

Opening up economics, The Cambridge 27

(Released 14 June 2001)

27 PhD students at Cambridge University support the following open letter:

Opening up economics: a proposal by Cambridge students

As students at Cambridge University, we wish to encourage a debate on contemporary economics. We set out below what we take to be characteristic of today's economics, what we feel needs to be debated and why. As defined by its teaching and research practices, we believe that economics is monopolized by a single approach to the explanation and analysis of economic phenomena. At the heart of this approach lies a commitment to formal modes of reasoning that must be employed for research to be considered valid. The evidence for this is not hard to come by. The contents of the discipline's major journals, of its faculties and its courses all point in this direction.

In our opinion, the general applicability of this formal approach to understanding economic phenomenon is disputable. This is the debate that needs to take place. When are these formal methods the best route to generating good explanations? What makes these methods useful and, consequently, what are their limitations? What other methods could be used in economics? This debate needs to take place within economics and between economists, rather than on the fringe of the subject or outside of it all together. In particular, we propose the following:

1. That the foundations of the mainstream approach be openly debated. This requires that the bad criticisms be rejected just as firmly as the bad defences. Students, teachers and researchers need to know and acknowledge the strengths and weaknesses of the mainstream approach to economics.

2. That competing approaches to understanding economic phenomena be subjected to the same degree of critical debate. Where these approaches provide significant insights into economic life, they should be taught and their research encouraged within economics. At the moment this is not happening. Competing approaches have little role in economics as it stands simply because they do not conform to the mainstream's view of what constitutes economics. It should be clear that such a situation is self-enforcing. This debate is important because in our view the *status quo* is harmful in at least four respects. First, it is harmful to students who are taught the "tools" of mainstream economics without learning their domain of applicability. The source and evolution of these ideas is ignored, as is the existence and status of competing theories. Second, it disadvantages a society that ought to be benefiting from what economists can tell us about the world. Economics is a social science with enormous potential for making a difference through its impact on policy debates. In its present form its effectiveness in this arena is limited by the uncritical application of mainstream methods. Third, progress towards a deeper understanding of many important aspects of economic life is being held back. By restricting research done in economics to that based on one approach only, the development of competing research programs is seriously hampered or prevented altogether. Fourth and finally, in the current situation an economist who does not do economics in the prescribed way finds it very difficult to get recognition for his or her research.

The dominance of the mainstream approach creates a social convention in the profession that only economic knowledge production that fits the mainstream approach can be good research, and therefore other modes of economic knowledge are all too easily dismissed as simply being poor, or as not being economics. Many economists therefore face a choice between using what they consider inappropriate methods to answer economic questions, or adopting what they consider the best methods for the question at hand knowing that their work is unlikely to receive a hearing from economists.

Let us conclude by emphasizing what we are certainly not proposing: we are not arguing against the mainstream approach *per se*, but against the fact that its dominance is taken for granted in the profession. We are not arguing against mainstream methods, but believe in a pluralism of methods and approaches justified by debate. Pluralism as a default implies that alternative economic work is not simply tolerated, but that the material and social conditions for its flourishing are met, to the same extent as is currently the case for mainstream economics. This is what we mean when we refer to an "opening up" of economics.

The students who have written this proposal are asking for economic students and economists, wherever they are based, who wish to formally and publicly back their proposal to email them at **cesp@econ.cam.ac.uk**, with the following:

“I support the proposal of the Cambridge economics PhD students . . . signed”

Please include university/position if you wish these to be noted. The website www.paecon.net will be regularly updated with the full list of supporters. Other enquiries about the proposal are also welcome, to the same address.