

Can Academia be Revolutionary? Barriers to Encourage an Alternative Economics from University Perspective

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Abstract: There are many published critical works on the hegemonic economics approach. Nevertheless, despite such, its hegemony continues. It does so, in part, and precisely, because of the support it receives from academia. This work questions the reasons for this academic behaviour, and offers the following responses: *First*, it points to an imbalance between hegemony and its alternatives. The latter is expected to be exhaustive and show sufficient arguments for all its proposals, whereas the first benefits from several cyclic functioning reproduced by inertia. *Second*, it shows how politics and academia follow two different schools of thought that defend very different conceptions of speed to get results; the exercise of freedom; the management of dissent; ingroup relations; and communications with the public. *Third*, it reflects on the fact that academia lacks cohesion, is mostly conservative, and is managed by the most obedient and efficient sector of its members. *Fourth*, it discusses how an academic minority interested in promoting alternatives is tasked with making the operations of hegemony visible to colleagues accustomed to obeying and focused on their compartmentalised work; in return, the minority is often punished by academic norms. *Five*, it focuses on how academia is absorbed by it through new public management models that marketize academic quality and fill the academic agenda, instead of transforming it. As solutions, the paper suggests the following: (1) creating visible alternatives and building group strength; (2) promoting new quality standards that release the academy from hegemonic conceptions of economics; (3) establishing partnerships with non-academic agents; and (4) transforming how we are teaching economics.

Keywords: Hegemonic economics, disputes between academia and politics, alternative models, academic functioning.

1. INTRODUCTION

There is a growing body of literature that recognises the need for a critical view (hereinafter, C), that can encourage a complete alternative to hegemonic understandings of economics (hereinafter, H). C is present in publications, intellectual movements, and citizen actions. These initiatives address a wide range of problems associated with H, and propose other ways of thinking, seeing and acting in the real world. Despite its efforts, little is known about actual effects of C, and it is unclear what factors explain why H remains hegemonic.

With these questions in mind, this paper synthesises some answers from literature and personal experience. In the pages that follow, it will be argued that academic staff are working for H, even when there is no conscious intention of doing so. This is because, in the daily practice of politics and universities, there are several barriers to the success of C. This paper attempts to identify and organize these problems into a brief scheme.

This document has been divided into five parts. The first section deals with imbalance of efforts between H and C to justify their decisions. The second is concerned with the very different working styles between academia and politics. The next section addresses some internal problems of academia as a change agent. The fourth, lists some issues about the academic management of dissidence. And the fifth highlights that the objective 'helping moves from H to C outside' is very difficult if what it is doing is 'assuming H inside'. Following this introduction, the article elaborates on H and C in the body, presents the difference between working styles of academia and politics before concluding and recommending some courses of action.

2. IMBALANCE OF EFFORTS BETWEEN H AND C

Overall, H requires less effort for greater effect than C. This situation can be described in four points: invisibility, justification, completeness and self-reproduction.

Both are invisible, but invisibility has very different effects for both. H is invisible because it lacks contrast. There is no contrast because (a) H is everywhere, and (b) H has been normalized by the passage of time. To

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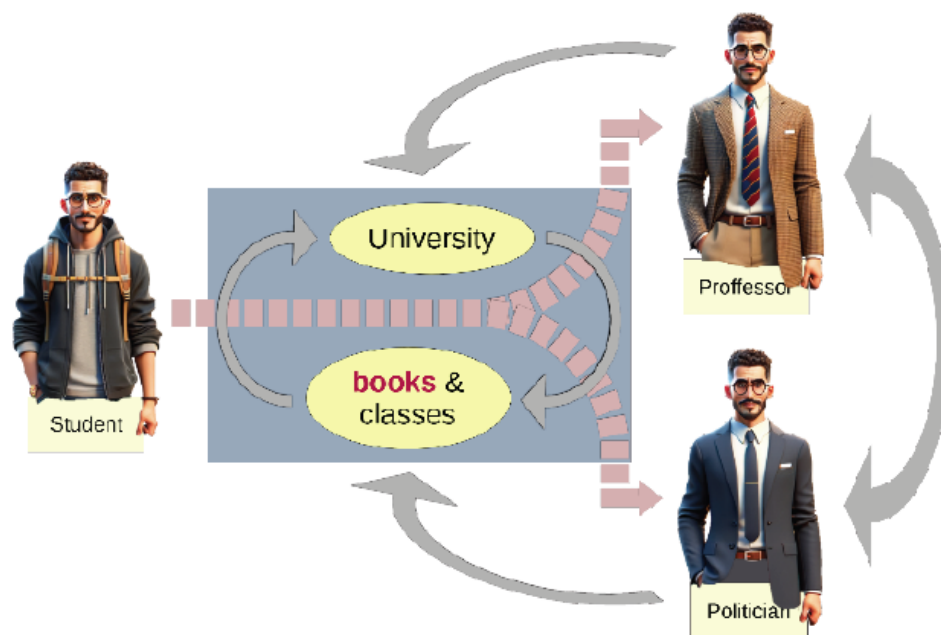


Figure 1: The circle of Academia, Politics and their relationship.

make H visible it is necessary to implement problematizing processes (Montero, 2009), which are difficult operations, and require a significant effort. C is invisible because it arises from disconnected minorities in academia, or from organizations without good access to the media. Getting cohesion and media access needs a lot of effort. Both invisibilities work in favour of H, and at the expense of C.

Only one of both must justify what says. H does not require a justification of each step, since it is standard and omnipresent. People agree that all decisions are going to be made from H. C not only must justify each affirmation, but it must also show that each unit from its discourse is the best. C must load with any justification efforts.

Only one of the two must be exhaustive. H has been completed over time. No one has designed H, but a mixture of few minds and many practices did-with abundant errors and successes-. All complex devices have been built gradually. After the first few steps, neither exhaustive nor complete, an army of anonymous people builds and improves reality through practice. On the contrary, it is required for C to be complete and thorough before being implemented in practice.

Sometimes, reproduction is self-reproduction. H participates in several cycles. In all of this H, plays the role of cause and effects (Goodwin, 2014). It happens also that cycles feed each other. C is outside of these

processes, and must apply specific efforts in each movement. Some of these cycles are:

- a. Education: H is the doctrine taught in university centers of economy, because it is the model of reference. The model will apply in practice, thanks to graduates from these economics courses. In this manner, this behavior reinforces the reference model.
- b. Public opinion: people, as mass audience, think about economy influenced through media effects like framing, agenda setting, and priming (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007). H is the only reference in all these phenomena. Consequently, when politicians and staff of mass media make decisions, this reference is taken into account.
- c. Meetings of economy: at conferences, in magazines and journals, and others formats, where aspects of economy are addressed, H is the main reference. On account of effects like «third person» or «spiral of silence» (Mutz, 1989), those economists who anticipate -or think they perceive- the success of H, will defend H, even though they prefer C. In this way, H remains the reference.

This research posits that books are at the centre of our educational system. Professors impart knowledge to students using books thus empowering students to

become professors or politicians in the future. While professors continue to publish for the benefit of the system, politicians apply theories developed in academia, changing in practice nothing imparted by professors. What happens in politics further informs academia as at times professors become politicians and vice-versa. This vicious circle is presented in Figure 1 above.

3. VERY DIFFERENT WORKING STYLES BETWEEN ACADEMIA AND POLITICS

The academia has difficulties to influence the world of politics on account of their different styles of work. The conversation between both dimensions is difficult. The relation between both often occurs when the academia adopts the ways of politics, becoming a part of it, or when politics imposes its criteria. Their styles are very different, regarding management of time, homogeneity, freedom and relationships.

Their rhythms are very different. Jarab (2008), from his experience in both dimensions, describes how politics tends to prioritise agility versus quality, contrary to the academia. In this way and over time, politics ends up controlling both agendas. Isheloke (2018) explains the need for industry or enterprises to synergise their efforts and use agility and mechanisms of control such as the “Strenghts, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT)-analysis and the “Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Ecological and Legal” (PESTEL) framework in identifying problems related to what the organisation does and trying to address them. The issue of quality is also to

be looked at using the tools provided if success is to be guaranteed.

The homogeneity has a very different value for each. Studies show that we feel much less regret if the action was chosen by the majority, and if we chose a habitual action rather than a novel one (Frith, 2014). In politics, this behaviour is a security feature: if one is wrong about something, all are wrong. The result is a diffuse responsibility. In the academia, at least in theory, heterogeneity is protected. The great advances come about via divergent thinking (Manzano-Arrondo, 2012).

Both start from different understandings of the exercise of freedom. Adopting an alternative model requires this freedom. This is an essential component of academic identity (Barnhizer, 1993). However, in the political dimension, two forces are more important than freedom for members: discipline -the party line-, and public preferences.

The relations with the public have opposing relevancies for both. In line with the above, politics maintains frequent contact with the public. Conversely, academia is often described as an ivory tower (Fox, 2004; Watson, 2008). When academia relates with populations, it does it through two weak formats: (1) reports of findings -by the interest of the media-, and (2) extraction of data from the population to its researches. As a result of this, the public does not think about academia as a valid interlocutor to build alternative models; academia neither.

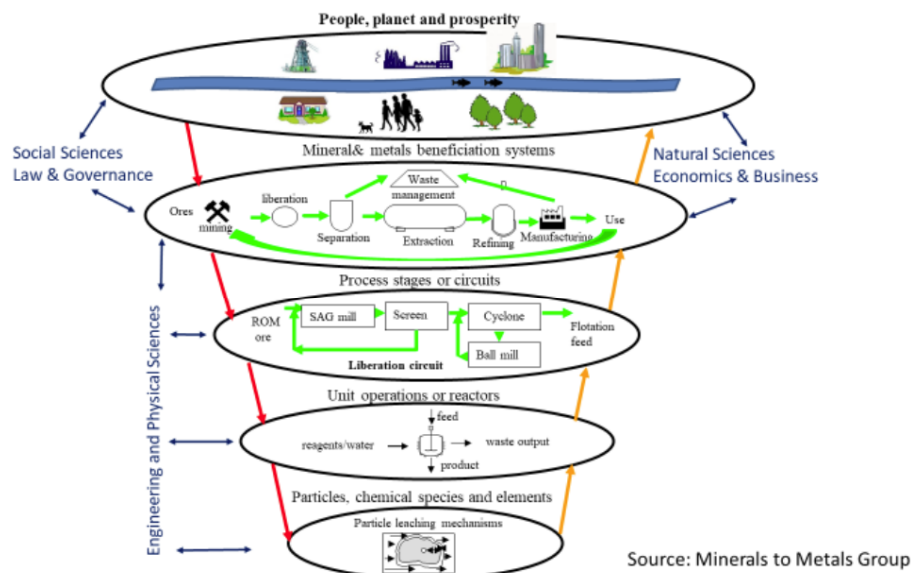


Figure 2: Complexity of interactions in science and real life (Isheloke and Von Blottnitz, 2019).

The two hold different visions of relations between equals. Peer communication is another essential point of academic identity. This criterion aims to subject the proposals to open discussion (Macfarlane, 2011; Shields and McGuin, 2011). However, in politics «there can be only one». This rivalry occurs between parties and within parties (Dussel, 2005).

3.1. Internal Problems of the Academia as a Change Agent

Academia is characterised, in practice, by a number of behaviours that make it difficult to think of it as an agent for social change. Mainly: there is no group cohesiveness, members have conservative ideology, and there are some controversial profiles.

One academia without cohesiveness: Universities express in their founding documents, a clear motivation for the common good (Watson, 2008). However, the model of the invisible hand works its way through the academic environment and everyone works according to their own interests (Manzano-Arrondo, 2012). This operation results in decrease of cohesion (Macfarlane, 2005). Without cohesion, there is no alternative.

Figure 2 exhibits some of the complex interactions in science and real life, giving an idea of what academia encompasses. Critical thinking and critical analysis could help both academia and politics to get the best out of such an interactive and complex situation.

Members with conservative ideology: It is easy to think of the academia as a progressive environment with leftist thought. Haidt and Graham (2007) define progressive and conservative ideologies according to a set of values. Both show interest in justice and well-being. However, conservative ideology prioritises three values: loyalty, respect to authorities, and purity. These three values are essential in academic practice. Accordingly, it appears that the academy is essentially a conservative institution. A conservative institution cannot lead or inspire social change. Instead, working on different scenarios and applying the principles of change management would.

Two controversial profiles: In Manzano-Arrondo (2015), I showed that there are two well-defined profiles within academia around these issues: MOR - Market orientation, Obedience, and Realism- and SRIP -Social orientation, Resistance, Idealism, and Positioning-. C is much more likely in SRIP than in MOR. Respect to H, shows the opposite. And it

happens that MOR occupies the management positions, so the inner workings of the institution are not a good foothold for C.

3.2. Problems with the Academic Management of Dissent

Science sees itself as objective, neutral, distant, aseptic, and impartial (Manzano-Arrondo, 2014). However, scientific behaviours and all parts of research reflect an underlying ideology that includes a vision of reality with conscious and unconscious components (Eakin *et al.*, 1996). Economists defend that (1) science is concerned purely with the objective and the positive (Zaman, 2014), and (2) ideological preferences are avoidable and unwelcome. Along these lines, H is exalted as the only objective option, whereas C is stigmatised as an ideological preference. This situation can also be understood in terms of invisibility, obedience and punishment.

Invisibility: On account of point 1, members of academia who defend C have serious problems (1) to communicate with members who think about H as the only valid model, and (2) to show the ideological elements of H.

Obedience: Due to points 10 and 11, it is easy to deduce that academia is obedient in daily practice. From obedience, it is very difficult to see unjust functionings of H and to work to correct them by means of C.

Internal punishment: As a result of the above, a minority movement of scholars who work on critical views of H and promote ideological resistance will probably be rejected by their colleagues who think that this behavior is less academic.

3.3. Academic Managerialism

While some scholars fight to move from H to C outside, a majority of academia assumes H inside. New Public Management, specific academic marketisation and academic stress are some of the contributors to the internal triumph of H.

New Public Management: This paper deals with barriers to move from H to C. This implies the direction academia → C. However, the standard New Public Management implements the direction H → academia (Codd, 2005; Moosmayer, 2011; Teelken, 2012).

Academic marketisation of publications: More and more, academic behaviour tends to limit itself to the

production of one single result: the publication of papers into a specific market of journals, in hands of a few international companies. Bermejo (2014), for example, shows that scholars work as slaves for these large companies in the publishing sector. Instead, a focus on how to benefit from inputs by the most valuable assets of academia, or any other organisation for that matter, would be more constructive.

Academic stress: Closely related to the above are the problems of stress and health issues. Shaw and Ward (2014), for example, highlight that these problems reduce the freedom of movement within academia. When stress is strong, it is unlikely that people acquire the needed awareness, and dedicate the necessary time and resources to modify structures and functionings necessary change from H to C. It is more than likely that scholars focus their energy on self-salvation (Becker and Marecek, 2008; Grinberg, 2009). Investing in the quality of working life (QWL) and abiding by management principles could help curb pressure, stress and related health complications.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND ACTIONS

Throughout this work, we have attempted to synthesise some answers to the question of why academia is not being revolutionary in regard to the movement from H to C. Numerous academics dedicate their efforts to show the abundant problems of H while giving shape to C. However, for such efforts to succeed, it is necessary to solve the barriers herein exposed. In this sense, it can be interesting to follow the next four points:

Get visibility and cohesion: It is convenient to disclose within academia not only the disadvantages of H -behavior almost habitual in the context of the economic literature, but much less common in other disciplines-, but especially the existence and relevance of C. These same processes, through mutual knowledge, also provide cohesion.

Recover freedom by means of new standards for quality and assessment. While the academia is assessed following the logic of the market, most of its members remain seized by their own career, without implying any effort to collaborate in the building of an alternative model (Balestena, 2001). It is urgent to change the standards applied to assess the people in academia. Through this change, we will be able to break the relation of servitude.

Establish external partnerships. Academia possesses good conditions to handle knowledge. Knowledge is the main raw material to build excellent alternatives. However, to make useful this knowledge it is necessary to exit the university walls and establish partnerships with three agents. On the one hand, the world of politics, inside which there are people claiming to be improving the state of things. They are grateful for the strong support from academic knowledge. On the other hand, the citizenry. Its movements and organizations inspire and are inspired by intellectual works and acts. They can contest political decisions and force politicians to adopt new and concrete solutions, in alignment with C. And, finally, mass media. For its members, it is important to have access to experts who can interpret the present drawing from different references and sources.

Change the form and the substance of the teaching of economics. In this sense, Goodwin (2014) offers

"a list of the qualities that would, ideally, be promoted in people who are learning to be economists. The list includes judgment, humility and imagination, as well as good communication skills - the ability to learn from others, and the ability to communicate with people with different educational and cultural backgrounds. (...) [1] Judgment can, and should, be informed by the gathering of information - but, as Herbert Simon pointed out, it is generally impossible to know exactly what is the information we need that we don't have, or when we have enough. Judgment also can and often should be assisted by analysis - but, as was noted above, complex decisions may actually be hindered by excessive rationalisation, and may be more effective when taken quickly, calling on emotion or intuition. (...) [2] Humility is another valuable quality, too seldom found in economists. No individual can be an expert in all the fields that are relevant to the important subjects for economics in the 21st century - fields such as ecology, systems theory, sociology, psychology, history, nutrition, anthropology, philosophy, political theory, etc. (...) [3] Humility tells us that we don't know all the answers: imagination is required to find solutions that are not obvious. Imagination is the quality that

may be hardest of all to teach, but at least economists could learn to recognize and value it." (p. 116)

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Received on 18-10-2024

Accepted on 05-12-2024

Published on 31-12-2024

<https://doi.org/10.6000/2818-3401.2024.02.05>

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