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MINI-SYMPOSIUM

The Future of History of Economics: Young scholars' perspective¹

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This symposium about the future of history of economics was motivated by two striking features of the current debate on the topic. First, there is the paradoxical fact that so many young, intelligent, and ambitious scholars continue to join the discipline at a time when its future is widely seen as bleak. The reasons for concern are well known: the decreasing weight attached to history of thought in economics education, especially in top-ranked research institutions; the decline in opportunities to pursue graduate study in this field; the small number of job openings for historians of economics; and so on. Far from being discouraged, however, a considerable number of young scholars continue to pursue a career in history of economics. Their presence is obvious at annual meetings of national and international organizations, in summer schools, and elsewhere.

Second, there is the fact that relatively few young scholars in history of economics participate publicly in the debate about the future of their discipline. The five junior contributors to the 2002 *HOPE* supplement (Weintraub 2002) were important exceptions. Yet, these voices constitute

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only a small sample, and do not reflect the full depth and breadth of opinion among junior scholars. Having participated in a number of informal discussions about the topic – including, for one of us, a discussion group formed for this purpose at the research center *PHARE* in Paris in 2003 – we know that many scholars entering the field find the terms of the current debate unsatisfactory and that they would like to take an active part in it. It is hardly surprising that those early in their careers take an intense interest in the future of their discipline; what is surprising is that their opinions do not get more public expression.

The aim of this symposium, then, was to provide young scholars in history of economics with a public forum for discussing the future of their discipline. First, we hoped to shed light on what makes young scholars think that it has a future at all. Presumably they do think that it does: the decision to pursue a career in history of economics should reveal not just a preference for a career in the discipline, but also a belief that there will be such a thing and that it will contain a place for them. By asking young scholars what reasons they have for holding this belief, we are in a better position to address the question of whether it is reasonable or not. Second, we wished to learn what character junior scholars think the discipline will have in the future. Insofar as there will be a discipline at all a few years from now, it will inevitably be shaped by those who are now beginning their work in the field. By inviting young colleagues to expand on what form they expect the discipline to take, we are better placed to judge how the discipline will evolve.

In order to achieve these goals, we put together a call for papers that asked potential contributors to consider whether history of economics has a future at all. Insofar as their answer was affirmative, we also invited them to explore what they saw as the character of the discipline. We

asked the following questions: How will future historians of economics be educated? What will the nature of their work be? What methods will they use? How will they make themselves relevant? How will they disseminate their work? What will their institutional home be, and how will they interact with other fields? We expected participants to suggest a diagnosis of the current state of the discipline, and to identify likely trends for its continued development. Furthermore, because the debate from the outset has had a strong normative component, we encouraged contributors to explore not only what they think is happening and will happen, but also what they think *should* happen. We expected participants to use whatever approach was most relevant for the points they wished to make: historical approaches for historical points, philosophical approaches for philosophical points, and so on. We asked for clear, bold statements with brief supporting arguments.

While recognizing that it would be impossible to find a truly representative sample of young scholars, we nevertheless wished to reach as broad an audience as possible. Thus, our call for papers did not discriminate on the basis of nationality or institutional or disciplinary affiliation. We distributed the call for papers widely, by posting it to the History of Economics Society mailing list and by sending it to a number of individuals as well as to several national and international associations. We also put up a symposium website, and were pleased that several other sites chose to link to it.

The response was encouraging. We received more submissions than we had expected. The overall quality suggested that the authors were deeply concerned with the problem at hand and that they had already thought a good deal about the topic. Given the large number of papers

received, we had to make a selection. Because we wanted to include a broad set of ideas, we chose papers on the basis of diversity of opinion as well as cogency of the argument. Thus, the selection was not based on any preconceived notion of what the “right” answers to our questions might be. Albeit to a lesser extent, we also tried to involve young scholars with diverse disciplinary backgrounds, regions of origin or residence, and professional status.

The panel that we organized included five papers that we felt optimally met these criteria. The panel (which included the present authors) was in fact highly diverse. The eight participants were men and women, of seven nationalities, and currently active in six countries. Some were graduate students, some post-docs, and some had recently been promoted to faculty. While most had or were pursuing Ph.D.’s in economics, three also had had training in science studies, philosophy, and/or history and philosophy of science. Some saw history of economics as their primary research field, while others did not. The dedication of our panelists was encouraging. By reading and commenting on each other’s contributions both before and after the symposium, they clearly signaled their deep interest in and commitment to the future of history of economics. We were delighted by the passionate response from the audience, which included leading senior scholars. And we were further encouraged by the fact that a group of Italian students were inspired to organize an analogous session in Lecce, Italy, a few weeks later.

In light of the diversity of the participants, it would be a mistake to attribute a shared position to them. In fact, the panelists disagreed with each other on multiple points. Nevertheless, at least two shared themes emerged in the discussion. First, the panelists appeared to agree that history of economics should maintain close ties to mainstream economics, and that a solid knowledge of

modern theory and methods is necessary (though not, of course, sufficient) to do history of economics. Some panelists made their point by criticizing what Ivan Moscati called “history of economic thought as science studies,” which they saw as moving in the opposite direction. In their contributions, Nuno Palma, Marta Sora, as well as Rebeca Gomez Betancourt and Alexander Tobon argued for close ties between history of economics and economic theory by highlighting the potentially fruitful interactions between the two. Meanwhile, Eric Schliesser argued that there are reasons internal to the way evidence works in science in general to rediscover the importance of history of economics.

A second theme that emerged pertained to the benefits of seeking closer disciplinary ties with philosophy and history and philosophy of science (HPS) departments. As long as history of economic thought is losing ground in economics departments, Schliesser suggested that some historians of economics may at least for the time being locate themselves in other departments, specifically in philosophy and HPS departments, which are likely to be open to some of the questions that historians of economics address. On the latter point one of the present authors strongly agreed. In part because philosophy and economics have a variety of historical, conceptual and theoretical affinities with each other, Angner maintained that philosophy/HPS departments are one natural home - though not the only one - for history of economics scholars. While philosophy departments are not at the moment the kind and nurturing homes that one might want them to be, there are exciting opportunities to integrate history of economics into the curriculum, e.g., as part of the growing number of philosophy, politics and economics (PPE) programs.

From our point of view as organizers of the symposium, at least two additional points stand out. First, the symposium highlighted the important role that international associations and yearly meetings have in fostering the work of young scholars in history of economics despite a difficult environment. Conferences, summer schools, etc., provide critically important opportunities to fill gaps in one's knowledge, to expose oneself to unfamiliar ideas, themes, and approaches, to sharpen one's arguments, and to share survival strategies with others working under similar conditions. In fact, this symposium was conceived at one of David Levy and Sandra Peart's Summer Institutes for the Preservation of the History of Economics in Economics at George Mason University.

The symposium also underscored the benefits of multiple backgrounds among history of economics scholars. In our view, this diversity of perspective expanded the range of positions expressed and improved the quality of the discussion. This should not be surprising: a community of scholars trained in a variety of fields is likely to be familiar with a broader literature and to master a more diverse set of tools and techniques. Such a community should also be better able to communicate and collaborate - for mutual benefit - with scholars in neighboring fields. This point can be a source of (limited) hope: if indeed history of economics can have multiple disciplinary affiliations, then the fact that it is losing ground in economics departments need not spell death to scholarship in the area. However, we need to acknowledge the fact that scholars from different disciplines may have different aims and purposes, and therefore that there are many ways to do good history. This is not to say that anything goes, nor that there are no standards to which historical work can be held; indeed, we believe that maintaining the highest standards is a *sine qua non* for being taken seriously outside of the

community. We do mean to say that there are several modes of reasoning, kinds of evidence, and so on, that can count as historical, and that each should be assessed on its own terms.

The three papers that follow, by Ivan Moscati, Nuno Palma, and Eric Schliesser, give a flavor of the variety of positions represented at the symposium, and of the passionate interest with which panelists have been participating in the debate.² These contributions, we believe, signal that the future of the discipline is not quite as depressing as some would have it. Their existence suggests that, with the right kind of institutional support, the community of historians of economics may not just survive, but flourish.

REFERENCES

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NOTES

¹ This symposium took place at the Annual Meeting of the European Society for the History of Economic Thought (ESHET) in Porto, Portugal, on April 29, 2006. We are grateful to ESHET, especially Pascal Bridel and Annalisa Rosselli, for generously assisting us logistically and financially in the organization of the symposium.

² The two symposium papers not included here were ‘In Search of a Definition for the History of Economic Thought,’ by Rebeca Gomez Betancourt and Alexander Tobon, and ‘The Importance of the Analysis of Economic Problems from the Perspective of the History of Economic Thought,’ by Marta Sora.