

Picking Up the Pieces of Macro Theory

The 2007 Crisis and Where to Go From Here?

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Abstract

It has been estimated that the global financial (GFC) crisis has cost the world somewhere between \$5-30 trillion USD. By any comparison this is a staggering loss and represents the most serious failure of economic systems since the 1920's. There were many reasons for the crisis, and analysis is ongoing, but what seems to be emerging as the leading cause of the crisis was the lack of macroeconomic models to account for major sections of the economy, mainly the housing sector and financial asset pricing. Just as important, but perhaps more theoretically challenging to address, are the lack of heterogeneity of economic agents, the lack of (or inappropriate) microfoundation underpinnings, and relaxing the requirement of rational expectations. The singular focus of macroeconomists and central bankers, pre-crisis, was on the Dynamic Stochastic General Equilibrium model (DSGE). None of the DSGE models were capable of alerting economists to the impending crisis. In this paper I examine the modeling paradigm pre-crisis and review the literature that has dawned as a result of the GFC. Much of this literature has been written by well-regarded macroeconomists and is highly critical of the field. The criticism cuts deep and results in a range of suggestions that include; adding elements to the DSGE framework to account for missing variables, to starting over with a completely new way to model complicated and emergent systems, ie. Agent Based Modeling.

Our ability to understand how and why the global financial crisis (GFC) occurred is predicated on our ability to understand past financial crisis, which in turn shaped the current environment that allowed the most recent financial crisis. In some regard, financial crisis are cyclical. A financial crisis starts, regulators respond to the crisis by implementing policies to avoid future crisis. Economists develop new models to deal with the failing of the old models in the hopes of better predicting future crisis. Complacency sets in and regulations are picked apart which amplify the negative affects of the (more often than not) unintended consequences of well intended regulators. After sufficient time, a new crisis forms and the cycle starts anew.

Financial crisis are not a recent phenomena. Since the 1920's the United States has endured a number of them, including a large depression, a large recession, and everything in between. With each occurrence regulators and economists spring to action with the hope of understanding, modeling and developing regulation to address future failings in the economic system. Less than one hundred years ago the U.S. was in the throws of the Great Depression. By the time the depression was over John Maynard Keynes had reformulated Alfred Marshall's partial equilibrium model with the inclusion of nominal rigidities. This reformulation required Keynes to invent several new concepts including liquidity preference, the consumption function and the multiplier. These components were necessary if Keynes was going to explain the Great Depression with his new ideas. However, Keynes' conceptual reformulation would only go so far. A methodological reformulation was also needed if the ideas Keynes proposed were going to take hold in any meaningful way. John Hicks provided the necessary methods in his IS-LM model and the foundations for general equilibrium analysis were set forth.

After the Great Resession the economy was slow to recovery but was helped along by the start of WWII. After the war was over the economy was humming and economists were hard at work continuing to refine and devolp additions to the IS-LM frmaework. Two influential papers on stabilization ploicy were written by Phillips (1954, 1957). These papers gave policy makers what they wanted; a link between the rate of unemployment and the rate of inflation. If policy makers wanted lower levels of unemployment they could simply turn the lever and magically lower unemployment, albeit at a higher rate of inflation. The seeming sucess of the Phillips curve led to an explosion of empirical macroeconomic models including models developed by Frisch, Goldberger, Haavelmo, Klein, and Tinbergen. This work culminated in the first economy-wide macroeconomic model which was used to lend credibility to the macroeconomic policy making advicated for by the Phillips model.¹

However, the sucess of the early macro-models was short lived. During the 1970's and 1980's a deep recession took hold. The recession was accomanyied by high levels of unemployment and high levels of inflation. According to the prevailing macroeconomic models in current use this should not have been possioble. Macroeconomists had a very public problem on their hands. As a result of this disparity between what the phillips curve predicted should be happeneing when unemployment was high and what was actually happening; the macroeconomists needed to refine their models and fast. This gave rise to what was to become known as the New Keynesian economics. Rather than start over with a completly new model the New Keynesians got to work adding complexity to their models to explain why we might see high inflation and high unemployment. Their focus, initially, was on the idea that wages and prices must be sticky. This sticyness of wages and prices could explain, why in

¹For a more detailed discussion of this model (the Federal Reserve System's MPS model) see Goodfriend and King (1997)

the short run, it was possible to have both high unemployment and high inflation. In addition to the stickiness concept, New Keynesians poured a lot of effort into development of the Dynamic Stochastic General Equilibrium (DSGE) model, a model that was destined to take center stage in the macroeconomic revolution. The DSGE model incorporates elements of endogenous capital stock and investment and is a microfounded representative agent model. Since the model contains both supply and demand analysis and has elements of the labor market, money market, and equity market the model is a true general equilibrium model. There is no universally agreed upon formulation as to the exact mathematical structure of the DSGE model however, most of the DSGE models contain the same basic ingredients. A short exposition of the DSGE model is given in Appendix A.

The trend of macroeconomics since the 1980's has been focused almost exclusively on the DSGE model. The model has become more rich and complicated over the past several decades. As with any modeling paradigm, economic models are intended to provide simplified insight into very complicated situations and the DSGE model is no different in this regard. The problem with the DSGE model was that policy makers were starting to view the model in the same way they were viewing the Phillips curve type models pre-Great recession. Adding to the problem, economists were omitting key segments of the economy in an effort to keep the model tractable. However, this tractability came at a very sick

Appendix A

The New Keynesian Dynamic Stochastic General Equilibrium Benchmark Model (DSGE)

A simplified version of the New Keynesian DSGE Benchmark Model (hereafter NK-DSGE) is given by the following eight equations²:

$$\frac{1}{C_t} = \beta R_t E_t \left(\frac{1}{C_{t+1}} \right) \quad (1)$$

$$w_t = X C_t L_t^\varphi \quad (2)$$

$$Y_t = Y_t K_t^\alpha L_t^{1-\alpha} \quad (3)$$

$$w_t = (1 - \alpha) \frac{Y_t}{L_t} \quad (4)$$

$$R_t = E_t \left[\frac{\alpha \frac{Y_{t+1}}{K_{t+1}} + 1 - \delta + (Q_{t+1} - 1) + \frac{1}{2\xi} (Q_{t+1} - 1)^2}{Q_t} \right] \quad (5)$$

$$I_t = K_{t+1} - (1 - \delta)K_t + \frac{\xi}{2} \frac{(K_{t+1} - K_t)^2}{K_t} \quad (6)$$

$$Q_t = 1 - \xi + \xi \frac{K_{t+1}}{K_t} \quad (7)$$

$$Y_t = C_t + I_t \quad (8)$$

where, C , I , Y , L , K , w , R , and Q are consumption, investment, output, labor supply, capital stock, real wage, real interest rate (gross), and Tobin's Q , respectively.

²A more detailed exposition of the benchmark model can be found in Schmitt-Grohe' and Uribe (2007)

For simplicity, the individual consumers utility maximization problem is not explicitly shown. For the same reason, the representative firms profit maximization problem is not detailed. Equations 1-8 assume the first order conditions have been satisfied and equilibrium conditions exist. Another simplifying assumption is a constant labor force and the level of technology remains unchanged.

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