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FAPE and the Open Letter

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Yesterday, Gary Dymksi ended his presentation on the necessity for political economists to listen to each other and debate in order to become a stronger and more creative community. My very short presentation aims to present what the preconditions are for a political economy community to exist inside the academic system. First of all, political economists have to be employed in the academic system, a door must be open for them to enter the higher education and research. On this crucial issue, institutions play a massive role.

FAPE ? Open Letter ?

- FAPE = French Association of Political Economy, 2009

Promote political economy: creation of a new "section" in political economy / heterodox economics (Economies and Societies)

- Open letter of FAPE, January 2015, to Jean Tirole
Letter (not open at all!) of Tirole to the Minister of Higher Education against the creation of a new section

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Fape (French Association of Political Economy) was created in 2009 in order to promote Political Economy/Heterodox Economics and preserve pluralism of methods, of theories, and of opinions in the profession. (+ read slide 2).

- Critical situation: for 15 years very rare promotions at the rank of professor for non mainstream colleagues (same for history of economic thought).
- The former recruitment system.
- "section" = academic form of a discipline, i.e. a council with 2/3 of elected members and 1/3 of nominated members
- The new recruitment system.

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Over the past ten years, the situation has become so critical that non-mainstream economics is about to totally disappear from the academy in France.

The main problem is that we have huge difficulties to obtain promotions from the rank of senior lecturer/associate professor to the rank of professors who have more legal power for recruitments and to rule masters and doctoral programmes. => this is a matter of reproduction of our own species. We are on the endangered list.

Why? For the same reasons as in many other countries: rise of neoliberalism, influence of the US system etc. and also because of the specificity of the recruitment system for professors.

Until last year it was totally centralised and controlled by the Ministry: in a nutshell, this system led neoliberal governments to nominate neoliberal economists and to systematically replace heterodox colleagues that were retiring by orthodox economists. Of course, some of them are nice, open minded, eclectic and even a little bit left wing (but not too much). But almost none are radical.

FAPE decided in 2010 to launch a campaign for a new "section". What is a "section"? It is the academic place where people of the same discipline are gathered in the academic system to regulate their careers: assessment, promotions, sabbaticals etc. Concretely, a section is made of a council: 2/3 of its members are elected and 1/3 is nominated by the government. Over the last 15 years, most of the time the nominated members weren't very keen on political economy. Our relative position is now so degraded in terms of population among professors that we have no hope for a better outcome in the economics section as it is. There is no possible coalition because the other elected groups in the national council are sectarian. Concretely, the eclectic "open minded" centre left group which claims to support pluralism is in fact favourable to pluralism inside mainstream only.

Last year the recruitment system changed. It became more decentralised. In this new system the council section qualifies colleagues who then apply to universities (internal market) and then each university chooses among those applicants.

But even with this new system we are screwed because we are a minority at the section council and

at recruitment councils in the universities almost everywhere too. Even where we managed to keep a majority among associated professors (like in my university) we lost it at the professor level; professors are chosen by professors only (not by associate professors). It comes to show the necessity for a new section devoted to genuine pluralism in economic analysis considered as a social science.

- Campaign for a new section: "Economies and Societies".
- 300 formal supports from colleagues inside the economics section, ≈ 20 % of the profession
- Negotiations with the Ministry of Higher Education:
=> 9th Dec 2014, new section about to be created.
- Fierce opposition from mainstream : Tirole's Letter
- The gvt step backwards in January 2015
- Fape Open letter to Tirole, international petition for the new section, book: manifesto (*What do economists do if they all say the same thing?*) => strong support, many newspaper articles, meetings and interviews

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At first, we started a campaign inside the current section. We launched a call “if a new section *Economies and Societies* is created would you join it?” 300 active colleagues formally signed it, roughly 20% of the profession. Besides, many people did not dare to sign but told us informally that they would join it if it were created. Then we started to publish articles in newspapers to explain the situation and we tried to initiate negotiations with the Ministry of higher education. This process took more than 2 years. Finally, on the 9th of December 2014 during a private meeting at the Ministry, we were told that they were about to create the new section.

Unfortunately, we weren't able to keep this information covert. During the Christmas holidays 2014, the mainstream oligarchy opposed very strongly against this project. Among other things, it was a letter from Tirole that buried the project. This letter was finally published on the internet by journalists (we made a translation of it).

After that, the government decided to step backwards: the section still doesn't exist.

We then wrote an open letter to Tirole and launched an international petition for the new section (more than 5000 signatures)

<http://assoeconomiepolitique.org/petition-pluralism-now/>



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Tirole's letter to the Minister:

“... As you know, I always advocated for our country to adopt the norms of research assessment that are in use in the rest of the world. It is specially important for the community of academic teachers-researchers and researchers to be endowed with a single scientific assessment standard, based on a ranking of the journals of the discipline and on an external assessment by internationally prominent peers.

“It is inconceivable for me that France would recognize two communities within the same discipline. The quality of research ought to be appraised on the basis of publications, compelling each researcher to face the assessment of his peers. This constitutes the very foundation of scientific progress in all disciplines. Trying to sidestep such judgment encourages relativism of knowledge, the antechamber of obscurantism. Self-proclaimed «heterodox» economists have to comply with this fundamental principle of science. For them, the objective of the creation of a new section of the National Council of Universities is to escape such discipline....

FAPE open Letter:

“...In short, you believe there is just one way of doing economics. In this monistic vision of the discipline, a diversity of perspectives encourages relativism and threatens excellence.

No, Professor Tirole, intellectual diversity does not give rise to obscurantism or relativism but rather to innovations and discoveries. Advances in knowledge are made initially on the margins by courageous minorities whose merits often go unrecognised until much later....

“This is not just an academic issue but also one that raises fundamental questions about democracy, since democracy, including in universities, is based on government by the majority as well as on pluralist institutions that guarantee that minority voices are able to make themselves heard, to explore new avenues, to contribute to debates and to persuade. These pluralist institutions no longer exist within the current ‘Economics’ section....

“...As academics, we all have a real need to have our work assessed, but the very nature of the evaluation should not lead to uniformity within the discipline. The most innovative outputs tend to conflict with the prevailing orthodoxy and often have difficulty in finding a place in the most

established journals. By standardising the evaluation and imposing a uniform set of objectives and metrics and hence a uniform content, we are killing off the variations and innovations that form the pathways along which the production of new knowledge can evolve. We are artificially curtailing the necessary cross-fertilisation with other disciplines that operate with different models.

“We are members of the AFEP/FAPE (French Association for Political Economy) and we publish in international peer-reviewed journals. However, since they publish the work of academics who take a different approach to economics, these journals are relegated to the margins of the rankings that prevail in economics. It was not ever thus. There was a time when the *American Economic Review* or the *Quarterly Journal of Economics* published authors from a broad range of intellectual backgrounds.

“...Let us not confuse sectarianism with quality....

“Let us avoid the standardisation of thinking in economics through the imposition of narrow criteria, on the same uniform scale, that block any deviation from the norm, since without diversity democracy, like science, will simply fade away. Where are the analyses foretelling the mechanisms that would lead to the financial crisis of 2007-2008 in the years preceding the crisis? They weren't published in the leading mainstream journals but in the minority books and journals or even in blogs. They were written by heterodox economists and researchers in other disciplines! So where is the Enlightenment and where is the obscurantism?”

NOW?

What happened after that?

When the government stepped back, people from the Ministry said that they would put the economics section under close scrutiny to maintain pluralism. As a result: the number of qualified colleagues for professorship applications among heterodox associate professors doubled. At the end of the process, among recruited people: 7 positions out of 55 (12%) can reasonably be classified as heterodox and/or history of economic thought (of course not all of them are FAPE!). This 12% corresponds to the average level we had since 2000: better than at the end of the period and worse than at the beginning. Nothing has hence really changed. We are currently preparing for the elections (for October 2015) in the economics section and the government will proceed to new nominations: we will see if they choose colleagues who are favourable to political economy or not. Is the new section already an old dream? No. It can still be created because students are also putting pressure for a very deep renewal of teaching. The new section would meet their demands and this is what mainstream is afraid of. Our struggle is popular among students and in the civil society, mainstream is on a defensive position: they don't want competition because they would lose the bulk of their positions if we can open departments of political economy.

This is very thrilling! And we have nothing to lose because if we do nothing we are sure that “we” as a species are going to disappear.

Mainstream proponents fear to debate directly with us because they have no strong argument. They have only authority arguments. The real issue about the survival of political economy and heterodoxy is not in the first place an intellectual issue but an institutional and real power issue.

Let's go!