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PLURALISM, PLURALITY, HETERODOXY AND THE RHETORIC OF DISTINCTION

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Introduction

Frederic Lee (2008)¹ addresses strongly a topic that has recently exercised many minds in 'heterodox' communities. For example, the UK Association for Heterodox Economics (AHE)² has engaged in debates about the future position of the Association; viz., whether a 'heterodox' or a 'pluralist' stance ought to be adopted. Many AHE members agitated for a clear statement in support of pluralism and even for a change in the Association's name. Many of the positions adopted in those debates can be found in Lee's paper; arguably, they fall under all three headings of theoretical, strategic and intellectual pluralism.

I take Lee's argument to run as follows: Economics is a space in which claims are contested, including fundamental claims about how the world works and therefore how economics should study it. Two main viewpoints in economics can be labeled heterodox and mainstream, and these are non-comparable; indeed, completely different. Mainstream economics can be identified as possessing key theoretical and methodological facets. Further, heterodoxy is a(n increasingly) coherent whole, which comprises critique of the mainstream but also includes theories and explanations which stand independent of the mainstream. Taken together they constitute something called heterodox economics. Lee defines *theoretical pluralism* as the belief that different theories are not *fundamentally* different, and that theories may not compete, but may co-exist and are comparable. Lee shows that theoretical pluralism is often strategic. Indeed, though he does not argue for this, Lee implicitly demonstrates why

¹ All references to Lee are Lee (2008) unless otherwise stated.

² The author was co-ordinator of the AHE from 2004-7.

heterodox economists may choose to be theoretically pluralist: it is better to be a heretic than a blasphemer. Blasphemers are punished harshly by state power, whereas heretics may be tolerated. In economics, heterodox economists should portray themselves as heretics, not deviating fundamentally from the mainstream program but complementary to it. That is a survival strategy.

Nonetheless, Lee criticizes those who opt for theoretical pluralism. Lee argues that those who advocate real difference see little possibility in theoretical pluralism because a) the mainstream is not open to persuasion from outside the mainstream (and has the power to ignore those outside); and b) the theories are non-comparable. Thus, the goal for heterodox economists is not theoretical pluralism but *intellectual pluralism* based on the politics of tolerance. Lee's position is based on democratic values, not dissimilar to Deweyan pragmatists, like, for example, McCloskey (1983, *et passim*). There is in Lee's arguments much resonance with McCloskey's position, albeit with less scope for productive conversation. However, there are two important differences between McCloskey's and Lee's positions: first, her work could be seen as a reaction to incommensurability theses like his. Second, Lee stresses and opposes the holding of power by one group over another.

This comment considers some key elements in Lee's argument. The comment focuses on criticism, so will appear negative. However, it should be acknowledged that Lee's paper offers excellent insight, particularly on strategic pluralism and more generally on the need to debate the meaning of pluralism. Despite good attempts to understand pluralism better, participants in debates often talk across each other (see Mearman, 2008, for an illustration of how writers use the term differently). Lee's intervention on that point is particularly useful.

However, there are several points at which Lee's argument is challengeable. This comment is a brief evaluation of Lee's treatment of pluralism. It argues as follows: the categories of mainstream and heterodox are difficult to define and thus a strict distinction between them is unwarranted; therefore, they are not non-comparable. Attempts to contrast them starkly are part of a rhetoric of distinction which may be problematic. Thus, Lee's concept of intellectual pluralism may be weaker than it seems, because it is based on distinction and its tolerance, rather than an embrace of diversity. Further, both theoretical and intellectual pluralism may be based on wider epistemological and ontological grounds and thus Lee's distinction between them may also be problematic. Sheila Dow's structured pluralism may be a more productive way of embracing difference.

Mainstream/Heterodox and Strict Distinctions

In making these comments, work done on (dualistic) distinctions (Dow, 1990; Mearman, 2005; McCloskey, 1994) is drawn on. A (dualistic) distinction is not merely problematic because it involves two categories, say mainstream/heterodox; it is the *nature of the distinction* that matters. Distinctions that are fixed, strict, mutually exclusive and artificially strong are difficult to sustain beyond their use as temporary grouping devices. They may also create permanent (or at least enduring) barriers between the categories, which may prevent opportunities for engagement, debate and critique. Such a rhetoric of distinction has several general problems. A pluralism which is structured, allowing difference, but also open, allowing for communication may be preferable. Such a conception may be found in Dow (2004).

A crucial element in Lee's argument is the definition of mainstream and heterodox. Like many articles on this topic, Lee's distinction can be considered (whether or not it was so motivated) in terms of sets: mainstream and heterodox are sets; and in Lee's case, they are mutually exclusive. However, if we think in terms of sets, there are two problems in the construction of both mainstream and heterodox: the definition of both sets is difficult; and both sets are fuzzy. That means that the categories are difficult to construct; and that some concepts or individuals may not fit completely into either set.

All arguments such as Lee's which attempt to create categories and allocate either concepts or individuals to those categories face similar long-standing philosophical and practical problems; how to categorize and to what extent it is possible. There is a variety of opinion. One view is that categorization is based on essence; another relies on family resemblance and use as criteria for loose categorizations. Some argue that categories are a combination of both (Bowker and Star, 1999). Let us take for now the first view. Thus, for an individual or concept to be classed as 'mainstream', there needs to be a) a clear definition of 'mainstream' and b) clear procedures for classifying individuals or concepts. However, this is far from straightforward. For example, taxonomy of species is extremely problematic: there may be as many as 24 different definitions of species, and there has long been debate over what constitutes a variety of a species, what is a genus, etc. (on species, see Hey, 2006; on varieties, see Blyth, 1835; on taxonomy, see Mayr, 1969). Identifying a clear definition of mainstream and heterodox is similarly fraught with problems, as the range of distinctions (and accompanying definitions of 'heterodox') offered by various authors shows (cf. Colander, Holt and Rosser, 2004; Davis, 2009; Dow, 2000; Lawson, 1997, 2003, 2006, 2009; Lavoie, 2006; Lee, 2006;

Mearman, 2007; Murphy, 2007; Potts, 2000; Wrenn, 2007). Lee offers another criterion for distinction: whether the explanation of the provisioning process is social or individualistic. It is clear that defining each perspective and thence the difference between them is exceptionally hard. Finding one characteristic or fundamental essence would seem impossible. Is it methods? Is it theories? Or is it, as Heilbroner (1990) or Dow (1996) might argue, 'vision' (which for Dow means ontology)? Dequech (2007) has shown that defining categories thus based on concepts is very difficult, and may lead to the set 'heterodox' being empty.

If we take the arguably looser position that categories (and therefore distinctions) are based on family resemblance, and that categories should be evaluated in terms of their use, does the mainstream/heterodox distinction fair any better? In some ways, it does. Indeed, the definitions of heterodox found in the literature are based on little more than resemblance. We could also regard the heterodox associations as families of self-defined heterodox economists espousing heterodox ideas. Yet, those families are fraught with division sometimes as strong as between families; for example between strands of Marxism (see the recent debates on the TSS interpretation of Marx: cf. Kliman, 2006; Venenziani, 2006), between different types of Post Keynesians (cf. Davidson, 2005; Lavoie, 2005), and between Austrians and other types of 'heterodox' economists. Further, it remains questionable to what extent there is agreement on what is meant by the label 'heterodox', within either its users or its critics (Dequech, 2007). The fact that associations like the AHE exist and function suggests that there is an agreed workable definition. However, there are sociological and strategic reasons why people attend such groups which may be strong enough to overpower conceptual differences. Further, even if there were some core set of ideas that were agreed, there would likely be issues at the edges,

on which the group 'heterodox economists' would fundamentally disagree. On these issues, would their respective positions also be described as non-comparable?

If the definition of heterodox ideas is problematic, how about identifying heterodox economists? Lee (2009: see particularly Appendices 24-6) has worked diligently to show the composition of 'heterodox' associations: one could define heterodox ideas as being those that the associations hold. However, that then raises the question of which came first: concepts or associations? Following the model of King (2002)'s examination of Post Keynesianism would suggest that concepts and informal groupings come first, and that formal associations follow later. If it was the concepts, this returns us to the questions of which concepts are heterodox, and which are not?

In defense of Lee, clearly his definitions of neither mainstream nor heterodox are blunt instruments: indeed, they display many subtleties. As he makes clear, both approaches are complex, layered entities. Both are multi-faceted and operate at many levels. Lee does not claim that heterodox economics is a homogeneous globule of ideas. There is a diversity of approach at some levels in the mainstream (see Holcombe, 2008), and arguably even more in the heterodoxy. Lee captures this well by describing heterodoxy as a concatenation (p. 9). This conceptualization suggests heterodoxy as being a complex system. As such, it is a set of elements with connections between them. In some cases, the connections are strong, in others less so. For example, Lawson (2006) argues that heterodoxy can be identified as not insisting on mathematical methods (and as having common elements in its ontologies). Certainly, in terms of that relation, the bonds between the different heterodox elements are strong. However, in terms of other relations, the connections are much weaker. For example, as already cited,

Austrian economists adopt a form of methodological individualism, whereas other heterodox approaches do not. Austrians and Marxists share little common ground on the nature of value and there is little in common politically between Austrians and Marxists. Indeed, in terms of all three of these criteria, there is much more in common between Austrians and *some* mainstreamers. Further, if we claimed that ‘the mainstream’ holds a belief that most of the time the provisioning problem can be best solved by markets with a little government assistance, a commonality of approach could be found between the mainstream and many Keynesians.

Thus, it has been argued that the definitions of mainstream and heterodox (and therefore the distinctions between each) are extremely difficult to identify. That may weaken Lee’s claim that the two approaches are ‘non-comparable’.

Non-Comparability

Arguably, the key word running through Lee’s treatment of all of these three elements is ‘non-comparable’. Lee uses this term frequently. The term is used throughout (albeit unevenly) the contested science literature (cf. Livingstone, 1987; Linenthal, 2000; Brew, 2001). A reasonable interpretation of the word is as being identical to ‘incommensurable’³. What is the effect of this term? On one hand, it is confrontational: mainstream and heterodox involve, by definition, the rejection of the other (Lee, p. 3). They are fundamentally and “completely different” (Lee, p. 7) and disagree on a range of issues at different levels. They are engaged in a

³ Lee generally avoids that specific word, except for fleeting oblique references.

contest. Yet, on the other hand, they are said to be incommensurable. They cannot be compared. The question then arises: how could they be fighting?

How incommensurable are the two positions, in fact? Lee (p. 3) offers a range of opposed elements of mainstream and heterodox. However, Lee (p. 13) highlights one: that mainstream and heterodox offer different explanations of the 'provisioning process' of society. For Lee, heterodox economists view the provisioning process as social, whereas mainstreamers view it as asocial, i.e. individualistic⁴. The main point is that if the two sides offer different explanations of the provisioning process for society, then they must at least share the view that there is a provisioning process to be explained.

One of the contradictions of 'incommensurability' is that in many cases, incommensurability is ascribed to parties actively involved in a debate, an argument, which would be impossible were they truly incommensurable (see, for example, Bhaskar, 1986). Another contradiction of incommensurability concerns the uses of allegedly incommensurable languages. In many cases, mainstream and heterodox economists are using common terminology. In other cases, of course, they are using different terminologies. And, of course, , they may sometimes use the same terminology but with different meanings: value, for example, is typically taken as equivalent to price in neoclassical economics, but in *specific* heterodox traditions, value is the quantity of socially necessary labor time embodied in a

⁴ However, if the distinction is between social and individualistic explanations, where does this leave Austrian economics? Their individualism is not the same as that of the mainstream, but they would be classified as mainstream under this definition; yet they are often taken, and take themselves, as heterodox.

commodity. But one of the lessons from Kuhn's discussion of incommensurable languages is that most of the time, communication across cultural divides *is* possible. Initially, Kuhn found Aristotle's ideas fantastic or at least difficult to decipher. The root of the problem of reading Aristotle was that he was using a different language, embedded in different foundational concepts. Once these different concepts were identified and understood, though, Kuhn was able to understand Aristotle. Aristotle's and Kuhn's languages were in fact commensurable.

If Kuhn was able to come to terms with Aristotle's writings, through a process of translation (however imperfect), then it seems strange to consider that mainstream and heterodox economists cannot compare their own arguments, methods, theories, standards, etc. Indeed, this happens all the time. Furthermore, because of their training, heterodox economists often do it rather well! (Lee, 2009, Appendix 10 shows that heterodox economists cite mainstreamers regularly). Disagreements occur about which approach is best (the Cambridge capital controversy being a good example: see Harcourt, 1972), which would be impossible without some mutual comprehension. Commensurability does not imply that there is harmony (cf. Lee, 2008, p. 5): indeed, it facilitates contest. Arguably, of the strict divides implied by Lee's categorisation of mainstream and heterodox, hardly any actually disallow meaningful comparison⁵. The criterion of non-comparability then means that scope for conversation is reduced.

This allows us to make a pertinent comparison between Lee and McCloskey (1994, *et passim*). Both argue against the current practice of economics and agree that more tolerance of

⁵ For instance, logical time and historical time are clearly comparable. The concepts of agency employed by the two sides are also. Yet, they are clearly different.

difference is required. Thus, although Lee's position resonates with McCloskey's approach, it is in fact much less permissive. It ignores similarities that may exist between mainstream and heterodox. That reduces possibilities for meaningful debate. Indeed, in that respect, McCloskey's position could be read as utterly different from Lee's; or in fact as a reaction to arguments like his. In contrast, McCloskey's approach would be that rhetoric could provide a means via which the mainstream and heterodox could converse. In contrast, by emphasizing non-comparability, Lee engages in a rhetoric of distinction which may reduce scope for conversation, and may unintentionally reduce scope for pluralism.

Tolerance and Pluralisms

One advantage of Lee's treatment of *theoretical* and *intellectual pluralism* is that it allows a multi-level application of pluralism: contrary to its name, theoretical pluralism does not apply only to the level of theories; it also licenses parallel or complementary analyses at other levels such as methodology, 'vision', ontology or method. Similarly, intellectual pluralism demands tolerance irrespective of the level of analysis being addressed. This flexibility is beneficial because of the variety of definitions of pluralism, which leads to confusion in debates over whether person/theory/school 'x' is pluralist, because often the debaters talk across each other. For example, one person may advocate monism at the methodological level but argue for plurality at the theoretical level, while the other promotes methodological plurality (see Salanti and Screpanti, 1997; Mearman, 2008).

In discussions of pluralism, one source of confusion is the conflation of pluralism and plurality. Let us define pluralism as the advocacy of plurality. That in turn implies an attitude

towards difference. One might, for instance, tolerate or celebrate difference. The concept of tolerance is arguably the most important element in Lee's discussion of intellectual pluralism. It in turn suggests a crucial issue: the extent to which intellectual pluralism demands 'good behavior' of those participating in economic argumentation. As in the literature on rhetoric associated with McCloskey (et al), Lee's appeal for better behavior appears to be based on democratic principles. Intellectual pluralism allows people to make *claims* that they are correct, whilst stopping them from imposing a judgment that their claim is exclusively correct. However, my interpretation of Lee's position is that in spite of his claims that heterodox and mainstream theories are non-comparable; he is *promoting tolerance* rather than *celebrating difference*. That hints at a potential problem with Lee's formulation: intellectual pluralism may be weaker than it first seems.

Lee holds that economics is 'contested inquiry' in which people with fundamentally different positions argue that they are correct – and imply that the other is incorrect. The claims in question might be empirical, methodological, theoretical, ethical or even policy-related. Intellectual pluralism is *desirable* in contested inquiry because of the clash between views: it would be better if all sides of debates showed tolerance of the other. However, it is only *necessary* in contested inquiry when one side of the argument has the power to impose their view on the other. Thus, intellectual pluralism is essentially asymmetric: it applies mainly to the powerful, as it appeals to them to use their power responsibly. In effect, Lee is arguing that the mainstream does not do that.

Of course, in contested enquiry, alternative strategies are available. One might simply ignore the other side of the debate, (1) perhaps citing the fact that they have different

standards of enquiry, different methods, different evidential bases, different logics, etc.

Another reason to ignore the other side would be (2) if one also believed that (perhaps because of their standards, etc.) they lacked legitimacy. A further reason (3) to ignore one's opponent would be – as members of associations like the AHE and Lee himself might attest – because one did not believe that the other side would listen. Under (1), each school of thought would plough on regardless of the other school. In effect the group would tolerate the existence of the other but not celebrate it. In (2), each school would aim to destroy the other; but this would only be possible for the larger and more powerful group, and thence clearly not for heterodox economists. This involves neither tolerance nor celebration of difference. In scenario (3), the oppressed school would largely ignore the other side but argue for the right to practice economics their way; i.e. request tolerance. There are different ways to justify this tolerance. What Lee labels as the *theoretical pluralist* position does this, for instance, by arguing that heterodox economics ought to be given space because this could lead to augmentation of the mainstream (implicit in the strategies of the Post Keynesians, Philip Arestis and Giuseppe Fontana, for example). In contrast, the intellectual pluralist appeals to democratic values to argue that the minority group should *per se* be given space to practice its art. In this way, intellectual pluralism appears strategically wise if not strategically motivated. That is an important consideration if one views the economic academic environment as one in which the dominant paradigm has sought to impose its view on minorities.

Having said that, intellectual pluralism does not guarantee good behavior. A consequence, if not a purpose, of Lee's paper is to appeal to mainstreamers to be more tolerant, and to argue that heterodox economists ought to have the right to express their right

to be different. However, what the call does *not* do is impel heterodox economists to embrace diversity. Tolerance is a weak form of pluralism. It is the type which says that one side should respect the right of the other to exist, but is prepared for the sides to be utterly separate and not to communicate. It would imply that mainstream and heterodox economists remain in distinct camps. However, it could also mean that different *heterodox* groups also remain in distinct camps. That is clearly not a position Lee advocates, as demonstrated by his extensive activist work in the AHE and in the International Confederation of Associations for Pluralism in Economics (ICAPE).

One of the key issues in recent debates about the nature of heterodox economics is whether it is essentially pluralist or not. Some argue that it is not, and that a tolerance of dissent (intellectual pluralism) was lacking within heterodox economics (Freeman and Kliman, 2005; Holcombe, 2008). The second key question about pluralism is: of what type is it? A narrow form of pluralism is based on tolerance, and creates a space for heterodox economics to operate. A broader form of pluralism allows the schools to co-exist but also interact. At the AHE, participants argued strongly for pluralism: for example, some argued that the name of the Association should change to explicitly use the word 'pluralist'. Recently, the theme of the Association's annual conference has explicitly included strong references to pluralism. These calls for pluralism included reaching out to groups of economists who were previously under-represented at conference: for example, feminists, behavioralists, institutionalists, Austrians. One of the purposes of this action was to encourage a stronger heterodoxy. In many ways, the goal was to mimic the model of the ICAPE, of which the AHE is a member. All of those initiatives could be aligned with both tolerance and embracing diversity, although my view is that the AHE

marginally favored the latter. Another facet of AHE practice has been to facilitate communication across heterodox schools of thought and to discourage themes organized around a specific school: this is not merely being tolerant but embracing difference. Significantly, the calls for papers expressly did not exclude mainstream economists (although Holcombe, 2008, disagrees). Indeed, the paper selection process was open to such economists.

One of the issues with Lee's classification is whether such calls for mainstream involvement are warranted or necessary. On the one hand, intellectual pluralism ought to require the possibility of engagement. On the other, the apparently asymmetric nature of the call for intellectual pluralism means that effectively, all that is required is for mainstream economists to allow the AHE to have its conference (which was not always straightforward: see Lee, 2002; 2009, ch. 10). Fundamentally, though, Lee's conceptions of contested inquiry, of the mainstream/heterodox distinction, and of intellectual pluralism mitigate mainstream involvement. Indeed, this may be a more general consequence of a rhetoric of distinction.

This is not to say, that Lee's call for tolerance is misplaced. Indeed, it is not. Tolerance and respect are sorely needed. However, the call for intellectual pluralism can be limiting if it is based on non-comparability. Further, Lee is perhaps precipitous to reject what he calls theoretical pluralism. One of the reasons not to reject it is that there are arguments that support both theoretical and intellectual pluralism. Lee's argument does not consider these commonalities because his argument for intellectual pluralism is based on democratic values rather than epistemological and ontological arguments for pluralism. For instance, it is held in much epistemological literature that it is extremely difficult to identify a single set of criteria for knowing whether a specific theoretical claim is correct. The grounds for arriving at certain

knowledge are perhaps impossible to achieve. This partly flows from the fact that the world is an extremely complex object. Thus, an argument for utilizing a range of perspectives to study the world is that no one theory could hope to explain or capture all of it. All theories are incomplete and fallible. Thus, pluralism is necessary. It is not a concession to strategic concerns, nor does it merely reflect a political value, though it is consistent with that value. None of these arguments mean that pluralism collapses into relativism or into what Lee describes as theoretical pluralism. Some theories may be better than others and be more likely to illuminate reality. They may have more explanatory power. Other theories will be better at prediction, which may matter where prediction matters, however fraught with problems it may be. Indeed, note that under such pluralism, explicit comparisons are being made: theoretical positions are not 'just different'; they are evaluated in terms of many criteria, allowing them to be interrogated and evaluated.

Conclusion

To put the preceding arguments differently, it is indeed possible to have one's cake and eat it too. Many of the epistemological and ontological arguments for theoretical pluralism apply to intellectual pluralism too. Indeed, rather than being opposite positions, it is perhaps better to say that intellectual pluralism encompasses theoretical pluralism. However, pluralism can have even more teeth than intellectual pluralism appears to have. One can argue simultaneously that theories have a right to exist, all are fallible, all may be useful in scientific explanation, but all are also subject to criticism. A heterodox economist may be strongly heterodox, believing that their theory offers the best explanation of a phenomenon, or even of

the entire provisioning process. However, they must a) be respectful of other theories and b) recognize that their theory may be incomplete, fallible and subject to revision. Even if engagement with the mainstream is not regarded as necessary, it remains possible. This allows more scope for engagement, debate and even emphasis of difference than the separate spheres model and thus may be strategically sensible too: that is particularly the case if the mainstream has the power to marginalize (or even eradicate) dissenters.

Dow's (2004) concept of structured pluralism may offer more scope for advancement, coherence, engagement, and yet authenticity and distinctiveness. Dow envisages schools of thought (which could therefore mean 'heterodoxy' or its components) as themselves structured, complex entities. Notwithstanding the difficulties of categories of which she is acutely aware, for Dow, these schools are identifiable and distinct. However, as social systems, schools are open to influences from outside. Together, such blocs comprise 'Economics', and each is necessary because of the complexity of the world and because of the problems of formulating theories that renders them all fallible. In such a formulation, contest and disagreement, and also and some degree of embracing difference are possible⁶. Of course, the reality of the situation may make such talk of embracing difference rather utopian and a different approach is necessary: but that is a strategic argument, which is not Lee's focus.

⁶ Dow's approach is offered as an alternative to other possible solutions, such as in Garnett (2006).

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