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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://epubs.scu.edu.au/jesp/vol10/iss2/8
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A new ideological concept has been introduced to the world and this book explains it. The idea of 'Autistic' economics was coined in June 2000 when a group of French students, who considered themselves 'victims' of modern mainstream economics, put their case on the web. They claimed that the economics discipline had become dominated by dogmatic neo-classical economics, by excessive use of mathematics, often as an end in itself, by unrealistic theoretical assumptions and by 'repressive' teaching styles which leave little room for critique or alternative views. They labelled this 'autistic' because the ideas and practitioners were allegedly 'lost in imaginary worlds'.

The students therefore called for a 'Post-Autistic Economics' which would reverse these sins, open up the discipline to new ideas, make it more relevant to real life and provide it with more realistic basic assumptions. They emphasized that they were not against a degree of formalism, the appropriate use of mathematics or a scientific approach to economics. But they argued that present-day economic methods went too far in this direction and were 'scientistic' rather than scientific. A few critics went as far as to describe mainstream scientistic economics as a 'cult' and as 'fundamentalism'.

After getting support from the odd 'respectable' dissident economist, they did what any self-respecting heretics do these days – they created a website and put out an electronic newsletter, along with a petition to the press and government. Soon other economists took up the cudgels, further groups in the UK, US and elsewhere issued petitions and the debate got some airing. A few crestfallen mainstream economists responded that the problem must be in teaching methods rather than the basic ideas of economics, while the French Government issued a report promising to rectify the concerns. The debate is still bubbling away, but repentant mainstream economists remain thin on the ground.

This book has an unusual and useful approach to presenting such an unorthodox topic. There are three elements to the book. The first is a few pages of general introduction by the editor, Edward Fullbrook, which paints the overall picture quite well. The second is a set of documents representing the main debate and history of the issue, as outlined above. The third, making up the bulk of the book, is a wide range of articles, under several headings, by practicing economists who sympathise with the 'post-Autistic' cause. Most are very brief, being either conference papers or quickie contributions to the on-line newsletter.

This approach is both useful and frustrating. The first two sections are handy and give a usable account of the battle. For the rest the articles are frustratingly variable and cover a range of themes which is a bit amorphous. Most of the articles are stimulating in some way and there are some prominent dissident economists present – Geoff Harcourt, James Galbraith, Tony Lawson, Geoffrey Hodgson, Sheila Dow, Paul Ormerod, Steve Keen and many more. Themes of the articles range from minor issues
about teaching to critiques of the fundamental assumptions used in mainstream economics. It would have been more satisfying to see a selection directed towards such fundamental critiques, but as it is the range seems too diversified for this.

I have several other qualms about the book and the Post-Autistic movement in general. First, I am not convinced that coining a quaint new concept like 'autistic' economics has helped the cause of critique. I also wondered about its politeness in relation to true sufferers of autism – is it an insult to them? However, one American contribution, James Devine, who apparently has an autistic child is comfortable with the analogy and has some interesting things to say about the parallels.

Second, in a way the 'Post-Autistic' movement does not seem as alternative to me as its initiators think it is, given that they generally accept mathematical methodology and reasoning. They seem to be doing something like what one prominent contributor, British mathematical economist, Paul Ormerod, is doing. This is, to question the working assumptions of neo-classical economics and propose more 'dynamic', non-linear models without questioning the value of the modeling overall. For me true heresy would question the whole basis of economic values and consumerism, as does the field of 'Gandhian Economics' in which I am interested, and many forms of 'Green Economics'.

Finally, the movement's main work has been almost entirely on-line, which today is fashionable and gets to a lot of web chat-rooms, but not to the general public. The web is nowhere near the vehicle for mass circulation of ideas that many technophiles and Gatesian-style techno-euphorists think it is. As a techno-phobe I suspect it never will be. I have spoken to a number of potential sympathizers of post-Autistic economics and none have ever heard of it, even web-buffs. Indeed, in France the issue only came to light when it was run, briefly, by mainstream newspapers such as Le Monde, since when it has lapsed into the obscurity of the internet. It will probably stay there, which is a pity because it has generated some interesting ideas.

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