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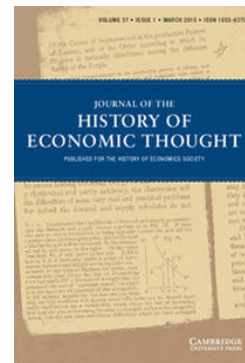
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A SUGGESTION FOR CLARIFYING THE STUDY OF DISSENT IN ECONOMICS

BY

ROGER E. BACKHOUSE

I. WHY STUDY CONTROVERSY AND DISSENT IN ECONOMICS?

The answer to this question might seem obvious: like Everest, dissent and controversy are there.¹ However, for most academic economists, dissent is negligible and controversy is far less important than it is commonly made out to be. To draw attention to disagreements between economists is to offer a distorted picture of what economics is about. Instead, they argue, the focus of attention should be on the enormous extent to which economists agree. From this perspective, dissent and controversy are not worth much attention. Another justification for studying controversy is that it is exciting. James Tobin once argued (explaining the appeal of Keynesian economics) that when you are young you like theoretical controversy: you like hearing about the good guys and the bad guys, and the idea of being on the side of progressive thought and against an encrusted orthodoxy.² Similarly, historians are interested in dissent and controversy in much the same way that writers of thrillers are more interested in neighborhoods where murders happen than in ones where everyone just watches TV all day! What these answers have in common is that they associate controversy and dissent with the pathology of the subject. Disagreement is something to be avoided and which reflects badly on the profession. The most famous representative of this view was probably Alfred Marshall. In his attempt to establish economics as a science that carried authority with the public, he studiously refrained (most of the time) from entering into controversy, and he sought to reconcile within his own work divergent trends that were tearing apart the subject in other countries.

Set against this, we have the work of dissenters themselves. By definition, they find fault with the consensus and use the language of dissent and heterodoxy to

Department of Economics, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 2TT, UK. A shortened, preliminary version of this paper was presented to a session on dissent in economics at the History of Economics Society, Duke University, July 2003. Though I do not discuss their papers here, I wish to note that it was stimulated in part by papers by Cristel de Rouvray, Tiago Mata, and Fred Lee.

¹When asked why he had attempted to climb Everest, Sir George Mallory replied, "Because it is there."

²Quoted in Blaug (1990, p. 65).

create spaces in which to construct the type of economics they favor. The classic example is probably Keynes (1936, ch. 23) who located the pedigree of his *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* in an underworld dissenting tradition going back to Malthus. Hobson, one of the figures in this genealogy, gave his autobiography the title *Confessions of an Economic Heretic* (1938). In the period since World War II, use of the term heterodoxy increased, till in recent years it has been used as a label under which to unite a variety of groups, all of whom consider their views systematically excluded from the mainstream of the economics profession. The most recent expression of this is the creation of the Heterodox Economics Conference and the Association of Heterodox Economists (cf. Lee 2002, 2003). Whether or not disagreement among economists would be desirable in an ideal world, such economists clearly regard it as inevitable in the world we inhabit. Indeed, given what many of them see as the obvious bankruptcy of orthodox economics, it is important for them to publicize the fact that an alternative economics exists.

What these two sets of economists have in common is that they are interested parties: they write about disagreements within economics in order to influence the way economics is done. For both of them, disagreement is the result of problems within economics: it is either pathological or the necessary consequence of a profession that has gone astray. Both views contrast sharply with the view that arises in the history and philosophy of science, or science studies. These take the view that disagreement, controversy, and dissent are an integral part of science, without which it cannot be understood. From this perspective, we should study such phenomena not because of a desire to influence the profession, but because they reveal things about science that would otherwise remain either concealed or obscured. This is the motivation for studying controversy and disagreement in economics that underlies the rest of this paper.

II. SOME SUGGESTED TERMINOLOGY

Most of the literature on dissent and heterodoxy is written by economists with a point of view to express on the economics they are discussing. The result is that there have been few attempts to define terms clearly.³ This has had two effects. One is confusion caused by the use of terms that are not clearly defined. The other is a distancing from the literature on the natural sciences where terms such as dissent are also used. In this section I suggest some terminology that, if adopted, might clarify discussions of these issues.

Before starting, it is important to make two remarks about the definitions that will be offered. The first is that they are all defined socially. No judgement is implied about whether orthodox or heterodox or consensual or dissenting science is correct. This approach is consistent with the approach that has become the norm in science studies. The second is that the definitions are not claimed to be

³A partial exception is King (1988, ch. 1). He discusses heterodox economics (dissent in my terminology) in the context of opposition to Kuhnian normal science and "deviant science" such as parapsychology. However, he does not draw some of the distinctions that I believe need to be drawn.

absolutely precise—it is claimed merely that they are workable. Their purpose is not to serve as the basis for formal logical deductions, for which a higher level of precision might be required, but is simply to clarify discussion. As I go through the definitions, I make observations about why the phenomena to which they refer matter.

Disagreement

The starting point is disagreement. If defined sufficiently generally, this is a universal phenomenon. It is arguable that whenever a scientist makes a significant claim to knowledge, he or she challenges statements made by other scientists. At the very least, there is an implicit criticism of one's colleagues for overlooking something important. Because status, prestige and much else go along with scientific claims, challenging other scientists is threatening, which has implications for the way science is undertaken. For example, it is common to mitigate threatening claims by hedging them (using phrases such as "I suggest that ...," "It appears to be the case that ..."). This might sound a trivial claim but it has important implications. It has been argued that the more central are claims to a discipline, the more likely they are to be hedged, because they will be more threatening than claims about things that are peripheral (Myers 1989). Such arguments can be used to infer, simply from linguistic usages, which claims scientists regard as central and peripheral to their discipline. Whereas in biology, where claims concerning facts about the real world are central, there is evidence that in economics it is theoretical propositions that are central to the discipline (Bloor and Bloor 1993). Thus, even everyday disagreements can be revealing.

Controversy

Going a stage beyond disagreement we can define controversy as a situation where disagreement is sufficiently important that it cannot be ignored, but where its resolution takes a significant length of time. How long this is will depend on the importance and depth of the issues at stake. Typically, it will be where, in the opinion of at least some of the participants, standard methods cannot resolve the questions on which there is disagreement (c.f. Collins 1985, 1991; Collins and Pinch 1993).

Controversy is often seen as breaking through the veneer that, in "normal" times, gives a false impression about the way science operates. It reveals that procedures for generating knowledge are more problematic than is commonly admitted. Science is revealed not as a purely rational process following the dictates of "scientific method" but as involving metaphysical assumptions, neglect of evidence, devices to save face, and other procedures not described in any "official" methodology.

Dissent

The term dissent is best reserved as a label for disagreement that, in some way, goes beyond "normal" disagreement. It is disagreement that is somehow beyond

the pale. The first thing to notice about it is that it is not symmetric. Disagreement is symmetric in that it implies no inequality in the two (or more) parties' positions. In contrast, dissent implies insiders and outsiders, or some such boundary. It may take a number of forms.

(1) Disagreement that is so extreme that it does not become the subject of controversy. It is simply ignored (except when dissidents capture the public attention and need to be put down) or dismissed as "crazy." J. K. Galbraith's theories of the technostructure (1969) is a good example: though read by millions, Galbraith's books were not taken seriously by most of the economics profession. In this sense, apart from critical book reviews or occasional remarks, engagement with his ideas was too sporadic to merit the name controversy.

(2) Disagreement that persists after controversy has ceased. Ideas may start out as simple disagreements between economists, perhaps provoking controversy. After a while that controversy gets resolved—a social process that determines the consensus, or the range of acceptable positions within the profession—but some economists persist in holding ideas that were on the losing side. It may be isolated individuals persisting in holding views that are generally discredited, or it may be more widespread.

There are analogies here with what has been termed "deviant" or "marginal" science—parapsychology, ufology, creationism, alternative medicine and so on (Wallis 1979, Mauskopf 1990, Ravetz 1990, c.f. King 1988).⁴

In assessing these ideas, it is important to remember that the resolution of controversy is a social process that determines the range of acceptable positions within the profession. It is not simply, as naive philosophy of science might suggest, a matter of establishing who is right and who is wrong. It may be the case that these processes do operate, in some sense, to filter out ideas that are inconsistent with reality (perhaps in the sense envisaged by C. S. Peirce). However, even if this happens in the long run, there can be no presumption that this is the case in any particular controversy. Interests, preconceptions, and ideology interact with the various theoretical and empirical techniques available to economists to produce an outcome that, in the circumstances, seems correct to those involved. Thus controversies may be resolved not by showing that one party is right and another wrong, so much as by agreeing that certain questions cannot be resolved or are not important. Questions that once seemed important come to be seen as less important, rendering some economists' positions, in the view of their colleagues, out-of-date or irrelevant. Thus it may make good sense for individuals who do not share the interests and preconceptions, whether epistemic or ideological, of their colleagues, to persist in holding ideas after others have abandoned them.

It is also worth noting that dissent may cease to be dissent. In the sense defined here, Milton Friedman's ideas on monetary policy, later dubbed "monetarist" were for many years dissent. He became skeptical about stabilization policy in the 1940s, failing to accept the emerging Keynesian consensus. For two

⁴Note that no judgements are being made about the truth or falsity of the doctrines being considered. There is no implication that, for example, Galbraith's ideas are no more valuable than those found in ufology or phrenology.

decades he remained a dissenter on macroeconomic policy—an outsider to the general consensus—controversy over his views erupting from time to time. In the 1970s his views became generally accepted, with the result that the label “dissent” became inapplicable. It is worth noting that similar changes have taken place in the status of some deviant views in natural sciences.

(3) Organized groups of economists who hold views that are regarded as beyond the pale—in much the same way that orthodox scientists have no time for parapsychology, homeopathy, phrenology, etc. It may be that such groups hold views that are initially acceptable to the profession at large but then, perhaps as a result of a challenge or period of controversy, become dissent. Austrian economics provides a good example. In other cases, dissenting groups originate from ideas coming from outside the body of accepted ideas. The ideas on which Marxist, Radical, and Post Keynesian economics are based were arguably never widely held. They represent attempts to challenge the status quo by introducing new ideas. Sometimes such ideas may be the subject of controversy before being rejected, but at other times they may never be taken sufficiently seriously to provoke widespread debate. Similarly, dissenting groups cease to be dissenters if their ideas come to be widely taken up. “Monetarism” is an example already given.

It is this third category that, I suggest, should be called heterodoxy, unless the divergence is such that it results in the group concerned being considered part of another discipline. This distinction needs considering in more detail.

III. DISSENT AND HETERODOXY

As defined here, dissent is a broader concept than heterodoxy. Elsewhere (Backhouse 2000) I suggested that heterodoxy be defined as involving self-identification, sociology, and core beliefs. Heterodox groups see themselves as such; they are institutionalized as identifiable, organized groups, and they share common assumptions that differentiate them from orthodoxy. This is a very strict definition, defined so as to encompass heterodox groups such as Post Keynesians, institutionalists, evolutionary economists, Radicals, Marxists, Feminists, and other such groups. It is heterodoxy as understood by, for example, the Association for Heterodox Economics. It excludes a range of economists who question important orthodox beliefs but whom it makes little sense to describe as heterodox but who could legitimately be described as dissenters. These include both identifiable groups and individuals. The notion of dissent is much broader and includes what one could legitimately describe as orthodox dissenters. The difference is that the latter are typically trying to change particular ideas rather than engaging in root and branch rejection of conventional ideas. It therefore makes sense to speak of degrees or levels of dissent in a way that it makes less sense to apply such qualifications to heterodoxy. These points are best made with some examples.

Heterodox groups are clearly dissenters. Dissent includes heterodoxy. However, it also includes others who do not count as heterodox. The New Institutional Economics could be regarded as highly orthodox, applying orthodox ideas about decision-making and costs to new problems, such as business organization.

But though involving orthodox ideas, it involves dissent—challenging standard conceptions about the type of costs that need to be considered to understand economic phenomena, changing the range of problems to which economists are trying to find solutions, and questioning accepted theories about phenomena such as firms and markets. Public choice theory is a similar example. At least, when modern public choice theory began to emerge, in the late 1960s and 1970s, it was challenging accepted views about the boundaries of economics.

An excellent example of an orthodox dissenter is Joseph Stiglitz (2002, c.f. Chang 2001). He clearly dissents from what he sees as the dominant orthodoxy in policy circles, represented by the monetary policies advocated by the International Monetary Fund. His criticisms of the current regime were likely connected with his abbreviated tenure as head of the World Bank. To this, it might be objected that his dissent concerns policy issues, where ideology and politics are as important as “pure” economics. However, the point about Stiglitz’s dissent over policy is that it follows directly from his holding to a view of markets that differs radically from that generally held in economic theory. Stiglitz’s theoretical work on asymmetric information tells him that markets cannot be characterized by equilibrium of competitive supply and demand and hence, for example, that policy responses may have effects that are very different from those they are commonly believed to have. Thus, when South East Asian monetary policy was changed, the countries affected were plunged into financial crisis. Because his theories are couched in the mathematics of optimization, his results seem less of a challenge to conventional ways of theorizing than they are.

One response to this might be that Stiglitz’s ideas on asymmetric information are so widely accepted that it makes little sense to describe him as a dissenter. But in his case it is arguable that dissent involves the conclusions he draws from the theory. The consensus on asymmetric information is much like the Chicago view of monopoly: it makes sense and there are microeconomic problems where such theories are essential. However, for the most part, they are ideas that can be ignored, modeling macroeconomic activity using standard supply-and-demand analysis. To view issues of asymmetric information and informational inefficiency as pervasive would be destructive of too much economic theory for it to be possible to entertain the possibility—Hicks’s (1939) view of the implications of imperfect competition. In short, Stiglitz’s dissent takes the form of seeing theoretical ideas as having greater significance than is conventional.

Another example of dissent is the economics of disequilibrium, or non-clearing markets. It is arguable that in the late 1960s, following the reinterpretations of Keynesian economics by Don Patinkin, Robert Clower, and Axel Leijonhufvud, such interpretations were clearly part of the macroeconomic mainstream. Keynesian economics was still the dominant approach to macroeconomics, embodied in forecasting models, and this literature sought to place it on logically coherent micro-foundations. However, from the mid 1970s, as concern with inflation grew, reinforced by the Thatcher-Reagan rightward shift in the political consensus, economics of disequilibrium moved out of the mainstream. It became normal to assume that non-market clearing implied irrationality and therefore did not make sense. Keynesian phenomena might be explicable using, say, models of monopolistic competition, but that was different: such models assumed rational,

profit maximizing equilibrium, even if competition was not perfect. To assume, as in the economics of disequilibrium, that markets are not in equilibrium because markets take time to operate, was to go against conventional views. To argue that this implied a radically different view of the world amounted to dissent. Thus Jean-Pascal Benassy might not have been regarded as a dissenter in 1975, but to persist in holding such ideas today (Benassy 2003) does amount to dissent. It is not heterodoxy in that the economics of disequilibrium fails the self-identification and sociological tests, but it involves a level of disagreement with prevailing beliefs that should be considered dissent. It goes beyond the pale.

Another example, relevant to what follows, is economists who deny the current consensus that macroeconomics needs, or even benefits from, microfoundations (e.g. Kirman 1993; Hoover 2001; for a parallel argument in microeconomics, see Hildenbrand 1994). The conventional view is that rigorous macroeconomic theory involves starting with models of individual behavior (usually, though not necessarily optimizing behavior). These models are then used to derive aggregate models. Because the conditions required for rigorous aggregation are highly restrictive, this approach inevitably means that heterogeneity has to be assumed absent. Consumers, firms, and products are treated as homogeneous. This process ends up with representative agent models, where macroeconomic behavior is simply individual behavior writ large. This notion is so well established in contemporary economics that to question it, and to suggest that macroeconomics may deal with relationships that have no parallel at the microeconomic level, is to dissent from the status quo.

IV. WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

To use language of dissent and heterodoxy is to talk about the boundaries of what constitute legitimate or acceptable ideas and practices. This is central to understanding what economics is about. It has a historical dimension in that economists almost universally use historical discourses to legitimate and lend authority to sets of ideas. While this is true in general, it applies particularly to heterodox economists. Clarity in terminology is needed to achieve a perspective on such claims. To see this, it is useful to consider the way in which heterodox economists often discuss their ideas in relation to orthodoxy.

The presuppositions and ideologies that underlie economic ideas often have deep historical roots. It is therefore natural for dissenting heterodox economists to challenge accepted histories in order to lay bare the ideologies they are challenging.⁵ The accounts of nineteenth century economics by Marx and Veblen are perhaps the classic examples of this. Both used history to explain the errors into which those whose ideas they wished to displace had fallen. Modern heterodox economists follow their example. This activity often goes alongside that of self-definition. Two of the heterodoxies for which this has been most important are Austrian economics and Post Keynesianism.⁶ Both of these schools have sought to construct themselves as long-established dissenting traditions.

⁵For further discussion of this way of using history, see Hutchison (1978).

⁶Other examples could be given.

All Austrians date the emergence of Austrian economics to Menger and trace a distinctive tradition in economics from his work to their own (see, for example, Vaughn 1994). It usually runs through Wieser and Böhm-Bawerk to Mises. From there it leads either through Hayek, Kirzner, and Lachmann or through Rothbard. The story is told of an unbroken tradition, standing against neo-classical orthodoxy. Menger and his students offered a theory that should have been understood not as a “third” version of marginalism but as an alternative to both the Marshallian and Walrasian variants of orthodoxy. In the 1920s, Mises and Hayek challenged neoclassical economics directly in the socialist calculation debate. Their monetary theory would have enabled governments to avoid the disastrous inflations of that period. In the post-war period, when Hayekian ideas were pushed aside in the wake of the Keynesian revolution, Austrian economics almost became extinct, till it was revived in the 1970s. Throughout this story, the mainstream failed to understand the Austrian message and Austrians remained a sometimes-beleaguered minority.

Post Keynesians, too, have constructed long genealogies for their paradigm. Keynes had sought to link the *General Theory* with a heterodox, underconsumptionist tradition going back to Malthus. Eichner and Kregel used the generalization of Keynesian theory to the long run to link Post Keynesian economics simultaneously with this heterodox tradition and with the Ricardian theory of value and growth. As she sought to distinguish her alternative from the orthodoxy she was challenging, Joan Robinson argued that the Keynesianism that dominated post-war macroeconomics was “bastard” Keynesianism, denying key elements in Keynes’s message. In his recent book, John King (2002) has constructed a history of Post Keynesian economics going back all the way to the *General Theory*.

Such accounts have two particularly important common features. The first is that current heterodoxies are read back into the past to create traditions on which the dominant majority turned its back. All such accounts contain a large element of myth. Austrian economists were a major element in the macro-economic mainstream in the 1930s, to an extent that Austrian accounts overlook. Post Keynesians offer a very partial reading of the *General Theory* (as do many more orthodox economists). They put together dissenters whose ideas and situations were far more heterogeneous than these accounts imply. There is nothing surprising in this. The “invention of tradition,” to cite the title of Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) is often conscious and deliberate. The history that legitimized the English reformation and the subsequent British Empire did exactly the same. In the same way that the Protestant Reformers in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England presented themselves as restoring an earlier English faith, untainted by Roman influence, distorting history in order to do so (Jones 1998), so Post Keynesians construed themselves as restoring a Keynesian economics untainted by neoclassical reinterpretations. The second common feature in heterodox versions of history is that, in the course of differentiating heterodoxy from orthodoxy, the latter is painted with a broad brush. However, though this is inevitable, it oversimplifies orthodoxy.

The reason why this matters is that it simplifies away the dynamics of the profession, without which neither orthodoxy nor heterodoxy can be understood.

The economics profession does not comprise simply “orthodox” and “heterodox” economics: these are constructions used to interpret what economists or outside observers see (or wish to see). Their use is defensible but if they are to be understood properly, account has to be taken of the dynamics within economics out of which they arise. These dynamics arise from the way in which the community of economists resolves (or fails to resolve) disagreements. Some disagreements can be resolved within established frameworks, but others cannot. Controversy ensues and is resolved in ways that it is often fruitful to analyze socially. Consensus is established by various means but some economists remain outside that consensus. They are best described as dissenters, for whom there are many parallels in the history of natural science and even mathematics. Only some of these go on to become heterodox in the sense in which that term has come to be used in economics: members of heterodox groups that remain within (or try to remain within) the discipline of economics. Some fail, or remain minorities of one. Others, sometimes after a period during which they work towards a transformation of economics, simply leave the economics profession (or are seen by economists as working in another discipline). This economic history can be seen as history; industrial relations as business studies, political economy as political science, and so on. Heterodoxy is simply one among many responses to disagreement between economists.

V. CONCLUSIONS

I have suggested that the study of heterodoxy, and more broadly dissent within economics, would be clarified by adopting a classification involving disagreement, controversy, dissent, heterodoxy, and fields that lie outside economics, where all these categories are defined socially. The reason why such a classification is important is that it places heterodoxy, which in economics has assumed a rather distinctive form (resembling in some ways, though not completely, “alternative” medicine), in the broader context of disagreement and the ways in which economists respond to this. The emergence of heterodoxy is simply one response among many. The identification of dissent as a category much broader than heterodoxy draws attention to the important category of dissenters who are not heterodox in the terms given here.

One of the most important issues in the study of the economics profession is where the boundaries of what is acceptable lie. These are not fixed (that is why definitions of orthodox economics regularly fail) but are continually renegotiated. Dissenters who remain within orthodoxy are important, as they are frequently the ones who manage to stretch the boundaries to include ideas previously considered outside economics. They account for the elastic nature of orthodoxy (Coats 2000). Without understanding this, not only can the relationship between heterodoxy and orthodoxy not be understood but neither can the evolution of the discipline more generally.

Adopting the terminology suggested here will not solve all the problems involved in analyzing dissent in economics. It will not tell us, for example, whether it is appropriate to regard Joan Robinson or Sidney Weintraub as heterodox in the 1950s (I would classify them as dissenters, but not, at that stage,

heterodox). However, it may help focus attention on substantive historical issues rather than getting confused by conflicting terminology.⁷ Perhaps more important, focusing on dissent, rather than simply heterodoxy, and its relation to disagreement and controversy, draws attention to social processes operating throughout the discipline. This will shift attention to the very important but neglected phenomenon of dissenters whom it is difficult to describe as heterodox. It may also assist the process of relating the history of economics to the history of science, where there is great awareness of the range of methods whereby disagreement is handled and, hence, of the problem of dissent.

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⁷As an example, I suggest that this terminology can clarify what is being claimed by Morgan and Rutherford (1998) when they say that inter-war American economics was pluralistic. There existed disagreement, controversy, and would-be orthodoxies were vigorously challenged by dissenters, but it does not make sense to talk about orthodoxy and heterodoxy.

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