THE CASE FOR GENUINE PLURALISM IN ECONOMICS EDUCATION

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Discussing the virtues and challenges of pluralism in the curriculum is a healthy feature of political economy. Luciano Carment's article in this journal issue provides a good opportunity to do exactly this. In this article, I make a strong case for what Luciano calls 'pluralism by juxtaposition' and offer a critique of what he calls 'pluralism by integration'. Indeed, I argue that the latter is not a form of pluralism at all. The key arguments I put forward are that a high level of *genuine* pluralism in the curriculum is essential, entirely practical, and in sync with student expectations.

Pluralism by integration

Luciano's paper rests on a definition of 'pluralism by integration' that derives from a definition developed by Sam Bowles and Wendy Carlin – two economists closely associated with the CORE project and its textbooks. Bowles and Carlin argue that any single theory or framework that has any pluralist *provenance* to its formation qualifies as being pluralist. Their own explanation and justification are worth considering in full, as follows:

> Let's distinguish between two variants of pluralism. One variant could be called pluralism by juxtaposition: differing approaches – schools of thought or disciplines – can be contrasted to highlight their differing ways of creating and using knowledge. Although at its best, this approach presents rich opportunities for students to learn to contrast and criticize ideas from differing points of view, what we call pluralism-by-juxtaposition can also reduce the study of economics to a kind of

Thornton, T.B. (2026)
'The Case for Genuine Pluralism in Economics Education'
Journal of Australian Political Economy
No. 97, pp. 51-62.

> paradigm tournament, conveying little or no common analytical core concepts. As well as being able to critically evaluate arguments and talk about competing approaches, the citizen or policy maker needs to be able to make economic arguments themselves. Samuelson's realization that what he called the 'classical verities' are a poor guide to policy in an economy of underutilized resources did not drive him to write an introductory textbook titled Keynesian versus Classical Economics. Pluralism can also be pursued, as Samuelson aspired to do, by integrating the insights of differing schools of thought and knowledge from other disciplines into a coherent paradigm. This can give students analytical tools borrowed from many schools or disciplines and help them to do economics rather than simply to talk about it. We call this pluralism by integration (Bowles and Carlin 2020: 208)

This definition of pluralism by integration is at odds with how pluralism by integration is understood within the philosophy of science where it is closely associated with the work of Sandra Mitchell (2002, 2023). Pluralism by integration is *definitely not* about the synthesis of multiple theories into a single unified theory but the ongoing *co-existence* of theories. It is 'integration without unification' (Mitchell and Dietrich 2006: 73). By contrast, pluralism by integration under the Bowles-Carlin definition synthesises a plurality of theories into a single framework: thus, it is non-pluralism (*i.e.* monism) by another name. Whilst a particular framework may fuse ingredients from different schools, such 'fusion cooking' (whatever its merits[1]) still offers only a single dish. I would argue that the Bowles-Carlin version of pluralism by integration needs to be discarded because, otherwise, it is likely be an ongoing cause of confusion.

Moreover, it is worth noting the context in which this contradictory conception of pluralism was put forward. At the time CORE was established it was already clear that there were extremely high levels of student dissatisfaction with the economics curriculum. In no other discipline do students so widely and regularly rebel against the content of their instruction (Kay 2014). Recent waves of student protest and initiative, several of which were global in nature or which quickly became

[1] The 'Post-Walrasian' framework Bowles and Carlin advocate for *is* interesting and worth engaging with. Whilst its presentation in CORE is rather attenuated (perhaps to cater to the very delicate sensibilities of many orthodox economists), it improves considerably when presented in its full-strength form (see, for example: Bowles and Gintis 1990; Bowles 2005; Bowles and Gintis 2000). The fundamental problem is not that the framework is without intellectual merit, but that it is being presented to students as the *only* framework.

global in nature, have included the Post-Autistic Economics Movement, established in France in 2000; Rethinking Economics, established in 2011; Peps-économie, established in France in 2013; the International Student Initiative for Pluralism in Economics, established in 2014; and Exploring Economics, established in 2016. The central concern in all these initiatives was the lack of pluralism in the curriculum.

These movements gained considerable media attention. For example, in May 2014, the International Student Initiative for Pluralism in Economics, then a confederation of 65 associations of economics students from over 30 different countries, published an extended open letter calling for greater pluralism in the curriculum (ISIPE 2014). The open letter, which I would encourage all political economists to read for themselves, received very high levels of global media coverage, including in Australia (see, for example, Thornton 2014). This student agitation for pluralism was, and still is, mirrored by many academic economists (see, for example: ICAPE 2026; Hodgson *et al.* 1992; O'Donnell 2010; King 2012)

It was in (and against) this context that CORE was the recipient of large amounts of funding from organisations such as Institute for New Economic Thinking who, for reasons best known to themselves, choose to direct funding towards the CORE textbook rather than more genuinely transformative curricular projects that were more in keeping with the cogent arguments from the students and academics worldwide who were pushing for a plural curriculum. Unsurprisingly, when the CORE textbook curriculum was published it received an underwhelming response from the student groups pushing for curricular change. For example, Rethinking Economics offered this evaluation:

> The CORE Curriculum is not an answer to our demands for reform. CORE is more engaging in its teaching style, but falls short of creating broader content […] What we are looking for is curricula that embody the three pluralisms: pluralism in methodology, pluralism is schools of thought, and pluralism in disciplines [interdisciplinarity]. This means at least a key role for the history of economic thought in a way that encourages debate over different schools of thought. We believe it is important to introduce students to a critical approach to social science in general, meaning that students can engage in debate over schools of thought, rather than be introduced to one narrative. CORE does not supply this in its present state. Rethinking Economics welcomes progress in economics education, a small part of which CORE has achieved, but we believe firmly there is still much more to be done in economics education reform (Economics 2014: 1).

This underwhelming response to CORE was also mirrored by some prominent political economists. For example, Sheehan *et al.* (2015) argue that CORE directed students to confirm their understanding of the CORE content when they should instead be gaining an understanding that (a) economic and social problems can be understood in more than one way; and (b) that analyses in economics tend to be contested. A good case can be made that these twin understandings should be the most important objectives of any introductory course in economics.

Clearly, CORE Econ was seen as failing to deliver on the entirely reasonable worldwide agitation for a pluralist curriculum. Given this awkward fact, it is perhaps unsurprising that CORE's authors tried to talk up what they themselves understood and believed to be the pluralist credentials of their text. However, as already explained, despite some pluralist provenance in CORE's theoretical foundations, students are presented with an ultimately monist text.

What do the problem and solution entail?

In my judgement, Luciano's article is not sufficiently clear on what the appropriate balance should be between monism and pluralism, making it hard to comprehend and respond to. He regularly makes a case for less pluralism (under the guise of pursuing 'pluralism by integration') and there are many criticisms of what he calls 'pluralism by juxtaposition' (though I think this is simply better understood as genuine or actual pluralism). However, towards the end of his article, pluralism by juxtaposition starts being praised rather than criticised, suggesting: 'I am not advocating the abandonment of pluralism by juxtaposition […] It has a special value in the instruction of first year undergraduates' (Carment 2026: 38).

One could try and deduce exactly what is deemed a satisfactory and unsatisfactory balance by looking at departmental case studies. However, without an indication of which departments have a curriculum that is deemed either satisfactory or unsatisfactory, we cannot scrutinise those departmental offerings ourselves. Some praise is made of the course offerings in the Political Economy department at Sydney University, yet it is not made clear in the article whether this department exhibits sufficient amounts of pluralism by integration or not.

The lack of evidence is particularly problematic in regard to student preferences. It is asserted that, whilst students had previously been seeking

a pluralistic perspective, the 'motivations that drive students towards heterodox economics courses have changed' (Carment 2026: 31). However, no evidence is put forward to support this surprising claim. If true, it would be quite a turnaround, given the well-documented global push for a plural curriculum evident in the statements from student organisations like ISIPE and Rethinking Economics.

From my own experience at the School of Political Economy, which has a global student cohort, I can report that the most popular subject (by a factor of five to one) is a survey course that looks at nine different schools of political economic thought. It has proven to be the flagship subject that drives enrolments into other units of study in political economy (despite not being a pre-requisite for them). I have had cases of students who had already completed economics degrees doing this unit of study twice. Recurrent feedback from such people as to why they doing this is that they are finally getting the sort of education they sought in their economics degree and that they can finally understand their field as a whole. Also, as the Director of the School of Political Economy (SPE), I have good connections to other organisations via SPE's membership of the New Economics Education Network (which also includes the organisations Rethinking Economics, Exploring Economics, Economy Studies, the Economics in Context Initiative and the Institute for New Economic Thinking) and I have not seen or heard of any evidence that the appetite for pluralism amongst students has changed.

The impracticality argument

Luciano's article implies that there is insufficient space in the curriculum for current levels of pluralism. To me, this claim collides with some simple arithmetic. An undergraduate degree in economics is typically comprised of 24 units (4 subjects a semester). A major in one discipline within any degree is always at least 8 units, typically including some units selected from a significantly larger pool of electives. A department offering a postgraduate coursework degree would normally provide at least another 8 units of study. There is ample room for a pluralist education across a range of units of study in both undergraduate and postgraduate courses.

Within individual units of study, a similar logic pertains. Each unit is usually of twelve weeks duration, so there is no reason why a unit in, say, the history of economic thought cannot cover the established thinkers *and*

more recent or marginalised voices. Given this, Luciano's assertion in relation to subjects in the history of economic thought also collides with arithmetic. In a unit of study lasting 12 weeks, Smith, Ricardo, Marx, Marshall, Veblen and Keynes can have a week each which leaves six more weeks to cover more recent thinkers and thinkers that have tended to be unreasonably excluded. It is hard to understand why this situation constitutes a 'painful reality'.

Pluralism does not mean each graduate must have identical degrees; it simply means they are provided with a working knowledge of their field as a whole and the main schools of thought within them, as is typically the case in other degrees such as psychology where it would be seen as unsafe to do otherwise.

What then can we say about the design of economic majors, or compulsory introductory subjects? In general, the rule of thumb needs to be that the smaller the number of economics units that are studied the more pluralist those need to be. So, if a student only ever takes one unit of study in economics, then there is a strong argument for it to be a survey course that is strongly pluralist. The things that are essential to understand about economics are not opportunity cost, gains from trade, or particular theories of economic value; instead, they are that economics is a contest of ideas, that values and purposes shape economic analysis, and that the initial foundations of any school of thought heavily shape the analysis that then emerges from that school (all roads do not lead to Rome!).

In summary, the initial focus needs to be on exploring why economists disagree rather than on giving the students the misleading impression that economists are generally in agreement. William Becker (2007) puts this in more blunt terms by saying 'quit lying and address the controversies', which is also in keeping with Joan Robinson's argument that 'the purpose of studying economics is not to acquire a set of ready-made answers but to learn how to avoid being deceived by economists' (Robinson 1955: 3). Genuine pluralism is the only reliable pathway to achieve this.

Luciano (2026: 38) asks further: 'when teaching students about inflation, why not […] jump straight to Isabella Weber?' Well, because Weber's intuitively appealing explanation might be incorrect, given the leading Post-Keynesian Marc Lavoie's criticism of the profit-inflation thesis that has been put forward by Weber and others (Lavoie 2024). Even if one is of the view that inflation is always and everywhere a conflict phenomenon there is still considerable variety of explanations within that broad

explanation (Hein 2024). It would be negligent not to alert our students to this variety. For students (and their teachers) to effectively adjudicate between these rival claims in applied analysis, they need to know the competing theories and concepts underlying them and probably even the deeper epistemological and ontological foundations of competing schools of thought in which the particular theories are necessarily embedded.

This is intellectual work that takes time, effort and the development of good powers of judgement, but that is the principal reason why tertiary education is regarded as the highest form of learning. Of course, there is always the option of presenting students with singular, uncontested explanations of applied issues through whatever lens the teacher might personally like at that point in time. Luciano's statements in favour of pluralism by juxtaposition at some points in his article imply that he is not advocating that, but it is what often happens in universities and one must be wary of the slippery slope that can lead there. Curricular narrowness tends to accelerate via a process of circular and cumulative causation. A commitment to genuine pluralism is the principal line of defence.

Whilst the impracticality argument does not 'add up', this has not stopped it being used as a classic line of attack against pluralism. Indeed, it often functions as a cover to attack pluralism for other reasons – most commonly an underlying desire to engage in intellectual suppression of approaches that are either not accepted and/or comprehended. Much intellectual suppression of political economy at Sydney University by orthodox economists has been of this type (Butler *et al.* 2009; Jones and Stilwell 1986; Thornton 2017). Indeed, this was a central driver of the student-staff push for the creation of that university's Department of Political Economy; and intellectual suppression significantly explains why the road to creating it was so long, winding and difficult. Accordingly, it would be a sad irony if mistaken thinking in relation to pluralism meant that a department, created in large part to insulate political economy from intellectual suppression, itself were to become a place where a monist form of applied heterodox teaching comes to dominate the curriculum.

Political economy, economics and heterodox economics

Pausing to reflect on terminology at this stage may seem odd when such big issues are at stake. Yet therein may lie insights into some of the difference of viewpoint. Luciano's paper is addressed to the teaching of

'heterodox economics' whereas, as the reader has probably noticed, I have instead spoken of the teaching of political economy. Probing the definitions of both terms can be quite revealing of why our perspectives on the curriculum appear to be quite different.

Rod O'Donnell's (2009: 91) three-criteria definition is what I hold to, so I quote it at length:

> Firstly, political economy is a social science that is open to, and engaged with, all disciplines relevant to the study of society – other social sciences, the humanities and even the natural sciences. This puts PE in fruitful, co-informing dialogues with history, politics, psychology, sociology, philosophy, language, thermodynamics, biology, climate science and so on. The contrast is with orthodox or neoclassical economics which, in viewing itself as self-sufficient and as 'queen' of the social sciences, isolates itself from learning from other disciplines.
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> Secondly, given the permanence of controversy and debate in the study of economic phenomena over the last 250 years, PE recognises the existence and importance of competing schools of thought. This makes it intellectually pluralist in orientation. In the 1970s, the main schools that drew our attention were neoclassicism, (Post) Keynesianism, (Old) Institutionalism and (Western) Marxism. Nowadays, a more complete list also includes, inter alia, Ecological, Behavioural, Neo-Ricardian, Austrian and Feminist economics, all of which have significant arguments about market economies and the social science of economics. Note that, then, now and in principle, PE includes orthodoxy, for students need it as much as other perspectives in order to engage with the world. Again, the contrast is with the monism or fundamentalism of neoclassicism which portrays itself as the one true route for economic science.
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> Thirdly, PE embraces different modes of analysis so long as they are logical and intellectually rigorous, and their strengths and weaknesses appreciated. More specifically, both discursive and mathematical reasoning are welcomed. This avoids the excessive reliance of neoclassical theorising on mathematics as the best way of distilling economic understanding. In sum, PE has an open, pluralist stance in which all schools, conceptual frameworks and modes of discourse are viewed as capable of contributing to economic analysis.

Note two things in this definition. First, it *includes* neoclassical (orthodox) economics. As O'Donnell says, 'PE includes orthodoxy, for students need it as much as other perspectives in order to engage with the world'. This is reasonable given it continues to be the dominant approach in economics. Furthermore, many competing schools in economics often directly react

against it: so, without a working knowledge of it, neoclassical (orthodox) economics will be an ever-present yet amorphously understood 'other'. However, O'Donnell also adds the caveat that political economy can only embrace the aspects of any school that meet normal intellectual standards of logic and rigour. Given the various astonishing failures of neoclassical economics in regard to both logic and rigour (Keen and Lee 2004; Keen 2011; Lavoie 2022), any coverage of neoclassical economics in the curriculum needs to be honest about these failures, rather than adopting the 'don't tell the children' approach that is often evident in mainstream economics teaching, particularly at the undergraduate level. So, political economy constitutes a capacious yet demanding level playing field for ideas, rather than being guided by tribal or ideological affiliations to determine what schools are 'in' or 'out'.

The second thing to note in the definition of political economy is that pluralism is one its *cornerstones.* Indeed, the term comes up multiple times in all three aspects of O'Donnell's definition of political economy as an area of knowledge.

What then is the relationship between 'economics' and 'heterodox economics' and the definition of political economy just provided? Heterodox economics is nearly always defined as non-neoclassical, or at least non-mainstream, economics. This is completely consistent with any standard dictionary definition of the world 'heterodox' which simply defines it as anything that is non-orthodox. You could make a reasonable case that such a dualistic conception of a field of study into orthodox and heterodox has non-pluralism built into its DNA. That said, the situation becomes more complex when we look at more survey-based evidence (see Mearman 2010; Douai *et al.* 2012; Mearman 2012). However, all these complications and contradictions just raise further doubts about the merits of continuing to use the term 'heterodox economics' as any type of general descriptor. If one adopts the capacious, yet intellectually demanding, definition of political economy put forward earlier, the term heterodox economics becomes largely redundant, as does the vexed matter of setting the precise boundary lines between orthodox and heterodox economics.

There are inherent intellectual problems of the term 'heterodox economics' that create a host of practical and strategic problems (Thornton 2017). For example, it is likely that political economy education at Sydney University could be just as lacking or unsatisfactory as anywhere else if the reformers of years past had directed their efforts towards a 'department of heterodox

economics', such is the disutility of the term 'heterodox economics' as a basis for building things up.

Conclusion

The arguments for genuine pluralism presented in this article are developed in more detail in my chapter in *The Handbook of Alternative Theories of Political Economy* (Thornton 2022). My central purpose in both places has been to persuade readers that pluralism is all about rigour and doing things properly; and that monism (non-pluralism), whilst perhaps giving the impression of offering a practical 'let's just get on with it' approach, is a fundamentally non-rigorous and inherently dangerous form of education that too easily leads to students being indoctrinated into the pet intellectual frameworks of their instructors. It is, as Joan Robinson points out, an education that is an exercise in concealment:

> In every country, educated institutions in general, and universities in particular, are supported directly or indirectly by the established authorities and, whether in Chicago or in Moscow, their first duty is to save their pupils from contact with dangerous thoughts (Robinson 1980: 98).

What *is* dangerous is *not* exposing students to the full suite of competing ideas in a particular field of knowledge. This diminishes their capacities to think critically and creatively. We should (and can) do a whole lot better than that. There is room enough in the subject grid for any economics education to be pluralist and there is abundant evidence that this is the approach students continue to expect from us. There are great benefits to our students, their employers and contemporary societies in providing a genuinely pluralist education. Students need more, not less, of it.

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