

## Opinion

### **If it ain't broke, don't fix it . . . post autism and political correctness**

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*"During times of universal deceit, telling the truth becomes a revolutionary act."*

- George Orwell

Where did the *Post Autistic Economic Review* go? Remember the summer of 2000 when a group of French economics students wrote a letter to their professors? That this letter would propel both French academia and economics into the world spotlight probably did not occur to these students. If it did, it might have been in a flight of fancy and optimism. But that is exactly what happened, they had hit a nerve.

The students denounced economics as a discipline which had separated from history, society and indeed reality. They declared that "we no longer want to have this autistic science imposed on us".

Suddenly, with coverage from *Le Monde* and the media, what was a student mission statement of sorts, became a movement supported by academics from across the theoretical spectrum. Nobel Prize winners to undergraduate students agreed with the core message of the French students: It was time for change in economics. Telling the truth became a revolutionary move.

This movement led to the creation of the 'Post-Autistic Economics Network' and their 'Post-Autistic Economics Newsletter' in September 2000. In only ten issues, and barely 14 months, the newsletter had become a fully fledged journal: the *Post Autistic Economic Review*.

The story could end there, but as of March 2008 the *Post Autistic Economic Review* is gone. Why? Has economics re-connected with society and history? Are students learning an applied social science? Did the revolution come and go quietly? No.

*"The most radical revolutionary will become a conservative the day after the revolution."*

-Hannah Arendt, *The New Yorker*, 12 Sep. 1970.

Why did we have a *Post-Autistic* journal? Because it is noticed. Because it has an underlying message. Yes, it is controversial and provocative, but that is why it always stimulates a conversation from the uninitiated about *what* post autistic economics is. It is perfect for students and academics who want to stand up and make people pay attention. It is not the *American Economic Review*, the *World Bank Economic Review* or a *Real World Economic Review*. It is Post-Autistic economics.

So what happened? Sociologist would say that social movements must be understood as reactions to and against the deepening irreversibility of certain forms of domination and hegemonic power in any society. Once the activists feel that their work is

accepted or gets drawn into mainstream politics (and publishing), the need for their alternative model, and radicalism, is spent. Did it only take 8 years for the flame of post-autistics economics to be extinguished?

Consider the language in the first newsletter, where the editors note U.S. economists who “spoke of the increasing ‘Stalinization’ of the profession”<sup>1</sup>. They cite a Belgian article ‘*Economie autiste*’ which “both reported on the events in France and offered its own analysis of neoclassical economics as a quaint political ideology masquerading as science”<sup>2</sup>. The editors agree that there is “‘a real schizophrenia’ created by making modelling ‘an end in itself’ and thereby cutting economics off from reality and forcing it into a state of ‘autism’”<sup>3</sup>. The language is strong, it is provocative, and it is unapologetic.

More so, the post-autistic economists called for action “to bring sanity, humanity and science back to economics”<sup>4</sup>. We should get involved and “click on your forward button and send this issue to someone”<sup>5</sup>. When new universities joined the cause, the editors would urge the readers to sign the petitions because they “need your support”!<sup>6</sup> Clear optimism, encouragement, winds of change, and now...

Now those same editors seem to have lost sight of their original purpose, as we have the rather un-inspiring, and uncontroversial *Real World Economic Review*.

“*There is no monument dedicated to the memory of a committee.*”

-Lester J. Pourciau

If ever there was an example of name by committee, the recent name-change of the *Post Autistic Economic Review* is a textbook case. One can almost imagine the meeting, where committee member A pointed out (correctly) that autism is a serious condition, not to be taken lightly. With member B, contributing, upon reflection (and recalling a documentary on savants) that people with autism can have a great deal of insight, and perform amazing feats, despite a lack of social skills, and this was definitively not what they wanted to say about neoclassical economics. Then member C would note that the journal had changed its name before, and members D and E would recall submitting their CV’s, and being asked why they didn’t publish in something ‘serious’, or more traditional? Brewing at the back of the committee’s mind is the book publishers who are uncomfortable with the headline ‘Post-Autism’ for the forthcoming volume of papers taken from the journal, and they would prefer something more... *mainstream*?

It seems this committee separated itself from the history and context of the journal and found themselves logically suggesting, timidly at first, a name-change, so it could be more serious / ‘publishable’ / respectable / sellable. Doesn’t this make it the *bête noir* of post autistic economics? Politically correct, academically neutral and out of context. If so, the journal may as well disappear in the sea of other titles, which make up a ‘decent’ CV and does not upset anyone.

<sup>1</sup> The Editor, “United States”, Post Autistic Economic Newsletter, No. 1 (2000).

<sup>2</sup> The Editor, “Belgium”, Post Autistic Economic Newsletter, No. 1 (2000).

<sup>3</sup> The Editor, “France”, Post Autistic Economic Newsletter, No. 1 (2000).

<sup>4</sup> The Editor, “Closing Remarks”, Post Autistic Economic Newsletter, No. 1 (2000).

<sup>5</sup> The Editor, “In brief” (closing sentence), Post Autistic Economic Newsletter, No. 3 (2000).

<sup>6</sup> The Editor, “A moderate proposal”, Autistic Economic Newsletter, No. 7 (2001).

Did the readers ever complain about the old name? Were we consulted on the new? Why not? Maybe because we felt it appropriate? In fact, Nobel laureates and students alike found it both appropriate to read and to contribute to the journal. The *Post Autistic Economic Review* established a 'brand' name and a movement in economics, and this is also important. So what rational, social and contextual justification is there for this change? Personally, I cannot see one, and rather than pursue this unnecessary course of politically correct, red, purple and blue action, could we please have our *Post-Autistic Economic Review* back? We know what it means, and no, we are not offended.

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### **Editor's Note**

I alone am responsible for both the journal's original name and the name-change. Nonetheless, the committee that Mitra-Kahn so vividly describes existed in part in my mind when considering the change, and so his analysis is close to the mark.

But there is another and more personal dimension to the history of the journal's name, which, I fear, reveals my naiveté. In American English the word "autistic" predates its clinical use. For example, *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* gives the word's primary meaning as: "Abnormal subjectivity; acceptance of fantasy rather than reality." It was the word's general meaning rather than its clinical one that I thought I was signalling. In choosing the name *Post-Autistic Economics Newsletter* – autism did not figure in my thoughts, nor, stupidly, did it occur to me that others would in the context of economics read the word in the specialist context of psychology. Nor was I aware that the word "autistic" in its general and primary sense was inoperative in British English. Even so, it is possible that if I had been better informed regarding the word "autistic" I would have chosen it anyway. With hindsight it appears to have served an important cause, one potentially affecting billions, rather well. It was the "committee's" judgement, however, that the label, at least for the journal, has out-lived its usefulness. But like individuals, committees are often wrong.