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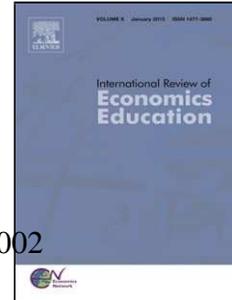


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## BOOK REVIEW:

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This is an impressive book of admirable scope and ambition. It offers a strong critique of current economics teaching including the much-trumpeted CORE Project; but furthermore the authors make a withering assessment of the prevailing ethos of modern Western universities and the factors underpinning its development. Crucially, the book aims to demonstrate the existence of an econocracy, a social formation dominated by economic motives and by a detached elite of professional economists. In so doing, it captures an important element of the zeitgeist. It sheds appreciable light on the factors behind the UK vote to leave the European Union and the election of US President Donald Trump. It does all of this in an accessible way, purposely eschewing technical language. In so doing its goal is no less than to bring significant social changes, not directly, but via changes in the education, role and behaviour of economists. The authors perhaps demand the impossible; but in making those demands they show some of what might be possible.

The book's main argument is thus: There exists an econocracy, "a society in which political goals are defined in terms of their effect on the economy, which is believed to be a distinct system with its own logic that requires experts to manage it". This econocracy is perpetuated by economists who, albeit unintentionally, act to make their discipline more exclusive, increasingly detached from wider society, and therefore unaccountable to and hence less trusted by citizens. Although all economists might be guilty of perpetuating this econocracy, 'neoclassical' economists in particular are guilty of doing so; and this is inherent to their way of thinking about economics. To correct this problem requires greater pluralism in economics: this will force economists to be humbler, more open about their assumptions and hence more trusted. In so doing, we would see a return to economics as an example of liberal education, rather than as a training course in technical excellence. Further, to accompany that, we need to see (amongst other things) economists and their universities re-engaging with the public, to democratise economics. This though, is unlikely to happen because of the disciplinary structures which have emerged and are perpetuated because they appear to suit the interests of those within them. Nonetheless, the book argues one should try to transform the discipline, to design an economics for everyone. Not surprisingly, a crucial driver of the movement towards these goals is the voice of students, which the book expresses eloquently.

The book's treatment of the econocracy is quite persuasive. The authors provide a sustained argument that the econocracy exists and they outline its multi-faceted nature.

The book traces the development of econocracy, for instance via the number of times the word ‘economy’ is cited in political manifestos, or appeared in newspapers. It also notes how growth in the technical apparatus of the State has facilitated the econocracy by creating more and more data for technocrats to use. The book also considers briefly the growth of formalism in social science post-World War 2. Similarly, it considers the disciplinary separation which occurred in the same period. Hence, the economy was increasingly seen as a separate sphere of activity not merely because economists viewed it that way, but because of the academic specialisms and accompanying boundaries being constructed at the same time. As a minor criticism, the book could have offered more on the relation between power relations in the wider society and the ideas being promoted. For instance, was there something in the nature of contemporary capitalism which led to the development of the econocracy? In this context, the book may also have benefitted from a discussion of neoliberalism. As a final note, the book may also have explored the concept of econocracy as compared with, Galbraith’s (1967) related concept of the technostructure.

The book will attract criticism from some quarters for its perceived attack on ‘neoclassical economics’. However, the book’s “argument is...not that neoclassical economics is without use” (67) but merely is rather limited, for example in its narrow treatments of power and values. The book is not anti-neoclassical. Rather, it is pluralist. It outlines well-established arguments for pluralist economics including neoclassicism: all theories are fallible, particularly in a complex world, hence pluralism is necessary for understanding, explanation and practical usefulness. Further, for the authors, pluralism not merely about presenting different perspectives but by showing the contested nature of the discipline. However, the book is not advocating eclecticism or relativism: “[The paradigms] are diverse and not all of equal value but they all hold valuable insights” (61).

Other critics of the book will claim that by focusing on neoclassical economics, it rather misses the point: neoclassical economics has been long surpassed by the research frontier. However, the authors anticipate that criticism in three ways. First, they adopt explicitly a well-established meta-theoretical characterisation of neoclassical economics which comprising three key elements: individualism, equilibrium, and optimisation. Implicitly too, they identify an insistence on mathematical modelling (see Lawson, *passim*) as central to their subject. Consequently their formulation of neoclassical economics applies to the contemporary mainstream. Second, they argue that in teaching, the material presented to students remains broadly neoclassical. Indeed, one of the rationales for the CORE Project is precisely to update the curriculum to capture recent developments at the research frontier. Thirdly, the book explicitly does consider behavioural economics. The book subjects it to similar critique, as offering a single way of thinking about economic problems; of representing a neutered version of its original ideas; and of presenting a series of biases and associated theories but without giving students any way to know which one applies when (pp. 175-8).

A further critical response will be that the book’s treatments of economics are unfair; however, the book seems to me rather polite. Indeed, the book may be too careful not to apportion blame. It denies that economists have intentionally created an econocracy:

“Economic experts are not part of a shadowy cabal running society behind the scenes” (4) (cf. Mirowski, 2013). Further, the authors say that economists have not deliberately excluded dissent from the discipline: rather, they are victims of the perverse incentives within the system, principally around research assessment. Here the book could have been much more damning. Indeed, it does relate how, under Davis Dewey the American Economic Review decided not to publish Marxist material. Further the book recognises the growing power of mathematical formalism in giving sciences prestige (p. 99). In his foreword to the book, Haldane argues that the erection of technical language is deliberate by the economics profession. As he notes, this is a common thing for professionals to do. In this respect he is more critical of economists than is the book.

In the context of this journal, the most significant elements of the book concern economics education. The book offers a lengthy argument for liberal education, as rehearsed previously by PCES (2014). Liberal education is aimed at creating critical, flexible, autonomous learners. The book argues that certain features of neoclassical economics make it inconsistent with liberal education. Here I might disagree: as I have argued elsewhere, although pluralism (Mearman, 2007), or indeed Marxism (Clarke and Mearman, 2003) may achieve the goals of liberal education more effectively, they can be achieved using neoclassical economics alone. By committing to teach neoclassical economics critically, leaving open the possibility that it is utterly wrong, liberal goals may be achieved. The crucial determinant of whether this happens is that the educator themselves shares the goals of liberal education at all. The book effectively challenges economists to declare their goals and pin their flag to liberal education.

Conversely, economists have typically eschewed explicit statements of their goals, and implicitly adopted other, more instrumentalist objectives around training future economics graduate students (so as to reproduce the subject) and ensuring specific concepts and methods are learned. Several recent interventions seem to confirm this. Coyle and Wren-Lewis (2015) assert that economics is vocational, not liberal. Birdi (2016), in outlining the pedagogical method of CORE, details the ‘how’ but not the ‘why’ of its approach: CORE is evidence-led (and apparently dispenses with prior theory) but for an unspecified purpose. The new UK official benchmark statement for economics (QAAHE, 2015) similarly outlines what would usually be taught, and how, but the aims of an economics education appear instrumental and to be something of an afterthought. It remains to be seen whether, in a subject which tells of consumer sovereignty, the students will have their demands met.

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