/free market utopia. In this context, policymaking depends critically on knowledge gleaned from observation rather than from abstraction. Economic history should be a critical part of post-autistic economics teaching.

Having expressed my sympathy for the goals of the post-autistic economics network, I do have reservations about it. First, autism is still too much of a taboo subject to enable it to become an effective metaphor for a protest movement. Second, there is a danger to overreacting to the failings of mathematical economics. Abstract mathematical economics, in its place, has a lot to offer humankind, as indeed does pure mathematics.

It is proper that the PAE movement should focus on a broad-based and critical economics education rather than on the rights and wrongs of neoclassical economics. The most immediate problem is that if advanced economics education is turning off everyone except a few people who come into economics with neoconservative mindsets, then we end up

with a society that is unable to debate economic issues, and unable to contest political *fait accompli* such as the 'Rogernomics' that afflicted New Zealand in the mid-1980s (named after the government's Treasurer, Roger Douglas). Without widespread economic literacy, policymaking becomes vulnerable to the machinations of control freaks.

As two of my colleagues at Unitec (Andrew Codling and Jacqueline Rowarth) have written in the *New Zealand Herald*:

It is to be hoped that the [tertiary education] commission's recommendations take account of the concern about the narrow base of learning that our students have. A revamping of our system, founded on the basic disciplines with inter-disciplinary, problem-based teaching, would give our students a broad education. This would allow us to promote our graduates and eventually our country to the world as an educated one, with all that that implies.

There is no single route to the truth in economics. Nor is there just one correct way to teach economics. Rather, each approach adds something to the whole. Students learn more, however, and take a more sympathetic view of their subject, if their economics education is grounded in reality.

References

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