

Gerard Debreu: Ghostly Whipping Boy

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ABSTRACT

Economics students have a rather fantastic view of the history of their science. Their professors have taught them hate for “mainstream” economics, which does not make sense. Obviously, mainstream is (by definition) what is being taught to undergraduates. The purpose of this paper is to make clear exactly what is now and has been for forty years the mainstream of economic science.

In 2000 the *Post-Autistic Economics Network* was founded; it denounced this author and every other mathematician involved in economics as “autistic.” The blacklisting of mathematicians had been going on for some time; Gerard Debreu renounced General Equilibrium in 1974 and blubbered an apology in 1983 at his Nobel awards ceremony, described [here](#) as “Debreu’s axiomatic method” as though Debreu invented it and that he and it rise and fall together. But [Alan Kirman](#) describes a “palace revolution” in 1974 as mathematicians piled on and Debreu backpedaled. He quotes Debreu’s 1983 Nobel introduction, “Gerard Debreu symbolizes the use of a new mathematical apparatus,” but fails to point out how absurd this must have sounded to mathematicians who had ejected the man ten years earlier for bringing shame to a very old mathematical apparatus; the axiomatic method dates back to Euclid and was made famous by Isaac Newton in 1686 (*Principia*) and by Leonhard Euler sixty years later in ballistic science.

In response to [this](#), I was told in 1992 that I “[have to](#)” use Debreu’s axiom set so economists can claim to have already defeated me. Until then I had never heard of Debreu. I knew that economists all hate the axiomatic method, but I did not know why; hence my suggestion to market the book to scientists. In 2000 the blacklisting of mathematicians was formalized under the name “toxic textbooks.” The founders (Edward Fullbrook, Steve Keen, James Galbraith and Donald/Deirdre McCloskey) of the *Post-Autistic Economics Network* were appalled that I had published in 1999 what they thought they had rid themselves of in 1992. They felt that a formal blacklist was needed to prevent any more such atrocities, and that is what they created.

In May 2011 the *Post-Autistic Economics Network* changed its name to the *World Economics Association* and the *Post-Autistic Economics Review* became the *Real-World Economics Review*. They were under pressure from psychiatrists – real ones with PhDs – who were pointing out that “autistic” is a neurological disorder, not just a bad name to fling at mathematicians. But economists still slip up and use the word “autistic” ([here](#)) or “blacklist” ([here](#)) sometimes.

Regardless of why they changed their name to the *World Economics Association*, it is not just hubris; they always and everywhere have the authority to prevent mathematicians from getting published. There are simply a lot more people in the world who hate mathematics than like it; they have us outnumbered. Forty years after Debreu renounced General Equilibrium, it is absurd for [Nicola Giocoli](#) to shriek, “Beware the underdog!” Obviously, the anti-Debreu have been the overdog for two generations; if there is anybody still alive who believes in General Equilibrium, they can be found at a nursing home being spoon fed their mush.

As the following recent (after the name change) quotations illustrate, the strategy of the *World Economics Association* is to redefine the word scientist to mean statistician and to redefine the word mathematician to mean an employee whose only job skill is having memorized the user’s manual to statistics software so that his boss need not dirty her hands massaging the data.

It is a completely mistaken idea that scientific theory is based on deductions from a series of postulates – that is the description of the methodology of mathematics... There is no science which uses axioms and logical deductions to derive scientific theory.

[This](#) is from 2013; the [founding of ballistics by Leonhard Euler](#) is an obvious counter-example.

Math and Science have ENTIRELY different methodologies which are suitable to them. Because of the spectacular success of the axiomatic method in Mathematics, people naturally started using the same method for science. This proved to be an equally spectacular failure. The scientific method involves making observations about nature and then GUESSING at laws which generate the observed patterns – that is induction. Later, one can verify these guesses by the means of experiments.

[This](#) (emphasis in original) is in reply to my recent (December 2014) paper, [Scientific Method, Groundless Guesswork – Same Thing?](#)

Mathematics is not a “science” since it is not based in any direct way on observational evidence. Unlike scientific laws, mathematical laws are not affirmed observational evidence. Recognition of the possibility that there are bodies of knowledge which are not science would lead to greater tolerance and pluralism which is currently desperately needed.

[This](#) is from 2013. That last sentence is a real jaw dropper! It is like Hitler saying, “Recognition of the possibility that there are races of people which are not fully human would lead to greater tolerance and pluralism which is currently desperately needed.” No. It leads to genocide.

Just the [titles of their papers](#) make it clear that economists will not even consider the possibility of another axiom set than the one Debreu renounced in 1974. General Equilibrium is allowed to survive like a captive zombie because it serves economists as a whipping boy; since 1974 it has been a rite of passage for young economists to dig up Debreu's moldering corpse and stick yet another knife into its skeletal ribs. The existence of this zombie chained to the wall in economists' basement makes the banishment of any new sets of axioms easy; they just falsely accuse the author of being a follower of Debreu and his career is over.

In an early defining document (2002), [James Devine](#) writes:

The original statements by the rebellious French economics students define autistic economics in terms of its one-sided and exclusionary interest in "imaginary worlds," "uncontrolled use of mathematics" and the absence of pluralism of approaches in economics. The hard-core autistic walling off from the societal environment can be seen most strongly in the specific, highly abstract, axiomatic school that the students protested against.

This paper begins "As an economist with a son having heavy autistic leanings,..." Then, based on this fact, Devine establishes himself as someone with the ability to diagnose autism in people whom he has never met, based only on their academic writing. Also, note that he is promoting the lie that the *Post-Autistic Economics Network* is led by some anonymous French students; we are to believe that within months of the publication of [Axiomatic Economics](#) these undergraduates materialized out of anonymity, got over 800 economists to sign an agreement not to cite it or any "toxic textbook," and then disappeared back into anonymity, leaving it to Devine to diagnose autism in those who do not self label with "axiomatic" in their book titles.

The story of French students is a lie; the *Post-Autistic Economics Network* was organized by four men, Edward Fullbrook, Steve Keen, James Galbraith and Donald McCloskey (the latter now a woman, Deirdre) and these were the only ones with the authority to blacklist "autistic" authors. Two years later (2002) Devine acquired this authority by giving the existing blacklist a pseudo-medical air; he was not a real psychiatrist but, because his son has autism, he had learned the lingo and could give the blacklisting of mathematicians the appearance of an actual diagnosis.

When General Equilibrium collapsed in 1974 and economists determined to conflate the man and the method, they only had to get the editors of a dozen journals on board. But the internet is not conducive to a blacklist and the desperate tone of modern censors like [Asad Zaman](#) and [Lars Syll](#) makes it clear that in 2014 the method of Euclid, Newton and Euler will break free.