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## ADVANCING EDUCATION IN POLITICAL ECONOMY

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For political economists working in universities, putting personal effort into course reform can be a frustrating experience. Concerns with teaching generally lack the *kudos* and career opportunities that result from research activities. Moreover, most economics departments teach a standard mainstream economics curriculum, with minor local variations, and are resistant to change. Trying to get curriculum reform that would allow teaching of alternative political economic perspectives in core courses is often dismissed as being impractical and or undesirable. However, from a societal perspective, a strong argument can be made that teaching and the curriculum are at *least* as important as the research and publication activities into which so much effort is put.

Education in economics has enormous implications. How young adults come to understand the economy bears strongly on their subsequent attitudes, beliefs and activities. Indeed, education in economics, probably more than most academic disciplines, shapes hearts and minds. The current dominance – some might say stranglehold – that mainstream economics has in schools and universities around the world needs to be continually challenged if more critical inquiry is to flourish. Unless progress can be made in supplanting conventional economics education with critical political economic education, achieving progress in many other important areas of economic and social reform will be that much harder.

This chapter reflects on the various options and avenues through which change in economics education could occur as a result of well-targeted and sustained efforts. The dominant focus is on increasing the presence of political economy in the curriculum and fostering creating greater criticality. Its first section expands on these opening remarks about why reform matters. A second section considers the nature of the traditional university economics curriculum, followed by two others that review previous attempts to get more emphasis on political economy and to develop alternative teaching resources. Attention then turns to the principal strategic options for seeking future progress – both within university economics departments and beyond. Concluding the chapter are two sections that reflect on the pedagogic and strategic issues that need to be faced and the prospects for further progress. Throughout, we adopt the definitions of political economy and economics outlined in this book's introduction; reference to the 'curriculum' means the content of courses in both mainstream economics and political economy; and curricular reform refers to a shift away from the former towards the latter. Of course, within and beyond that shift are many more fine-grained questions how teaching can be made more effective (see, for example, Earl 2002; Groenewegen 2007; Reardon 2009; and Stilwell, 2011) but our primary focus here is on *what* is taught.

## Why does the teaching of political economy and economics matter?

Annually, millions of people across the world undertake study of economics as part of their university degree requirements. Later in life, people in positions of power and influence - politicians, policy advisors, policy analysts and journalists, among many others - often draw on what perceptions of the economy that they acquired as students. Given this, the economics curriculum represents a type of intellectual 'commanding heights', inculcating 'conventional wisdoms' about what is (and is not) possible and the means by which particular economic outcomes might be achieved. As the principal founder of the modern economics textbook notes, 'I don't care who writes a nation's laws – or crafts its advanced treatises – as long as I can write its textbooks' (Paul Samuelson, cited in Skousen 1997, p.150). Whilst we may laud the original works of the great economists, they are seldom read: rather, for many generations, most students have got their understanding of economics from textbook-based curricula. The textbook market is huge:

At the peak of their sales, both Paul Samuelson's *Economics* and Campbell McConnell's *Economics* exceeded in a single year the lifetime sales to date of Keynes's *General Theory*. Every year, six or seven introductory textbooks achieve sales of 60,000 copies or more. The market, variously estimated at a million and a half to two million students per annum, is immense (Lamm 1993, p.104).

Nowadays, textbooks and teaching materials are increasingly online, often as open access resources, sometimes accessible free of charge. Recognising the existence of zero-marginal cost distribution, and the opportunities for shaping ideology and policy outcomes, many conservative and libertarian institutions have joined the game, presenting themselves as providers of singular and objective truths. For example, the corporate-backed Foundation for Economic Education in the United States produces pro-market open-access educational resources that draw, uncritically, on elements of neoclassical and Austrian economics to lead young, impressionable minds to Panglossian conclusions about markets and capitalism. Nuance, qualification and consideration of competing viewpoints is usually in such short supply that the material is little more than indoctrination. When society is reared on this type of poor intellectual diet, relatively unquestioned legitimacy and authority is accorded to certain types of economic arrangements and the interests they serve.

Economists are often unaware or unconcerned about the 'social engineering' aspect of the curriculum they teach. Indeed, labouring under the common (but mistaken) belief that the standard curriculum is value-free and that teaching it is not fundamentally different to teaching physics, chemistry or maths - they may take umbrage at the suggestion. They typically see their task as steering students into 'thinking like an economist' (Mankiw 2019). Implicitly, they treat the curriculum as more or less timeless, and they teach it more or less well. Declining enrolments or expressions of students' disinterest are countered by proclaiming the curriculum's supposed virtues and/or by trying to make the content more engaging for students by using different pedagogical techniques, even relating the economic concepts to popular television shows. However, these adornments do not fundamentally change the faulty product.

## What is currently wrong with the teaching of economics?

For a discipline whose practitioners commonly claim academic rigour, there are fundamental logical problems embedded in orthodox economics, as previous chapters in this book have shown (see also Harcourt 1972; Mantel 1974; Mandler 2001; Fullbrook 2004; Keen and Lee 2004; Keen 2011). They include the difficulties of measuring capital and the related problems of aggregate production functions (Sraffa 1975); the impregnable circularity embedded within the concept of utility (Robinson 1978); and the impossibility of aggregating individual downward-sloping demand curves into a reliably downward-sloping market demand curve (Mantel 1974). Although the existence of theoretical weaknesses like these is not necessarily an argument against teaching the topics, concealing such weaknesses from students and not providing alternative theories is harder to justify - yet this is what often happens. As a result, students can spend years climbing an arid and difficult intellectual mountain, only (perhaps) to eventually discover that the resulting view from on high is not of the real-world.

Other theoretical shortcomings include unrealistic assumptions, over-reliance on formal methods of analysis, and over-dependence on equilibrium theories rather than studying economic dynamics. The orthodox framework has inherent difficulty in incorporating history and institutions, which contributes to the blatant neglect of these central elements of economic reality. So too is the fealty to methodological individualism. Perfectly rational individuals possessing perfect information, making optimum decisions in perfectly competitive markets have, at best, only tangential relevance to a world pervaded by inequalities of power, wealth, income, and opportunity. These intellectual strictures produce analyses that vary from the facile to the misleading, as some of the brighter students sooner or later come to realise.

Another deep concern relates to ethics and the value judgements that are embedded in what is studied. Treating values and ethics as not relevant to the analysis, whether explicitly stated or implicit in the teaching, is untenable (Myrdal 1970; Stretton 1999; Berry 2017). Indeed, taking such a stance is not without irony in the light of longstanding research findings that show the prevailing economics curriculum to be detrimental to students' social and ethical development. Researchers engaging students in free rider/prisoner's dilemma games, for example, have found those with a training in economics to be more aggressive, less cooperative, more pessimistic about the prospects of cooperation - and more prone to cheating - than students who had *not* studied economics (note that selection bias was controlled for in these experiments). Moreover, these characteristics that students developed through taking economics courses tended to persist long after their education had finished (Frank *et al.* 1993, 1996).

While the influence of studying economics on ethical development may be long-lasting, it seems that much of the specific knowledge is often not properly understood nor retained (Clarke and Mearman 2001). Within a few months of completing their studies, testing shows that students who have done an introductory economics subject at high-school or university do little better than those who had not studied economics at all (Hansen *et al.* 2002). This evidence is not necessarily inconsistent with the earlier claim that school or university economics education may influence the outlooks of people who attain positions of power

and influence later in life. The details of particular theories may be long-since forgotten, but the broader view of the 'free market' economy as a want-satisfying mechanism - deriving from uncritical exposure to notions like 'consumer sovereignty', 'market efficiency', and 'gains from trade' - lingers on.

Finally, and perhaps most fundamentally, there are the problems arising because the standard economics curriculum lacks pluralism (King 2012). Inculcating students into just one principal way of seeing economic issues does not systematically develop their capacities for comparative and critical inquiry. The problem could be rectified by changing the curriculum to engage with some of the other schools of political economy. Developing closer engagement with other disciplines - like history, politics, philosophy and sociology - would also help. In practice, all that tends to happen is that students are given the opportunity to take optional electives in sub-areas, such as behavioural economics and game theory, after they have done the required core courses in mainstream economic theory. The presence of this minor 'internal heterodoxy' has the appeal of adding some apparent variety to students' studies, but the 'add-ons' fall well short of engaging in structural pluralism. The general failure to make the broader and more critical engagements renders the currently non-plural curriculum deficient as a means of developing the graduate knowledge, skills and attributes that employers require (O'Donnell 2007), as well as being a poor basis for a liberal education and creating an informed society.

Despite this litany of problems and failings, most university economists seem to be quite comfortable to continue with the standard curriculum, perhaps with some minor tinkering around the edges or using fancier means of presentation. This is the more remarkable because in no other discipline do students so regularly rebel against the content of their instruction (Kay 2014). The frequent and marked student dissatisfaction has sometimes led to the formation of active organisations for change.

### **Attempts to reform the economics curriculum**

When student dissenters join forces with academics who share their dissatisfaction with the standard economics curriculum, significant change is possible. While a full historical and worldwide survey of all such attempts to create change is beyond the scope of this chapter, a brief consideration of some of the forms that dissent has taken during the last six decades are likely to be of significant relevance and use in future struggles.

In the 1960s there were various initiatives to reform both economics and economics teaching, particularly in the USA. The Union for Radical Political Economics was formed in 1968. A handful of pluralist economics departments also emerged, such as that at the University of Massachusetts (Amherst) and the New School for Social Research in New York, joined later by other 'heterodox' departments such as the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC). In the UK, the University of Cambridge became well-known for its broader approach to teaching economics and political economy in the 1960's and 70's (Lee 2009). Initiatives of local significance also occurred in other countries. In Australia, for example, a long struggle by dissident staff and students resulted in the establishment of a separate Department of Political Economy where a pluralist curriculum was established and continues to flourish (Butler *et al.* 2009; Stilwell 2012).

During the 1970's it seemed that economics - and economics education - might even undergo a Kuhnian paradigm shift. The renowned institutional economist J.K. Galbraith wrote that: 'for a new and notably articulate generation of economists, a reference to neoclassical economics has become markedly pejorative...I would judge as well as hope that the present attack will prove decisive' (Galbraith 1973, p.1). However, curriculum change proved very difficult to bring about. We learnt that a wave of student dissent may not have much impact because, unless the baton is passed to incoming students, conservative forces can usually wait out the disquiet by stalling on demands for reform, sometimes combined with more nefarious responses. We found out that academic staff who 'go out on a limb' by challenging the curriculum and supporting student demands for change are vulnerable to insecurities in employment and face conservative biases in hiring and promotion processes. Such progress as was made turned out to be patchy and was often subsequently reversed.

Drawing lessons from this, advocates of heterodox economics and pluralism in economics education put more energies into developing their own organisations, nationally and internationally, during the 1980s and 1990s. The intention was to enhance the prospect of reform within the economics discipline through holding conferences, establishing new journals and newsletters, and collectively agitating for change. Some examples of this type of effort include the formation of the International Confederation of Associations for Pluralism in Economics and the creation of the *International Journal of Pluralism in Economics Education*. The process continued with the formation both nation-based and global organisations such as the Association for Heterodox Economics Society (UK), the Society for Heterodox Economists (Australia), and the World Economics Association. There is also a *Heterodox Economics Directory* and the *Heterodox Economics Newsletter* that continue to facilitate connections and support between political economists worldwide.

Student-led organisations have also proliferated. They include the Post-Autistic Economics movement (Fullbrook 2003), the International Student Initiative for Pluralism in Economics and Rethinking Economics, operating across multiple countries. Rethinking Economics is a particularly good example of growth in an organisation seeking to achieve curricular change. Originating as a student organization, it has expanded its membership to include academics, industry and government economists, and concerned citizens. It currently produces books, reports, festivals, webinars, newsletters and conducts research, nearly all of which is orientated to curricular reform. It has also been able to garner philanthropic funding, set up a membership council, a board of trustees, and an advisory board. The focus is genuinely global, involving over 100 groups from 41 countries. Its membership structure has a federated character, with some local groups adopting the Rethinking Economics label while others, especially those pre-existing, preferring to affiliate under the Rethinking Economics umbrella. The member organisations include other autonomous entities, such as Promoting Economic Pluralism. Active projects include curricular research, analysing economic curricula around the world; and *Communicating with Academics*, training student organisers how to effectively push for curricular change.

## Developing alternative resources

An alternative curriculum needs alternative teaching materials. Indeed, the two processes of seeking curricular change and developing new teaching materials are interdependent and mutually supportive. But the appropriate form of teaching materials is not self-evident. Activist movements made early initiatives in producing books of collected readings on various topics in radical political economy, which proved popular but did not displace the standard economics textbooks. One early attempt at the latter in the 1970s, Robinson and Eatwell's *An Introduction to Modern Economics*, proved difficult to use for teaching purposes (King and Millmow 2003). Another early starter, Hunt and Sherman's *Economics: An Introduction to Traditional and Progressive Views* proved more flexible and durable, subsequently going through many editions and adaptations. Others followed, Reardon, Madi and Cato's *Introducing a New Economics: Pluralist, Sustainable and Progressive* being a recent example. The Network for Pluralism in Economics provides an online textbook covering major schools of political economy and economics. We are ourselves textbook authors (Stilwell 2011; Goodwin *et al.* 2020). The *Heterodox Economics Directory* (2021) documents most of the books currently available and the reader is encouraged to survey the full list of options.

The variety that exists in these books reflects differences of ambition and approach that, not surprisingly, exist in any movement for reform. A political economy book for teaching purposes can seek to be outright replacements for textbooks of the Samuelson type, aiming to facilitate profound curricular change. Most of those already mentioned are of this character. But more reformist options also exist. For example, the Economics in Context Initiative (ECI), where one of this chapter's authors has worked and has ongoing affiliations, produces textbooks and teaching modules that are designed to be amenable to reform-minded and progressively inclined mainstream economists. The implicit theory of change is that there is currently a large constituency of academic economists who are unwilling or simply unable to suddenly embrace a fully pluralist economics curriculum, so that providing them with materials that they could adopt while teaching within a quite conventional curriculum offers a plausible pathway to incremental change, hopefully laying groundwork for more comprehensive change later. ECI's 'contextual approach' provides much of the content of the standard curriculum, albeit covered in a more nuanced and qualified way, placing the economic issues in social, political, historical and ecological context. Furthermore, some political economic/heterodox content is also introduced alongside the standard content. ECI's open-access teaching modules also allow instructors to substitute one or more standard textbook chapters with a superior alternative. Some textbook chapters are also open access, allowing instructors to use them as substitutes for chapters in a traditional text. By providing these free textbook chapters and modules, instructors are very easily able 'dip their foot in the pool' of curricular change.

Another variant of a reformist approach is represented by the CORE project which, since 2013, has been creating teaching resources for an alternative introductory curriculum. CORE's approach is to incorporate a post-Walrasian economics that relaxes the neoclassical assumptions of complete contracting and endogenous preferences (see for example, Bowles 2005; Bowles and Gintis 2000), as well as some key ideas from game theory, behavioural economics, transaction cost economics, complexity economics and the Hayekian ideas on

information. CORE understands itself as offering a new paradigm (Bowles and Carlin 2020). However, like others (Sheehan *et al.* 2015; Rethinking Economics 2014), we would argue CORE exhibits both change and continuities with the traditional textbook, with its continuities including a lack of plurality. Accordingly, we would classify it as mildly reformist.

In assessing these options, our perspective derives from a view of what the curriculum should look like, which is quite different to what is contained in these sorts of reformist texts. We strongly believe in an explicitly and thoroughgoing pluralist approach (for reasons set out in this book's earlier chapter on pluralism). However, we recognise that change is usually an iterative and evolutionary process, such that even a mildly reformist approach could be a starting point for more fundamental reform - and some progress is usually better than none. There is evidently a fundamental conundrum, however, because, while any genuinely pluralist political economy course or textbook is unlikely to be acceptable to the bulk of mainstream economists because it appears 'too different', yet something that makes only minor improvement inevitably faces criticism from the proponents of more fundamental changes.

How best to manage this conundrum? We believe that a teacher should always seek to use the best (or least-worst) textbook possible, surveying widely and reading reviews to ascertain the best option for their purposes and seizing any opportunities to move to a better text with future iterations of the subjects they are teaching. Furthermore, a teacher should normally be able to at least flag deficiencies or problems in any text and indicate where students can access alternative viewpoints, even if such deeper interrogations might have to occur outside the formal auspices of the subject. In this regard, running a few optional tutorials or workshops, creating online appendices for particular book chapters, or simply providing an optional reading list are all worthwhile options that are generally low cost and low risk for both teacher and students. Any reading list might draw on the *World Economic Association's Textbook Commentaries Project* which has been designed to counter the problems and deficiencies of some of the dominant texts.

For textbook authors, it is important to be able to offer a spectrum of resources. Accordingly, it is helpful for some textbook authors to continue to produce resources that are knowingly 'diplomatic' and strategically aimed at that segment of the market that cannot currently countenance profound curricular change. However, it is at least as important that there is the continued production of texts that are not constrained in trying to cater to the often delicate and recalcitrant sensibilities of orthodox economists.

### **Strategies for expanding the territory in which political economy can be taught**

Having briefly outlined the rationale for educational reform, considered organisational initiatives and indicated some challenges relating to teaching resource materials, we need now to consider what can be useful for future efforts directed at curricular reform. What strategic options are likely to be most fruitful for extending the presence of political economy content in economics education? Consideration can usefully be given to five broad strategies:

- seeking reform within economics departments
- trying to form new departments in which political economy can be taught
- hybrid strategies that integrate the study of economics with other disciplines
- teaching political economy in other social science departments
- teaching political economy outside the school and university system

Within, and across, these locational choices are more detailed concerns that impact on the likelihood of success, both in terms of effecting the institutional changes and in terms of achieving and sustaining good teaching and learning arrangements afterwards. These include matters such as the role of student activism, compromise, coalition building and use of the media, along with all the requisites for progressive and effective pedagogy. However, because it is the strategic choice of location that significantly conditions how these other matters play out, our analysis is structured accordingly.

### *Reform within economics departments*

The *Directory of Heterodox Economics* provides a list of university departments that self-identify as heterodox. *Promoting Economic Pluralism* provides a further list of universities that self-identify as providing pluralist postgraduate degrees, some of which are based in economics departments. This is evidence that teaching some elements of heterodox economics or political economy within economics departments is feasible. Accordingly, we would not discourage anybody from seeking reform via this pathway. Indeed, we have both spent many years doing so ourselves. Moreover, it is important to recognise that economics departments will probably remain the principal focus of agitation for change because that is where most economics teaching currently occurs. Because dissent among existing economics students is a major element in the dynamics of change, where those students are located will always be a primary site of action.

Having acknowledged the importance of focusing on economics departments, however, it is equally important to recognise the barriers, frustrations, and poor ratio of success thus far relative to effort expended. Aspiring reformers therefore should not presume that reform from inside economics department is always the best way, or even the only way, to make progress. Why? First, because the track record of this strategy is, thus far, lamentably poor: despite much effort, significantly pluralist economics departments represent a tiny proportion of all university economics departments worldwide, almost certainly less than 1%. In general, reform by this pathway usually has a history of being slow, difficult and may, in some senses, be dangerous. By dangerous we do not mean that students and staff pushing for reform are likely to be in any physical danger, but activist students may be deterred by fear of being victimized, while academic staff may find it harder to get their employment contracts renewed, to get tenure or promotion. Another hazard is that any hard-fought gains may be quickly reversed when subsequent changes in the balance of power occur within an economics department or the university more generally. Even in benign circumstances, the heterodox or pluralist elements introduced into the curriculum may lapse – perhaps deemed to be ‘redundant’ - when their active proponents and teachers move on or retire.

Moreover, 'reform from within' has been made harder during the last two decades with the advent of research assessment and ranking exercises that discriminate against the research of political economists (Bouchikhi and Kimberly 2017). Given that universities usually select their academic staff appointees largely on the perceived prestige of their published research output, this makes it hard for dissident political economists to find a secure base inside economics departments.

An established literature documents these various difficulties, risks, and frustrations of trying to achieve reform from within (see, for example, Butler *et al.* 2009, Thornton 2013, Lavoie 2015). Again, we emphasise that none of what is being said here should be misunderstood as trying to dissuade anybody from trying to achieve change. As earlier noted, there are supportive organisations and resources to which reformers now have access. Furthermore, future possibilities can be different to the past. Rather, our blunt account of previous and present difficulties is intended to be *constructive*, on the basis that being forewarned of potential problems is to be forearmed against them. Accordingly, we would recommend looking at existing case studies that may help reformers identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that may be present in their own circumstances. Looking at case studies may also be useful in helping reform minded academics and students weigh up whether a 'reform from within strategy' really is the best option to pursue in your specific institutional context. Even with an army behind you, it makes sense to carefully consider on which battle front may lie stunning and rapid success, a long trench war, or costly defeat.

### *Setting up independent departments of political economy*

The editorial introduction to this book made the intellectual case that political economy may be regarded as an area of knowledge, distinct from mainstream economics even if sharing overlapping concerns. If political economy is regarded in this way, it can be thought deserving of an independent institutional base. Of course, there are complexities with any social science categorisation; and there are undoubtedly fuzzy boundaries between political economy and economics (Mearman 2010, 2011, 2012). However, such features apply to *all* social science disciplines: politics versus history, anthropology versus sociology, etc. And, ultimately, all knowledge is interconnected. So, in practice, the argument for having separate departments in universities does not depend on the existence of tidy disciplinary taxonomies: rather it is a matter of identifying the conditions under which progress in the development and dissemination of knowledge may most fruitfully be made. On this basis, there is a strong argument for political economy to be organisationally separate from existing economics departments so that the discipline and its teaching may flourish.

Although a strategy of institutional separation may initially seem rather bold, there is 'proof of concept' for it. The Department of Political Economy at the University of Sydney is a case in point. In the mid-1970s, after years of struggle by students and a minority, dissident group of staff in the Department of Economics, the university approved the introduction of political economy courses, to be taught alongside a standard economics curriculum, allowing students to choose which they preferred. After three more decades of struggle, during which the pluralist political economy curriculum had been studied by some 15,000

students, the university authorities agreed to create a separate Department of Political Economy to formally administer the program. It now has a staff of a dozen academics, offering both undergraduate and postgraduate courses in political economy. It was the creation of a separate department that ended decades of conflict and allowed political economy to prosper, side by side with the Department of Economics but no longer engaged in acrimonious, time-consuming conflicts.

Of course, a strategy of disciplinary differentiation and institutional independence is bound to be controversial, and like any other strategy, is not without risk. Mainstream economists, although often irritated by the presence of political economists in their departments, are usually resistant to allowing their critics independent space in which to develop. On the other side, some heterodox economists may not wish to 'vacate the current playing field' if that allows the orthodox economists to simply play on. Others fear that separate political economy departments could be even more vulnerable to future arbitrary closure. However, the Sydney experience suggests at the very least, that this type of separation can function as a pragmatic way of responding to the unwillingness of mainstream economists to accept a principle of pluralism that includes study of bodies of knowledge deeply critical of orthodoxy. Separation, in this case at least, has produced a more desirable and sustainable outcome than would otherwise have been likely to occur. The Sydney political economists' pluralist curriculum includes introducing students to mainstream economic ideas but always in relation to other alternative ways of seeing.

Not all attempts to create separate political economy departments have been positive. At both Notre Dame University in the US and the University of Manitoba in Canada, the idea of separate departments was vigorously opposed by the political economists (and their students) who feared that it would be an interim strategy to remove them from within the economic departments and thereby weaken political economy within that university. Indeed, this is exactly what happened at Notre Dame, as the newly created department was later wound up (Bouchikhi and Kimberly 2017; Thornton 2017). Whilst this experience is relevant, it should be noted, however, that what was proposed in each case was a second department of economics rather than a department of political economy. Furthermore, the push for these changes was imposed from above, rather than coming from within the ranks of the political economists or heterodox economists themselves. Indeed, an argument can be made that the more desirable path forward may have been to negotiate for a separate department of political economy and, especially, to negotiate for it to be set up in manner that would allow it to potentially prosper and grow.

The argument for institutional separation can even be couched, perhaps a little ironically, in mainstream economic terms - as an instance of a 'Pareto improvement' because the change makes both parties better off. With separate departments, both mainstream economists and political economists can get on with the teaching and research that is important to them. It creates a more level playing field for the contest of economic ideas and creates a broader array of choices for students about their education. There must be critical mass in both camps of course. And what to call a separate department can be a tricky issue. Some dissidents in the economics profession prefer the label 'heterodox economics' rather than political economy (in regard to this, see Stilwell 2019). However, we are unable to point to the existence of a known 'Department of Heterodox Economics'. This is probably not

surprising, for at least two reasons. First, the creation of a department by this name would likely be opposed by mainstream economists who would regard it as an obvious incursion onto their 'turf'. Second, it is hard for an academic department to be defined primarily by what it is *not* - since the term 'heterodox' implies it is 'not orthodox.' There is also the question of what should happen to the name of such a department if currently heterodox ideas were to become orthodox? Should departments simply switch names at this point? To us, it seems the term 'heterodox' is better suited to contention about ideas, some of which are destined for permanent obscurity, rather than to engagement with concepts of enormous (and increasing) relevance to understanding and improving the world.

### *Hybrid approaches that integrate study of economics with other disciplines*

A third approach, beyond relying on 'reform from within' or pushing for separate institutional territory, is to explore the opportunities presented by cross-disciplinary cooperation. Genuine pluralism does not just rely on coverage of multiple schools of thought within a particular discipline: it is also enhanced by some degree of interdisciplinarity. This is quite challenging for the economic mainstream because of the intellectual isolation that is baked into its basic tenets of methodological individualism, given preferences, complete contracting, and so forth (Thornton 2017). Given this, reformers can try to move the curriculum forward by structurally integrating the study of economics with other disciplines. This can take various forms, such as creating 'majors' in areas like international development, environmental studies or globalisation, where the study of economics can be integrated with political economy and other disciplines.

Another option is the establishment of degree programs for which different departments cooperate in teaching. Political economy can then occupy niches within the broader arrangements. Degrees in politics, philosophy and economics (PPE) are the most obvious example (Thornton 2013, 2017). Political economy as an area of knowledge has always had strong and explicit philosophical and political roots. Indeed, one could argue that political economy *is* philosophy, politics and economics. For political economists, power is not just market power, nor is it something that just structures the costs and benefits of particular choices. It is much deeper: power changes not just what we do, but also who we are, what we want and what we believe (Bartlett 1993). Recognising that the economy is a system of power (Samuels and Tool 1988) leads to an awareness that answers to economic problems nearly always raise political questions (Robinson 1981). Political economy also has a strong philosophical dimension. Indeed, it can be argued that all economics is, in the end, just a sustained form of philosophical reasoning (Fusfeld 2002). The more explicit focus on methodological issues in political economy (which is in many respects the philosophy of science as applied to economics) is a big plus here. Hugh Stretton (1999) has argued that one of the key problems in current undergraduate economics education is lack of attention to the philosophy of science; while Sheila Dow has also made the point that, if one really wants to get to the bottom of many disputes in economics, one must think methodologically and philosophically (Dow 2002). Philosophy is ultimately about rigorous and clear thinking.

Given these inherent linkages between economics, politics and philosophy, students who have some grounding in all these disciplines should be much better prepared for studying political economy than students undertaking a standard business or economics degree. The

former can be expected to start specialist subjects in political economy already aware of the big debates and issues in the social sciences, enabling them to get the best use out of whatever political economy subjects are available to them.

The other advantage of PPE degrees is that it allows political economists to form linkages and networks with like-minded academics working in other departments. These linkages can lay the foundation for some degree of mobility between departments. For example, with good professional working relationships, it is sometimes possible for political economists to teach in other departments or pick up teaching and research work there. In other words, PPE degrees can function as network- and relationship-building mechanisms for political economists and heterodox economists who might otherwise be isolated and overly dependent on the whims of their academic seniors in an economics department.

Having said all this, however, it is equally clear that PPE is no panacea. The curriculum of the economics course component in a PPE program may simply be re-packaged mainstream economics orthodoxy. In that case, students may be quite unable to see and understand the connections between the economics and the politics and philosophy courses they take. This 'three silos' approach to PPE degrees, unfortunately, is all too common. It is only when 'bridges' between the disciplines are explicitly built into the curriculum that the great potential of PPE degrees is reliably realised. In our view, this requires the explicit presence of political economy content in tutorials, lectures and reading. In universities with the 'three silo' type of PPE degree, the challenge is to work on building those 'bridges' more formally and extensively into the program. In our experience, student-led PPE societies can be invaluable in struggle for that goal (Thornton 2017).

#### *Teaching political economy in other academic departments*

A fourth possibility is for proponents of political economy to find safe harbor in other academic departments where their approach to teaching sits more comfortably. These include departments of politics, management, industrial relations, business, history, geography, sociology and anthropology, among others. Academics in many of these disciplines commonly recognise the importance of economic factors that bear on the topics that they study. It is also commonly the case that they have little empathy for a mainstream economics approach that is variously regarded as too rigid, technical, imperialist or intellectually flawed in character. For any or all these reasons, they may regard political economists as more likely to be suitable for teaching components in their courses, or even co-designing the curricula.

Such possibilities for developing political economy education in other social sciences and humanities disciplines are many and varied. It largely depends on the relevant personnel, their awareness of each other's interests and work, levels of trust and affinity, and the institutional specificities of the university in which they work. When establishing new subjects, or new majors, we again recommend considering greater disciplinary differentiation. Specifically, if any new subjects are framed as being subjects in 'political economy' rather than 'economics', orthodox economists are significantly less likely to see them as an encroachment on to their turf (Argyrous 1996; Argyrous and Thornton 2014).

Consequently, political economists may encounter less resistance in driving new subjects and majors along the often long and winding road to administrative approval.

### *Teaching political economy outside the university system*

Finally, there is a strategy for progressing political economy that need not navigate any of the foregoing obstacles that exist within universities. This is to simply start teaching it through other channels where it is welcomed, appreciated and readily supported. This can be done through adult education organisations, NGOs, political parties, think tanks and trade unions. Of these options, trade unions are currently the most well-established organizational avenues for this sort of activity, especially where labour-oriented political economic analysis offers alternatives to the conventional interpretations of prevailing political economic conditions (see Stanford 2015 and the following chapter in this book).

Another possibility is the setting up of independent schools for the study of political economy. 'Going off the grid' in this way means offering university-level instruction, but without it being described as such or constrained by university accreditation processes. The *Exploring Economics* website offer an extensive list of such courses, many of which are free or low cost. For example, the School of Political Economy (SPE), which one of us has established and directs, was established in 2019 and offers an expanding range of both online and face-to-face teaching. Whilst still in its infancy, this 'off the grid' approach is working surprisingly well in terms of viable enrolments, effective pedagogy and a capacity to attract intellectually strong students. It is also relevant to note that, if one takes a long view of the process of educational change, it has sometimes been the case the curricular innovation has sometimes occurred outside the university and the success of such efforts has forced the universities to play catch up (Burke 2000).

### **Further Considerations**

The five strategic options we have reviewed differ in terms of location – *where* we can seek to create space for the development and teaching of political economy. How a strategic decision on these options is made will necessarily vary from place to place, depending on local circumstances. It is also likely to vary over *time*, such as where a reform movement begins (as it usually does) with a focus on seeking 'reform from within' in an economics department and then, frustrated by limited success, moves on to refocus its efforts on one or more of the other options. Particularly in relation to the third and fourth options, where interdisciplinary links are crucial to progress, the question of 'where' is also inherently linked to *what*, in practice, are the relevant cognate territories. Making connections with, say, a department of Anthropology could be conducive to the development of teaching on the political economy of development. For a course on the political economy of inequality, maybe a Sociology department would be the preferred location. For the political economy of cities and regions, a Geography department. And so on. If such shared spaces are established, pluralism may then come into the course construction. This applies even when the general structure of the curriculum is oriented around particular real-world issues or problems because, for each issue or problem, the principal competing theoretical perspectives can be considered in combination with the relevant empirical evidence, policy

options and so forth. In these cases, the strategic question of *where* political economy may flourish is connected directly to the question of *what* is being studied.

There is another dimension to this 'what?' question too, relating particularly to the first strategy of trying to teach political economy within an orthodox economics department. If what is being sought is just, say, an elective on post-Keynesian economics that students can study alongside their orthodox economics core courses and electives, that strategy may have a reasonable chance of being accepted. The likelihood of success may be strengthened further if a generic sounding subject title and or subject description is used - for example, 'Capital and Growth' or 'Institutions and Markets' which avoids explicitly framing the subject as 'heterodox', 'alternative' or 'post-Keynesian'. Similarly, designing and framing a pluralist subject as a history of economic thought subject, or as a type of 'survey' subject can work. Such approaches are sometimes described as 'operating by stealth' or, to put it more diplomatically, 'taking a less combative approach' (Earl and Peng 2012). By such pragmatic means, some political economy subjects may be established amongst the suite of options in an otherwise mainstream department, and perhaps then provide the basis for further reform. Obviously, there are limits to what such pragmatism can achieve, as well as limits on how much one should compromise in describing subjects to colleagues and to potential students.

Proposing electives that mainstream economists regard as a direct challenge to their program represents a different order of ambition and approach. For example, proposing the introduction of 'Marxist Political Economy' or 'Alternative Theories of Capitalism' is likely to meet stronger resistance within most economics departments, as is seeking to make the core economics courses explicitly and structurally pluralist. Such outcomes *can* be achieved - we have seen it done and sometimes done it ourselves, at least for a time - but the chances of success are less. Our key point in all this is that, when approaching what appear to be limits to change *in any particular domain* - or simply encountering sharply diminishing returns to one's efforts - changing track to one or more of the other four strategic options set out in this chapter may be the better path forward.

Geoffrey Hodgson's recent book *Is There a Future for Heterodox Economics?* (Hodgson 2020) is relevant in this context, especially when seen in relation to critical responses that have been offered (*e.g.* Lavoie 2020; Dow 2021). His book raises many concerns that touch on these strategic issues, although its principal focus is on the nature of research and scholarly contributions in heterodox economics, rather than directly on teaching. It sets out a rather different array of possibilities that its author thinks require consideration. Significantly, Hodgson argues that heterodox economists may need to change *what they do*, particularly by narrowing the range of their academic work if they are to survive in the hostile environment where economic orthodoxy continues to prevail. Ultimately, he makes the case for having a more consolidated focus on a particular field, such as the institutional approach in political economy in which he is an acknowledged leader. While we have some sympathy with his call for greater unity in striving for change - or even in defending existing hard-won teaching territories - it seems both undesirable and unviable to prescribe what that focus should be in terms of a particular sub-field. Political economists inclined to Marxian analysis cannot be expected set their preferred approach aside to rally around a push for institutional or post-Keynesian economics, for example, or to concentrate their

collective efforts on criticising a particular feature of orthodoxy such as the assumption of utility maximization ('Max U'). So, while we appreciate Hodgson's significant contributions to institutional and evolutionary political economy, our understanding of what could and should be done differs in several respects. In particular, we consider that the most primary and urgent task is for political economy to 'teach its way out of trouble' by means of a pluralist curriculum. A commitment to pluralism is conducive to 'unity in diversity' (Stilwell 2021) and to celebrating and showcasing that through progressive education.

This emphasis on teaching may be seen to be going against the grain in the modern university where the managers commonly seem to give priority to research outcomes rather than teaching quality. Yet public expectations of universities continue to regard them as, first and foremost, teaching institutions. Efforts by political economy academics to push for pluralist curricula have the effect of re-focusing on the challenges of good teaching as well as providing instructors with a head start in promoting students' engagement and understanding (O'Donnell 2007, 2010). Good teaching requires clarity in *what* is being taught in the course materials and presentation; continual explanation of *why* particular issues have been selected for study; and encouragement of critical inquiry and feedback. A pluralist curriculum, although intrinsically challenging (Earl 2002), mitigates against an authoritarian pedagogy that treats students as passive, empty vessels needing to be filled (Stilwell 2012), although it offers no guarantees in this regard. Indeed, poor teaching of good content may result in levels of student engagement and understanding no higher than occurs within current mainstream economics education. Accordingly, the onus needs to be on political economy educators to make sure that the approach to teaching is conducive to the development of student interest, enthusiasm and commitment.

Finally, it is pertinent to note that there are personal investments of time and effort in all these aspects of pushing for educational change. Struggling to get a stronger foothold for political economic education may be stressful and personally costly for both academics and students, especially when facing orthodox economists who are implacably opposed to the proposed reforms and hold institutional power. Forming networks of communication and support - across universities, across countries and crossing the student-teacher divide - can be helpful in these circumstances, hopefully making the process more of an interesting adventure and less of an isolating experience. Engagement in the process of struggle can also be an important personal experience. As a former student activist, reflecting on what he learnt from active participation in the struggle to establish political economy education at the University of Sydney put it:

On reflection, the real learning from being in the PE [political economy] movement was about how our society works and what levers can be used to effect change and mobilise people. It was about how to force your agenda, how to keep your issue alive and not be taken out of the game in the process. In practice, that meant taking action with the ombudsman, petitioning the Senate, soliciting the support of unions and journalists, and writing in the University newspapers... (Paul Porteous, in Butler *et al.* 2009, p71)

Indeed, involvement in the process of pushing for change can be at least as educational as any content that students encounter in their classes.

## Conclusion

This chapter has considered a range of strategic options by which progress in political economic education may be achieved. Its presentation of the five principal strategies for progress has sought to clarify the main options and their respective pros and cons. Which strategy is most appropriate to pursue will always depend on the specific situation and the judgements that proponents of educational reform make about what seems viable and desirable in that context. Being aware of other experiences in similar contexts can inform the choice of broad strategy and serve as a reference point for making more finely grained judgements about how to advance the reform effort (for illustrative case studies see Argyrous 1996, Butler, Jones *et al.* 2009, and Thornton 2017). While we do not seek to dissuade anybody from trying to push for change from within economics departments - almost certain to remain the primary terrain of struggle - we urge consideration of greater strategic diversification because other options may be more achievable and sustainable.

Educational reforms exist synergistically alongside broader efforts at reform that include writing articles and books on political economic topics, creating and editing journals, forming and running organisations, both national and international, and using diverse media in seeking to have broader public impact. The prevailing material conditions are always important too. Educational change - especially in the territories of economics and political economy - cannot occur in a vacuum. The pursuit of progress in political economy requires developing ever better analyses for illuminating a changing world and contributing to changing it for the better. Notwithstanding its entrenched position in the academy, the 'conventional wisdom' of mainstream economics is made more vulnerable by the growing and deepening economic problems and crises in the world around us. These same problems increase the potential audience for, and interest in, an alternative political economic perspective. Seen in this broader context, advancing education in political economy is a vital ingredient in promoting and protecting our collective future.

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