

FROM TERRIBLE TO TERRIFIC UNDERGRADUATE ECONOMICS CURRICULA:

An evidence-based assessment of an intellectual disaster, and a
proposal for an alternative approach to economics teaching¹

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Since 2010, the PEPS-Économie student initiative (Pour un Enseignement Pluraliste dans le Supérieur en Économie) has championed a pluralist teaching of economics. PEPS-Économie has now become a major stakeholder in the field of economics higher education. Often quoted in the media as well as by renowned economists, our actions contributed to put economics teaching on the agenda of the Higher Education and Research Ministry. At the local and national levels, PEPS-Économie is working with students' unions and organisations in order to change the national competency framework for the Bachelor's degree in Economics. At the international level, PEPS-Économie is a founding member of ISIPE (International Student Initiative for Pluralism in Economics).

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Introduction

Among the areas left largely unscathed by the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent never-ending recession, the teaching of economics ranks high. In spite of recurrent criticisms and concerns (fourteen years after the birth of the Post-autistic movement in this very same city!), undergraduate curricula is still largely dominated by strictly technical approaches, with little effort to make contemporary economic issues accessible to economics students. Surprisingly, the crisis has not caused any changes to the teaching of economics, even though it called into question some of the core results of the dominant approach.

In an article originally published in the journal *L'Économie politique* in April 2013 and whose English version is forthcoming under the title 'The case for pluralism: what French undergraduate economics teaching is all about and how it can be improved' in the *International Journal of Pluralism and Economics Education*, we dedicated ourselves to two interconnected tasks: First, we documented the urgent need for more pluralism by taking a close look at today's economics curricula in all French universities (50 universities total); and second, we designed a curriculum committed to a strong conception of pluralism.

Although this survey is limited to France given the high degree of similarity in economics curricula from one country to another, we hope that it will inspire supporters of pluralism in economics education. Our work was undertaken with very modest means – mostly the good will of PEPS members using their own computers on their own time. We did not require any funding and thus feel such a study could be replicated in other countries. We hope this large round discussion at the 2015 INET Plenary Conference will inspire others to carry out similar studies and helps energize the fight for pluralism.

Our survey of existing economics curricula in France

Focusing on the titles of the economic courses given in all French universities, and taking a straightforward and tractable empirical approach, we first show that French

undergraduate curricula do little to develop a critical understanding of both real world economic phenomena and economics as a (fallible) scientific discipline.

Table 1 Inadequate curriculum for economics education: average weight given to each subject taught in French undergraduate Economics programmes, as measured in the number of ECTS credits granted*

<i>Type of course</i>	<i>Average weight</i>
Technical approaches [1]	43.0%
Working methodologies [2]	13.9%
Management	13.7%
Thematic approaches [3]	12.1%
Reflexive approaches [4]	5.5%
Others	4.7%
Interdisciplinarity	4.1%
Professionalisation [5]	3.0%

Notes: [1] Mathematics, statistics, microeconomics, macroeconomics

[2] Speaking and writing skills

[3] Labour economics, money and banking, international economics etc.

[4] Epistemology, economic history etc.

[5] Internships in the private or the public sector.

*The 'European Credit Transfer System' (ECTS) was established in the early 2000s to allow for greater comparability in higher education programmes at both national and European levels. An undergraduate diploma requires a minimum of 180 ECTS credits. The number of credits granted to a course more or less reflects its relative importance in the whole economics curriculum in terms of the amount of dedicated teaching hours and its grading weight.

Source : PEPS- Économie (2015)

In light of such findings that strongly support our critique of the teaching of economics in higher education, we have designed an alternative curriculum that would respond to our four main claims.

Our proposal for an alternative economics curriculum

In order to go beyond mere criticism, we designed a curriculum for a Bachelor of economics. Freeing ourselves – for the time being – from institutional and administrative constraints, we allowed ourselves to dream of an economics curriculum which would truly satisfy our expectations and thus make amends for the palpable lack of pluralism that we strongly condemn in the existing curricula. This curriculum constitutes a 'pluralist economics' bachelor's degree insofar as it responds to our demands for a threefold pluralism: theoretical, conceptual, and disciplinary.

The 3 pluralisms

When using the term 'pluralist', we refer to a demanding three-fold definition of pluralism:

1. **Interdisciplinary pluralism:** In addition to economics, we can also learn from Sociology, Philosophy, Political Science, Geography, History, Psychology, etc.
2. **Methodological pluralism:** taking the example of unemployment, how can one hope to fully address it without studying its treatment within economics in different periods, analysing and questioning the underlying assumptions, and putting into the different set of tools used?
3. **Theoretical pluralism:** Theories such as the Neoclassical Synthesis, New Keynesian Economics, Post-Keynesian Economics, Institutional Economics, Marxian Economics, Feminist economics, etc., should be taught.

Our proposed curriculum

Our alternative curriculum embodies such a strong conception of pluralism by restoring economic and social issues as the primary focus of economics teaching. Instead of consisting of a set of often poorly articulated subjects (microeconomics, macroeconomics, econometrics...), we argue that economics curricula should predominantly address specific objects of studies (unemployment, growth, money, banks and finance, states and institutions...). For such issues naturally call for a plurality approaches and explanations, an object-oriented teaching would make the best case for pluralism.

There is another reason to argue in favor of an object-oriented curriculum: it simply makes more sense! If economics teaching is to help develop students' critical understanding of the world we live in, basing the curricula around the social and economic issues that arise is most certainly the best way to reach that goal. Therefore, methodological tools and theories as well as interdisciplinary approaches should be taught in a way that clearly shows how they contribute to our understanding of such issues.

YEAR 1 SEMESTER 1

22 h/week

<i>Objects</i>	<i>Toolkit</i>	<i>Theories in perspective</i>	<i>Miscellaneous</i>
Contemporary economic and social issues	4h <i>Quantitative methods</i> Reminder (12th grade maths taught in the economics and social sciences stream)	2h30 <i>History of socioeconomic thought and facts</i> (till the end of the 19th century)	4h English 1h30
<i>Object 1: Production and consumption</i> Who produces? For which purposes? How to produce? How do organisations work? Who consumes? Why? Is it sustainable?	3h <i>Qualitative methods</i> Archives (historical perspective on an economic issue)	1h30	Second foreign language 1h30
<i>Object 2: The state and institutions</i> What is the state? Why the state? What is the role of the state in the economy?	3h		Information technology and office systems (c2i) 1h

Source : PEPS-Économie (2015)

This table shows an example of a first semester in our ideal bachelor's degree.

The first column represents the backbone of our curriculum. It is based of our vision of objects-based courses. Starting with an object and the questions it calls for, 'object-oriented courses' would appeal to the whole range of available knowledge on an issue – the criteria to select a knowledge being its relevancy to address the problem. Therefore such courses would attenuate theoretical, conceptual and disciplinary monopolies.

We have also added to the curriculum a course exclusively devoted to contemporary economic and social issues, which takes up a heavy workload. As students, too many of us have found ourselves unable in ordinary conversations to answer questions about youth unemployment, the financial crisis, etc., asked by those who expected that we would have a take on such issues, as surprising as this may appear. Contemporary economic and social issues are omitted from the economics curricula to the extreme point that some of us have not even heard of the current recession in our classes! Room for discussion of contemporary economic and social issues, to be grounded in theories, tools and economic thinking should thus be given.

In support of courses rooted in real-world economic issues, some others should be devoted to the toolkit that economics students should master. Thus we should include

some courses explicitly devoted to methods – both quantitative and or qualitative. Indeed, it seems primordial not to grant exclusive privilege to one or the other approach, as it is nearly always the case in economics curricula, characterized by the ubiquity of quantitative teachings. If it goes without saying that employing mathematical and statistical tools whenever appropriate to aid the analysis is important, such tools could and ought to be complemented by qualitative methods such as interviews and archives work.

A complementary course should be exclusively dedicated to the history of economic and social thought and to the history of economic and social facts. In this substantive class (in terms of content, credits and time commitment) attended by first and second year students, instructors will pursue three goals. First, they will teach theories, their core assumptions, and emphasize their coherence (or lack thereof). As opposed to the object-oriented class, which shows how different theories give alternative answers to the same socioeconomic problems, this class will give an exhaustive and comprehensive account of each theory by stressing their internal structure. Second, instructors will show how such theories emerged at a given time in order to address socioeconomic phenomena that could not be explained with existing theories. This is why the history of socioeconomic thought and the history of socioeconomic facts must go hand-in-hand. Most history of economic thought classes go through a chronologically ordered list of theories and often give the impression that such theories first appeared out of the blue and subsequently fell out of favor for mysterious reasons. Our approach will avoid this shortcoming since it emphasizes the importance of the historical context in the emergence of new theories, and their evolution. Finally, instructors must illuminate debates between advocates of alternative theories. By doing so, they will demonstrate that economics is far from being a monolithic entity devoid of debate and ideological views, and will help develop students' critical skills.

Conclusion

To conclude, let us say that our approach provides an informed critique of contemporary economics. Let us also recall that Peps-Économie stands for “For a Pluralistic Teaching of Economics in Higher Education” and that our ideal curriculum has been designed to concretely articulate our commitment to a strong conception of pluralism, regardless of the official name such a bachelor's degree would take. Based on our own experience as students, and then supported by our survey, we argue that our

economics education does not train economists to understand global contemporary issues, nor does it contribute to the acquisition of basic skills and knowledge needed to inform citizens. The near absence of reflexive approaches, the quasi-domination of quantitative methods and standard microeconomics and macroeconomics combined with the lack of theoretical, methodological and disciplinary pluralism has us intellectually frustrated and professionally helpless. More than ever, we need at the core of curricula, the three forms of pluralism – theoretical, methodological, and disciplinary – to become the standard in economics curricula.

References

The members of the PEPS-Économie Students' Association 2015, The case for pluralism: what French undergraduate economics teaching is all about and how it can be improved, *International Journal of Pluralism and Economics Education*, forthcoming