

Breaking into the Mainstream

BY AARON STEELMAN

In 2003, administrators at the University of Notre Dame decided to split the Department of Economics into two: the Department of Economics and Policy Studies (DEPS) and the Department of Economics and Econometrics (DEE). Why the divide? In large part because there were significant differences in methodological approaches and fields of study within the department.

Those who considered themselves within the “mainstream” of the profession, generally using a neoclassical framework to examine issues such as economic growth and industrial organization, tended to move to the DEE. Those whose work was generally considered more “heterodox” or “pluralistic,” employing a variety of methodological approaches to address questions regarding race and gender, inequality, and the development of economic thought, among others, tended to form the nucleus of the DEPS. Less than a decade later, the DEPS was closed by university administrators and what was simply called the Department of Economics emerged again.

Faculty within the DEE tended to neatly fit into the new department, while many faculty members within the DEPS moved to various departments throughout the university. Developments at Notre Dame reflect divisions within the economics profession more broadly. Heterodox economists have formed roughly 20 associations around the world, including the Union for Radical Political Economics and the Society for the Advancement of Socio-Economics. Most of their members are considered to be on the left of the political spectrum and have clustered in a relatively small number of Ph.D. granting institutions around the country, including American University (AU), Colorado State University, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst (UMass), and the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

Not all departments with a strong heterodox presence are generally considered left-leaning, however. For instance, at Clemson University, Florida State University, and George Mason University (GMU), all of which also offer Ph.D. programs, students can work with faculty members interested in Austrian economics, public choice analysis, and experimental economics. Many of the prominent figures in those fields are thought of as vigorous defenders of the free market.

Does that mean such departments are explicitly ideological, as some have charged? Not necessarily. Economists at those institutions, like nearly everyone in the profession, have opinions about what the world *ought* to look like. “We all come to the study of economics with a set of predispositions,” says Robert Pollin, an economist at UMass. “I am quite open about my commitment to egalitarianism as a general pre-analytical social commitment. I think it is fair to say that virtually all of my UMass colleagues share that

commitment in various specific ways.” But economists who claim to be “apolitical centrists,” Pollin says, also have “a pre-analytical vision, no less than being an egalitarian.”

Moreover, holding relatively strong normative views doesn’t mean that ethical principles necessarily trump scientific investigation. Pete Boettke, an editor of the *Review of Austrian Economics*, did his Ph.D. at George Mason and taught at three institutions, including New York University, once considered the leading center of study in Austrian economics, before returning to GMU.

Boettke notes that “GMU is often misunderstood by outsiders because so many of our faculty are significant national and international voices in defending the free market that outsiders tend to think of the place as rather homogeneous.” But, he says, “when it comes to economic theory and economic methodology, GMU is one of the most diverse scientific environments,” a setting where economics, not ideology, is stressed. Pollin adds that if “one wants a solid grounding in mainstream economics and one wants to develop technical skills necessary to operate effectively as a professional economist, then UMass is a truly outstanding place to drink in all that economics has to offer.”

No heterodox department is generally considered to be among the top 50 departments in the country. But that doesn’t mean the students drawn to them are mediocre. Mieke Meurs is an economist and a former Ph.D. program director at AU. “Every year we attract students of a quality that one would not expect, given our ranking. These students come to AU because they want to study a variety of approaches to economic questions,” she says. “One former student explained it this way: If the only tool you have is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail. I use this analogy to talk about the usefulness of heterodox approaches.”

Nearly all students from heterodox departments find jobs as professional economists. But most find employment at liberal arts colleges, branch campuses of state universities, and nonprofit institutions. Not many are able to break into departments at highly ranked research universities.

Will today’s heterodox departments generally stay on the outside looking in at the heart of the profession? Probably for quite some time. But many heterodox economists point to an example from the 1950s and early 1960s. At that time, economists at the University of Chicago such as Milton Friedman and George Stigler led the challenge to the prevailing Keynesian orthodoxy. Within two decades they were at the forefront of the profession and had built Chicago, an already strong department, into a powerhouse. No one is predicting a similar ascendancy for AU, GMU, or UMass, but the more optimistic envision a time when they, too, will find a place within the mainstream of the profession. **EF**