

Introduction: on the role of a generalist journal

ALESSANDRO RONCAGLIA *

Economics is a wide field indeed. Economists commonly specialize in some limited part(s) of the general field. This is a necessity, of course, due to the complexity of the different issues, the amount of literature available on each one of them and the possibility of recourse to different analytical or statistical tools. However, specialization has its drawbacks. Quite often, specialists in the fields of, for instance, labour economics or industrial organization, utilize tools such as the aggregate production function or Marshallian U-shaped cost curves for the firm and the industry; tools which any specialist in abstract theory knows to have been proved faulty (as Sylos Labini, 1988, forcefully recalls). Again, quite often econometric exercises rely on implicit, forgotten assumptions which if duly recognized would deprive the results of any meaning with regard to the interpretation of real world events.

Worst of all, economists nowadays quite often are born, trained and set to work within the mainstream approach – as if no other interpretation of how the economy works (or *Weltanschauung*, as Schumpeter calls it) did exist or had ever existed.

The risks of field specialization are commonly countered by the existence of generalist journals: by perusing them, any specialist may keep in touch with developments in other fields of enquiry. However, quite often generalist journals restrict themselves to the mainstream approach. Thus, a different kind of specialized journal is born: generalist as far as the field of research is concerned, but limited to a certain non-mainstream approach, be it Austrian or Post-Keynesian, institutionalist or Marxist. Comparison between the conceptual foundations of the different approaches is investigated within another specialist field of research, the history of economic thought, which because of this role should be a

* Sapienza University of Rome. E-mail: alessandro.roncaglia@uniroma1.it.

central element in the basic training of economists, but which what we might call ‘mainstream cultural imperialism’ relegates to a purely optional component of even graduate studies.

Over its sixty-five years of life, our journal has attempted to maintain itself open to both different fields of economic analysis and different theoretical approaches, selecting contributions on the basis of their quality as judged on a twin criterion: analytical rigour and real-world relevance. The present issue makes no exception to this practice. The articles published here illustrate (aspects of) different analytical approaches, besides contributing to different fields of economic research, in the attempt to show once again the usefulness of such a broad remit.

Lord Skidelsky’s paper provides a brilliant comparison of different traditions that may help to shed light on the present crisis (Skidelsky, 2013). Keynes’s, Marx’s and Hobson’s theories are briefly but vividly illustrated, evaluating their characteristics by contrasting them with one other. Lord Skidelsky thus shows how each theory may help our understanding of one aspect or another of the financial and economic crisis that still affects the world economy and of the policies rightly or – more often – wrongly adopted with the aim of countering it.

Dainelli, Giunta and Cipollini (2013) indirectly consider a specific, but – in the context of the crisis – highly relevant, issue, namely the difficulties in financing small and medium enterprises (SMEs) arising from the Basel III criteria on risk evaluation and capital requirements of banks. More directly, the article provides an econometric analysis of the determinants of SMEs’ credit worthiness, on the basis of a sample of 187 small and medium sized Italian enterprises, showing the relevance of previous financing history and current profitability and the lesser relevance of their capitalization levels.

Toporowski (2013) brings us into a different dimension, with an obituary of Tadeusz Kowalik. The doyen of Polish political economists and an advisor to the Polish trade union Solidarity during the 1980s, Kowalik was a pupil and the last surviving collaborator of Michał Kalecki who, independently of Keynes, had in the 1930s already constructed an original approach that combined elements of Marxian class analysis with Keynesian-type aggregate demand determination of production levels. Kowalik was a

fierce spirit with strong reformist motivations and his memory remains alive in all those who, like myself, have had the good fortune of meeting him.

James Buchanan was awarded the Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel in 1986, for his contributions to originating the theory of public choice. His was a very important approach with a quite different stance to that of Kowalik and Kalecki, and which deals with the logic of choice by public policy authorities in a democratic regime, as well as with the norms (the ‘constitution’) that provide the framework for such choices. To honour his memory (Buchanan died on January 9, 2013) we republish in this issue his contribution to the series of “Recollections of Eminent Economists”, originally published in 1986 in English and in 1987 in Italian (Buchanan, 1986; 1987). In it, Buchanan stresses the influence of Italian economists belonging to the so-called Italian school of *scienza delle finanze* on his thinking; this school is the object of an in-depth illustration by Giuseppe Dallera (2013) in this month’s issue of *Moneta e Credito*, the Italian counterpart to this journal.

Shortly before receiving the Nobel memorial prize, Buchanan had been invited to contribute a recollection article by Luigi Ceriani, then editor of this journal, at the suggestion – if I recall correctly – of Fritz Machlup, who gave Ceriani and myself (then assistant editor of the journal) some advice on a provisional list of suggested authors for the Recollections series. In fact, the news of the prize reached us when the proofs of the article had been just sent to Buchanan for his final revision, and Buchanan sent us back the proofs together with a most kind letter saying that our request had brought him good luck... The article was subsequently reprinted more than once, and lent its title to Buchanan’s own handsome volume of personal recollections (Buchanan, 1992).

REFERENCES

- BUCHANAN J. (1986), “Better than Plowing,” *Banca Nazionale del Lavoro Quarterly Review*, vol. 39 n. 159, pp. 359-375. Republished in *PSL Quarterly Review*, vol. 66 n. 264, pp. 59-76.

- (1987), “Meglio che arare,” *Moneta e Credito*, vol. 40 n. 157, pp. 3-18. Republished in *Moneta e Credito*, vol. 66 n. 261, pp. 93-110.
- (1992), *Better than Plowing and Other Personal Essays*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- DALLERA G. (2013), “La scuola italiana di scienza delle finanze,” *Moneta e Credito*, vol. 66 n. 261, pp. 43-91.
- DAINELLI F., GIUNTA F. and CIPOLLINI F. (2013), “Determinants of SME Credit Worthiness under Basel Rules: The Value of Credit History Information,” *PSL Quarterly Review*, vol. 66 n. 264, pp. 21-47.
- SKIDELSKY R. (2013), “Keynes, Hobson, Marx,” *PSL Quarterly Review*, vol. 66 n. 264, pp. 7-19.
- SYLOS LABINI P. (1988), “The Great Debates on the Laws of Returns and the Value of Capital: When Will Economists Finally Accept Their Own Logic?,” *Banca Nazionale del Lavoro Quarterly Review*, vol. 41 n. 166, pp. 263-291.
- TOPOROWSKY J. (2013), “Tadeusz Kowalik: Radical Political Economist, Solidarity Advisor and Critic of Globalised Capitalism,” *PSL Quarterly Review*, vol. 66 n. 264, pp. 49-57.