

Reading Economics as Political Theory

Call for papers
Workshop 17-18 of June 2021
Sciences Po Paris

There is a consensus that economics is more than just a neutral and objective set of categories and variables to describe the economy and adjunct phenomena. Various literatures on the performativity of economic concepts have already traced how models inscribe themselves into the very fabric of modern economic practices. Historians of economic thought have equally outlined how *Chicago economics* have served as a yardstick to the conservative ‘revolutions’ of the 1970s in Latin America and the Big Bang of the 1980s in Europe. It is often pointed out, more generally, that economics as a profession allows economic experts to identify problems or demand reforms and streamline political debates.

In this workshop, we want to build on these insights and pursue the idea of *economics as political theory*. Political theory is traditionally understood as the discourse anchoring claims to sovereignty. Today unquestionably, it is economics which has come to represent the political theory par excellence. Reading economics as a new form of political theory however faces difficulties, the most important of which is the fact that this discourse is explicitly constructed as a logical discourse that is meant to abstract from politics. Its ability to couch itself in logical or scientific terms has in fact made it a particularly effective form of political theory in its ability to present specific positions as universal.

This framing has made it difficult to think through the *politics of economics*. Confronted with highly technical or mathematically advanced discourses, scholars interested in politics often default to discuss broad axioms shared within economics. As a result, there is too often a divide between generic critiques of economics found in the works of those interested in politics and the more specific analysis of economic historians who tend to underspecify the contextual (or socio-political) significance of economic ideas.

With *economics as political theory* we seek to challenge this binary and reflect on ways to politicise the formal writings of economics. Thinking through the politics of economics, how the sovereign and the political is implicitly constructed in these models (e.g. of development or public choice), involves not only a reflection on the social context that frames the work of economists, but also a sociology of the economic field that refracts these political concerns in distinct ways. While addressing the politics of economics has traditionally meant identifying the interest behind the theory (Cox 1982), translating economics as political theory implies a broader ambition to reflect on the ways in which the question of politics is framed by an intersubjective field, the discipline itself, and thus requires us to decipher it more generally. Addressing both, we contend, is crucial to avoid reifying economics to treat it as a distinct discursive field, through which a variety of approaches have been articulated. In particular, we look for approaches that deal with:

- a) the performativity of economics and how to move beyond
- b) sociologies of the economic field
- c) the advent and transformative power of the economic profession
- d) textual contextualisation from historians of economics theory that locate economic ideas within the broader development of the discipline (Mirowski)
- e) economics and questions of hierarchy, power, authority, expertise

This workshop is intended as the first step in a broader project to survey the evolution of economics in political terms. It is preliminary planned to take place on the 17th and 18th of June 2021 at Sciences Po in Paris. Among confirmed participants to this workshop are Béatrice Cherrier, Dieter Phlewe and Matthew Watson.

After this more conceptual workshop we intend to put together a series of workshops that would broadly cover three different eras of the discipline of economics:

- a) the formalisation of the discipline in the 19th century with the rise of economics and the marginalist revolution
- b) the mathematisation and modelisation of economics with the rise of Keynesianism, developmental economics and cybernetics in the interwar and post war era
- c) The Neoliberal turn of the 1980s

Building on these workshops, we intend to put together a special issue or an edited book on the politics of economics.

Those interested in participating in the workshop and presenting a paper should submit a title and a proposal of no more than 500 words to Oliver Kessler (oliver.kessler@uni-erfurt.de), Samuel Knafo (s.knafo@sussex.ac.uk) or Matthias Thiemann (matthias.thiemann@sciencespo.fr).

The deadline for submission is Friday the 4th of December 2020.

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