
Quelle Economie pour la démocratie

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Résumé

What is the scope of economics as a science, what is economics for? Real freedom or what we call substantive democracy has never been an objective of economics. In this perspective freedom, or the lack of it, would not be a purpose of a particular economic system, but at best one of its side effects. In this paper I sustain that economics' discourse has become one the most substantial contributors to what could be called the erosion of democracy. The first argument used in this case against economics refers to its attempt to be considered a neo-naturalistic science; the second concerns the fact that economics considers democracy contradictory to the expression of its scientific rationality and; the third, that economics crowds out people from decision-making processes by pushing them into the hands of experts.

Within the theoretical frame inherited by mainstream economics, human communities are amorphous clusters of individuals, social classes simple tags put on individuals to differentiate economic functions, and individuals dehumanized by being assimilated to drying racks where propositions of economic logic are hanged. In short mainstream economics aims at being considered on the same foot as natural sciences. As a consequence of this naturalization process, putative economic laws have been made equivalent to natural laws, allowing economics to release itself from the complexity of human relations and to transform its exercise into the simple application of immanent rules.

The second argument against mainstream economics puts face-to-face two sources of rationality in the decision-making process, on the one hand scientific rationality and on the other hand democratic rationality. A substantively democratic society demands not only that citizens must participate in the making of decisions that concern them but also that decisions must not be served wrapped in a shroud of ignorance. In such a democratic society, scientific and democratic rationalities are complementary, scientific rationality being given the role of enlightening the masses. Unfortunately, when mainstream economics is involved this complementarity can easily be converted into conflict, in other words economic science can exclude the masses instead of enlightening them.

Finally, the preponderance of technical arguments for supporting public decisions leads to yet another form of marginalization of democracy. The intellectual difficulty in dealing with these technical problems eventually crowds out lay people from decision processes and transfer decisions on matters that affect the community from the hands of elected representatives of the people to those of individuals holding the required knowledge to address them, the experts.

What part should economics be called to play in this search for substantive democracy?

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This issue is all the more critical that economics has reached the status of a major political fact. Partisan political programs have essentially become economic programs, and economic variables have thereby become major global political issues. One of the ways for economics to contribute to substantive democracy is to propose an alternative discourse to mainstream economics. An economics favorable to substantive democracy should, thereby, be political rather than naturalistic, pluralist rather than monist and, instead of crowding out people from decisions processes, should aim at the co-production of economic knowledge with those concerned by the outcome of economic decisions.