THE POST-AUTISTIC ECONOMICS MOVEMENT: A BRIEF HISTORY

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In France in June 2000 a group of economics students published a petition on the web protesting against:

- the lack of realism in economics teaching;
- economics' "uncontrolled use" and treatment of mathematics as "an end in itself", with the result that economics has become an "autistic science", lost in "imaginary worlds";
- the repressive domination of neoclassical theory and approaches derivative from it in the university economics curriculum; and
- the dogmatic teaching style in economics, which leaves no place for critical and reflective thought.

The French students' petition argued in favour of:

- engagement with empirical and concrete economic realities,
- prioritizing science over scientism,
- a pluralism of approaches adapted to the complexity of economic objects and to the uncertainty surrounding most of the big economic questions, and
- their professors initiating reforms to rescue economics from its autistic and socially irresponsible state.

The students' petition carried great weight because its authors and initial signatories were associated with France's *Grandes Ecoles*, whose enormous academic prestige and selectivity surpasses that of other higher education institutions in France. No one dared say that these students,

the *crème de la crème*, opposed the formalist approach to economics because the mathematics was too difficult for them. Thus from the outset defenders of the *status quo* were deprived of their favorite argumentative gambit.

Meanwhile some economics teachers in France responded with a petition of their own, supporting the students' demands, adding to their analysis, and lamenting the cult of scientism into which economics in the main had descended. The professors' petition also called for the opening of a public debate on the state of economics and economics teaching.

That debate began on the 21st of June, when the French newspaper, *Le Monde*, reported on the students' movement, soon to call itself *Autisme-économie*, and interviewed several prominent economists who voiced sympathy for the students' cause. Other newspapers and magazines followed suit. As the French media, including radio and television, expanded the public debate, student and teacher fears of persecution if they took a public stand diminished and the number of signatories to the petitions increased. This fuelled further media interest. Jack Lang, the French Minister of Education, announced that he regarded the complaints with great seriousness and was setting up a commission to investigate. He put the venerable Jean-Paul Fitoussi, president of the *l'Observatoire Français des Conjonctures Économiques* (OFCE), in charge and instructed him to report within a year.

The movement in France now entered a new stage, as it sought to capitalize on its official recognition and expand the public debate. Meanwhile, news of the recent events was beginning to reach the rest of the world.

The Post-autistic Economics Newsletter / Review

The first issue of the *Post-Autistic Economics Newsletter* appeared in September 2000. It arose out of a conversation the previous month at the World Congress of Social Economics at Cambridge in the UK. Benjamin Balak, then a graduate student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, told me that some distinguished American universities were eliminating, even as an elective, the history of

economic thought from the curriculum, the idea being that the total absence of competing ideas would facilitate students' indoctrination into neoclassicalism. I was incredulous. It seemed too much to believe that the closing down of the horizons of economic enquiry could have gone so far. But a quick check with other conferees not only confirmed Balak's account but also turned up economists faced with redundancy in consequence of this new narrowing of vision.

Attempts to interest people at the conference in organizing a spirited response, however, came to nothing. The general view was that such a project, no matter how important, stood no chance of success. Sure, economists who either do not subscribe to the neoclassical model or who reject the anti-scientific fundamentalism that surrounds it constitute a sizable and growing minority. But no means existed for mobilizing them as a community. Dissenters survived only as isolated, worried and often persecuted individuals or as members of numerous competing heterodox groups, each zealously guarding their mailing lists against the others. And no one at the Cambridge conference seemed to have heard of the events earlier in the summer in France. My mention of them to a few people appeared to leave them wondering if they were talking to a fantasist.

If it had not been for Geoff Harcourt, that probably would have been the end of my involvement. But, in his after dinner speech at the conference banquet, the old warrior, still fighting and still hilarious, raised spirits with laugher that rattled the timbers of the medieval dining hall. The next day, still buoyed by his performance and returning home on the train to the west of England, I pondered the possibilities for constructive rebellion. Somehow the success and hope of the French students had to be communicated to economists of conscience throughout the world.

The students had a website "*Autisme-économie*" packed with documents, newspaper articles and information. With this to draw on, compiling a journalistic account of their exploits and public reactions proved both easy and fun. But what to do with it? Even if my effort had been accepted in some form by a quality newspaper, it would still largely miss the target audience. Sending it, then just a Word file named "post-autistic economics", out as an electronic newsletter occurred to me as a possibility. Sending it anonymously, giving it an element of mystery,

could conceivably spark enough interest for a second issue that would include translations of the French students' and teachers' petitions. It was really these that I thought people should read.

A week passed before I set up an anonymous account with Hotmail, formatted the document as a newsletter, put in pleas for subscribers and for readers to forward the newsletter to potentially interested colleagues, and then emailed it to 99 people. 90 seconds later the newsletter had its first subscriber, Frank Ackerman. 40 seconds after that, its second, Paul Ormerod, and so on until at the end of the first week there were 209. The following email message also arrived from Olivier Vaury, one of the founders of *Autisme-économie*: "I just now got back to Paris. Who are you? What country are you in? What is your organization? What do you want?" This and other messages suggested that the mystery element was working.

But after the first week, uptake fell off: 128 new subscribers in the second week, 57 in the third, and 67 in the fourth. The second issue on October 3 failed to regain the initial momentum and likewise the third at the end of November. Furthermore, generating copy was becoming problematic and the project was taking up too much time. And then there was the hate mail, some of it quite nasty and not the ideal way to start the day, and, worst of all, the viruses that were being targeted at *PAE News*. So after the third issue I decided the next would be the last. But when my partner, Kate Fullbrook, heard this she implored me to persevere for a few more issues just to see what developed. "The neoclassicalists", she reasoned, "wouldn't be spending their time sending you viruses and hate mail if they didn't see the newsletter as a serious threat."

About this time Joseph Halevi gallantly stepped forward to help out with advice, encouragement and hard copy. So too did James Galbraith. And the French students were proving marvelous to work with, especially Gilles Raveaud. These associations were a real turning point as they raised the possibility of developing the newsletter into a review with very fast publication of articles received. And, although February 2001 saw only 59 new subscribers, this pushed the total past the 1000 mark. In mid-March, issue number 5 came out featuring six contributors, and in

the months that followed circulation grew very rapidly. Today (19 August 2002) the *Post-Autistic Eeconomics Review* has 5500 subscribers.

Fitoussi's Report

Meanwhile in France the movement grew in stature and influence. In the beginning the neoclassical mainstream had chosen to ignore the demands and analysis of French economics students and academics. But by autumn 2000 it became clear that in France the call for reform was not about to go away. In October *Le Monde* carried in one issue three pages of articles on the movement, including an ambiguous interview with Amartya Sen. It was about this time that the traditionalists changed tactics and launched a counter-attack. It included a long article by Robert Solow in *Le Monde*, another by Olivier Blanchard, the chairperson at MIT, and the publication of a counter-petition – a plea for the *status quo*.

These mainstream initiatives, however, backfired. Solow's article came across as imperialistic and condescending, while the petition, which was mainly an MIT affair, left observers shocked by its cynical misrepresentation of the students' demands. Most of all, however, people on all sides seemed surprised at how feeble were the arguments offered for blocking the reforms proposed by the French students.

Meanwhile the *Autisme-économie* students, led by Gilles Raveaud, Olivier Vaury, Ioana Marinescu and Emmanuelle Benicourt, organized public debates on the issues they had raised in their petition. Through the winter and spring these well-attended events took place at universities all over France, the debate at Nanterre on April 10th attracting more than 400 people.

Articles continued to appear in the French press regarding the issues raised by the movement. In February 2001 *L'économie Politique* devoted an entire issue to the debate. In articles and interviews in the French national press, various French economists of note, including Bernard Paulré, Olivier Favereau, Yann Moulier-Boutang, Jean Gadrey, and André Orléan, came out on the side of the students. Over 200 French academic economists signed the petition of support.

In November 2000 *www.paecon.net* was launched to give international direction to what had become known as the Post-Autistic Economics Movement and which by now was receiving media attention around the world. At the beginning of December, Gilles Raveaud and Ioana Marinescu, appeared in a roundtable "The Future of Economics" at an international conference in Leeds, UK. This event forged important links between the movement in France and emergent initiatives elsewhere. At about the same time James Galbraith flew to Paris to meet with student and academic leaders of the new movement. In January 2001, Galbraith replied to Solow in the fourth issue of the *Post-Autistic Economics Newsletter*.

The French students re-designed and re-launched their website (*http://mouv.eco.free.fr*) in both French and English. Meanwhile other PAE-related websites were springing up in various countries. These included one created in the UK by Oxford University students, which came about following an appearance by Raveaud and Marinescu at the Cambridge Workshop on Realism and Economics.

Throughout the academic year (2000-2001), Fitoussi's commission was intensely lobbied. This included a special spring visit to Paris by members of the Executive Committee of the International Economics Association. Big guns and bold manoeuvers were called for, because it was perceived by both sides that success by the French reformers would, in all likelihood, have effects far beyond the French borders. Concessions won there would, in time, be demanded in other countries, not just by other students, but also by the thousands of academic economists whose fidelity to the neoclassical mainstream is more survivalist than intellectual.

In June 2001 'the Cambridge-27', 27 embattled economics PhD students at Cambridge University, published their petition "Opening Up Economics". By "opening up economics" they mean becoming mindful of the limitations of the "competing approaches to understanding economic phenomena", of "learning their domain of applicability", and of using "the best methods for the question at hand" rather than "restricting research done in economics to that based on one approach only." Their petition soon had 500 signatures. In September 2001 a cognate petition appeared, that resulted from a meeting of 75 students,

researchers and professors from twenty-two nations who gathered in Kansas City for a week of discussion on the state of economics.

People expecting Fitoussi's report to be a whitewash were surprised when it was released in September. It proposed enough reforms to win the support of *Autisme–économie*. And enough for Jack Lang to speak of fundamental reforms which he has promised to carry through.

Fitoussi's report, *L'Enseignement Supérieur des Sciences Économiques en Question* (Rapport au ministre de l' Éducation nationale. Paris: Fayard, 2001), calls for two fundamental changes in the teaching of economics.[1]

Firstly, it calls for the integration of debate on contemporary economic issues into both the structure and content of university economics courses. It means real debate, not neoclassical opinion presented on its own or with only token alternatives. Such an open environment would preclude the standard practice of keeping the ideological content of neoclassicism hidden from students. This change alone would radically transform economics teaching, with inevitable and incalculable effects to economics itself.

Secondly, Fitoussi's report demands that multidisciplinarity be placed at the heart of the teaching of economics. Economics students will be required to study cognate disciplines, such as sociology, history, law, psychology, etc., so as to become familiar with their contrasting views of, and methods of, treating social-economic phenomena.

By now over 100 articles have appeared in the French press about the crisis in economics and the efforts to reform it. The PAE debate is now also receiving increasing media attention in other countries. Here are a few extracts from international press coverage of the movement:

> The bonfire of revolution has become so bad that the French education minister, Mr. Lang, has ordered a commission to investigate. *The Melbourne Age* (Australia).

> A movement has begun calling for post-autistic economics … If there is a daily prayer for the global economy, it should be "deliver us from the abstraction". *The Independent* (UK).

the Post-Autistic Economics Movement . . . has spread like wildfire among students in France and Spain, with growing numbers of correspondents in other countries as well. *Science and Society* (USA).

The battle lines are being drawn, and *www.paecon.net* is the site for much of the action. *The Australian*.

The PAE movement is drawing praise from anti-globalization activists and thinkers. Writing in *The Independent*, Andrew Simms of the United Kingdom-based New Economics Foundation hails the PAE movement as part of an effort to make "the mandarins of the global economy experience a reality check" and protect the environment. The movement's Web site and its e-journal, the *Post-Autistic Economics Newsletter* (published every one or two months), showcase PAE's specific critiques of mainstream economics as well as the movement's growing influence. *Foreign Policy* (USA).

the "post-autistic economics" (PAE) movement, an academic backlash against traditional economics that is rapidly gaining adherents among disaffected practitioners of the dismal science in developing and advanced economies. *Foreign Policy Magazine* (USA).

“This [PAE] protest is three-fold: economics as it is taught is completely detached from the “world out there”, . . . economic teaching . . . makes an excessive use of maths . . . and economic teaching is monolithic. It does not present the variety of past and present theories.” *Arena* (Sweden).

in France, a "post-autistic economics" movement erupted in protest against the excesses of formal economics discourses. . . The movement quickly spread to Spain and across much of continental Europe, and is making inroads in the UK. *The Guardian* (UK).

Paris has become the birthplace of a revolt against the pre-eminence of theory over practice, of economic abstraction over reality, and statistics over real life. Called "post-autistic economics" . . . the movement has had a worldwide impact, with Cambridge students drawing up their own petition. *New Statesman* (UK).

> the PAE movement comes at a time of reaction to globalisation and the power of the corporation . . .[and to economists'] continuing loss of students and their increasingly fragile position within the business school. *Arena Magazine*, February 2002, (Australia).

> The second issue already had readers in 36 countries, today the *Post-Autistic Economics Review* has 5,000 (non-paying) subscribers in one hundred countries. *De Morgen* (Brussels).

> In September 2000 the first internet edition of the *post-autistic economics newsletter* appeared, which spread news of the movement to students, assistant professors and professors throughout the world. Further editions of the newsletter, alongside the Post-Autistic Economics Network website (*www.paecon.net*), have founded a strong platform for discussion. *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (Munich).

Tomorrow

Economics has not experienced such pressure to change since the 1930s. Then the complaint was its inability to explain the Great Depression and to effect a recovery. It responded by inventing macroeconomics. Today, the indictment is both more general and more serious: economics as taught in universities neither explains contemporary reality nor provides a framework for the critical debate of issues in democratic societies.

One of the founders of *Autisme-économie*, Emmanuelle Benicourt, has described the movement's aspirations as follows:

> We hope it will trigger concrete transformations of the way economics is taught . . . We believe that understanding real-world economic phenomena is enormously important to the future well-being of humankind, but that the current narrow, antiquated and naive approaches to economics and economics teaching make this understanding impossible. We therefore hold it to be extremely important, both ethically and economically, that reforms like the ones we have proposed are, in the years to come, carried through, not just in France, but throughout the world.

The PAE Movement is about bringing economics students and economists of goodwill together to realize these changes, especially by promoting critical public discussion and honest debate. The publication by Routledge early in 2003 of *The Crisis in Economics: The Post-Autistic Economics Movement: The first 600 days*, a collection of material from the first 12 issues of the *Post-Autistic Economics Review,* is intended to promote these ends.

Finally, it seems worthwhile to ask why the reform movement begun by the French students has, unlike others, so quickly caught the imagination and involvement of so many economists around the world. Three reasons seem to stand out.

Firstly, the movement is founded on the sort of optimism that youth is most capable of originating. The French students had the innocent audacity to ask not for a mere amelioration of a deplorable state, but for a total overhaul of economics and economics teaching, in short, for a new beginning. The usual wary vocabulary of the economics of dissent which presumes that the neoclassical hegemony will continue, is completely absent from the students' documents.

Second is their notion of pluralism. Whereas traditionally the representatives of different economic heterodoxies have effected a kind of pluralism by meeting in the name of mutual tolerance and by conspiring through alliance for political advantage, the pluralism of the PAE Movement – and this will become clear if you read *The Crisis in Economics* – is epistemologically grounded. It regards the various 'schools' of economics, including neoclassicalism, as offering different widows on economic reality, each bringing into view different subsets of economic phenomena. It rejects the idea that any school could possess final or total solutions but accepts all as possible means for understanding real-life economic problems.

Third, among the decent people of the world there is a growing revulsion against the global financial regime whose policies, distilled from neoclassical dogma and forced on the world's poor, result annually in an invisible slaughter, millions condemned for orthodoxy's sake to needless death and suffering through the withdrawal of life-supporting services in the false name of 'good economics'.