

## **What is this thing called ‘heterodox economics’?**

**Andrew Mearman**  
**Department of Economics**  
**Bristol Business School**  
**UWE**

**Abstract:** This paper conducts a type of meta-analysis of a sample of commentaries on heterodox economics, also drawing on biological literature and other treatments of classification. The paper contrasts what might be called a ‘classical’ category with a ‘modern’ category and then analyses treatments of HE as a category. It is argued that though HE appears to be a complex object – and that authors recognise this – HE as a category is most often classical even though modern would appear more appropriate. That this is the case may reflect choices of levels of abstraction which in turn reflect instrumental purposes of influencing the reality of Economics. While arguments for the rejection of HE as a category are too strong, current treatments of HE are perhaps not careful enough in recognising its provisional and fluid nature. The paper considers these issues in turn.

**Keywords:** heterodox economics, taxonomy, complexity, meta-analysis

**JEL codes:** B4, B5, Z13

**Draft of March 2010.**

**Copyright held. Please do not cite or distribute without the author’s permission.**

## **What is this thing called ‘heterodox economics’?<sup>1</sup>**

“To classify is human and all cultures at all times have produced classification systems”

(Bowker and Star, 1999: 131)

“He has never been a White person...And I do not believe he will ever become one”

(PMK Leroux, quoted in Bowker and Star, 1999: 219)

### **Introduction**

Ayers (1936) appears to be the first to use the term ‘heterodox economics’ (hereafter, HE). In Ayers, HE was merely a throwaway term; probably the consequence of him searching for a synonym or summary term for an opposing set of ideas. More recently, the term HE has taken on stronger meaning and been debated and defined by several leading authors (Dequech, 2007; Dow, 2000; Lawson, 1997, 2006, 2009; Lee, 2009; Potts, 2000; Backhouse, 2004; see also Colander, 2009; Colander *et al*, 2004; Davis, 2009). All offer a vision of HE as a set of ideas but are able to define it quite simply, i.e. often in terms of a single criterion.

Thus, the growing literature on the nature of heterodox economics has generated several variants of the term. How do we make sense of these variants; and can they be resolved? What do these variants tell us about heterodox economics itself? Should we

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper has benefited from comments from Sheila Dow. The usual disclaimer applies.

think of heterodox economics as a set (as in Dequech, 2007), as a system (drawing on Dow's (2004) treatments of schools of thought), or perhaps as a race of economists, or even as a specie, a sub-species or just a hybrid? Races and species might be considered 'scientific' categories. But is it the case that HE can be described similarly? Or is HE more ephemeral like the categorisations of music genres, or more political such as the Nursing Interventions Classification (Bowker and Star, 1999).

All of the literature cited may simply amount to interesting academic discussion; however, the category of HE has taken on considerable import. It is employed as a means to distinguish one group (or set of groups) of economists from another; similarly it is used to distinguish sets of ideas; it is a weapon for attacking one group or another; it is a tool in debates over economic policy, curriculum design and politics. HE has become a recognised term with accompanying implications for those labelled with it, or those choosing that label.

This paper will provide a type of meta-analysis of a sample of commentaries on heterodox economics, also drawing on biological literature and other treatments of classification. The paper contrasts what might be called a 'classical' category with a 'modern' category and then analyses treatments of HE as a category. It is argued that though HE appears to be a complex object – and that authors recognise this – HE as a category is most often classical even though modern would appear more appropriate. That this is the case may reflect choices of levels of abstraction which in turn reflect instrumental purposes of influencing the reality of Economics. While arguments for the rejection of HE as a category are too strong, current treatments of HE are perhaps not

careful enough in recognising its provisional and fluid nature. The paper considers these issues in turn.

### **‘Heterodox Economics’**

Most of the attempts to define HE come from either historians of economics (see Wrenn, 2007), methodologists, or leading authorities in schools of thought which were seen to be outside the mainstream. Sherman (1987) and Sawyer (1989) offer implicit visions of HE as a synthesised product of extant non-orthodox theories. Arestis (1992) bases a HE around elements of a radical Post Keynesianism. Dugger (1989) makes a similar attempt, with institutionalism the central plank. Davidson (*passim*) tries to define HE as a particular strand of existing heterodox thought, i.e. a particular reading of Keynes. George (2008) defines HE as developments outside the mainstream; but not of the type referred to by the authors above.

Although schools of economic thought are often defined in terms of theory, definitions of HE are often methodological (here, meaning to deal with methods and/or their ontological and epistemological underpinnings). For Lee (2010a: page) the essential difference between HE and the mainstream is of whether they theorise the provisioning process as social rather than individual. Lawson (1997) argues that heterodoxy can be identified as advocating depth realism and open systems. Dow (2000) similarly argues that heterodox views share a belief in open systems (although the concept may mean

different things to different groups<sup>2</sup>). For Lawson (2006), HE has many elements, but the essential nominal difference between it and the mainstream is that the latter insists on mathematical modelling. Underlying that, Lawson (2006, 2009) argues, is a real essence of HE which is a particular social ontology, which is structured and open. Colander (2009) shares Lawson's view and defines the mainstream as being an attitude, a "willingness to compete within a given set of rules and institutional structures" (2), and heterodoxy as a willingness to do think otherwise. Lavoie (1992) defines heterodox economics as holding to realism, organicism, procedural rationality, and a focus on production (all of these are counterpoised with neoclassical principles). Lavoie (2006a) defines heterodoxy additionally in terms of a belief in the need for government intervention and regulation. Lavoie (2006b) searches for elements common to heterodox theories and identifies several, including the held need to theorise a monetary production economy. Lavoie (2006b: 104) further proposes that the transactions-flow matrix associated with Godley and Shaikh (2002) and Taylor (2004) might be a unifying framework for HE. Potts (2000) defines a heterodox approach as one in which a unified field theory is rejected in favour of complex systems. Davis (2009) adopts Lawson's vision of ontology but highlights specific treatments of time (as historical, irreversible), the individual as embedded in society, and as agents and structures affecting each other as distinctly heterodox. Meador (2009) claims that HE is defined in terms of an *episteme* (a la Foucault) different from mainstream economics; one which is as yet unidentified because it is difficult to do so inside the mainstream episteme. Backhouse (2004) holds that core beliefs are something which defines HE; Backhouse (2000) refers to core

---

<sup>2</sup> Dow (private post) emphasises that she does not regard open systems as an homogeneous concept, and that different schools of thought may hold different *ontological* positions. This does not appear to be the case for Lawson.

assumptions. So, according to this literature, in defining HE, methodological approach, including one's view of the nature of the world, is important.

Most of the above definitions of heterodox are what Dequech (2007) calls 'positive intellectual': i.e. they make claims about what kinds of *ideas* heterodox economists *do* hold. However, as hinted at above, most if not all of these treatments also regard HE as being distinct and in opposition to mainstream or orthodox economics. Indeed, Dequech (2007) surveys many of the above alternative definitions of HE and argues that the only thing they have in common is that HE is not mainstream economics: this is Dequech's 'negative intellectual' definition of HE. This approach can be traced back to Ayers' (1936) seminal contribution.

Therefore, a starting point for most definitions of HE is to assume that it is non-mainstream economics. However, from the previous paragraph, the literature suggests that HE is more than *merely* non-mainstream economics. Again, it seems likely that this surplus element is methodological.

A feature of many treatments of HE is to claim that a central element of HE is that its members self-identify as heterodox. Backhouse (2004), Wrenn (2004, 2007), Colander *et al* (2004), Dequech (2007), and Lawson (2009) all take this view. Davis (2009) argues that heterodox economists can be identified partly in terms of their orientation, i.e. in terms of their desire to change mainstream economics, or to operate outside it. This strand of the literature is important for at least two reasons. First, several authors focus on heterodoxy as attitudinal, as a state of mind (see Colander, 2009, above), as rejecting sets of rules, theories or practices, and actively espousing other sets. Second, when we consider sociological definitions of HE, power becomes crucial. The use of labels can

itself be a source of power. If heterodox economists have labelled themselves, this may indicate a source of power; whereas if they have been labelled thus by the mainstream, that suggests very different power relations.

Dequech (2007) distinguishes intellectual definitions of HE from sociological definitions. Sociological definitions tend to focus on the holding of power. Backhouse (2000, 2004) and Dequech (2007) use an explicitly sociological definition. In other work, the sociological approach is implicit. Colander's (2009) and Lavoie's (2006b) discussion of rules suggests sociological analysis, as does Meador's (2009) invocation of epistemes. On the face of it, sociological explanations of HE are also quite convincing. Backhouse (2004) argues that they are able to accommodate changes in theory and method whilst still maintaining HE as a coherent entity. Indeed, viewed from the perspectives of schools of thought traditionally classed as heterodox, the sociological element of HE seems obvious. Schools of thought such as Marxism, Post-Keynesianism and Institutionalism all emphasise power in the analysis of socio-economic outcomes.

Further, an appreciation of power is apparent in the actions of self-identified heterodox economists. For example, the formation and development of the Association for Heterodox Economics (formerly, and also, the Association of Heterodox Economists) (AHE) has created an institutional structure and face for a group of economists who wish to declare themselves different from the mainstream in some way, and who have some common beliefs. The AHE's role has been explored in depth by Lee (2010b). It is apparent that the AHE has developed from merely an arena for airing and sharing heterodox ideas into an organisation which acts in advocacy for heterodox economists. Moreover, somewhat in its role as part of the International Confederation of Associations

for Pluralism in Economics (ICAPE), the AHE has campaigned for pluralism in economics. This has involved organising journal issues (see Denis, 2009) on pluralism, encouraging the development of heterodox ecological economics (see Douai, *et al*, forthcoming), arguing against institutional structures which may discriminate against specific types of economist and their work (see Freeman, 2009).

Thus far, a discussion of relevant literature on HE suggests that it can be defined in terms of key ideas, which are often methodological rather than theoretical; that to be a heterodox economist is to identify with these ideas; that these ideas are often self-consciously opposed to mainstream ideas, and consequently, that heterodox economists set themselves up as opposed to the mainstream; and that HE may also reflect power relations within the Economics discipline. It may appear that the task of defining HE is complete. However, two problematic conclusions follow from the above: one, that HE is a complex object defying simple definition; and two, that there is a raft of literature providing simple definitions of HE which would appear to be undermined. Further, casual observation suggests that under almost all of the definitions, there appear anomalies, exceptions, others: those who do not comfortably fit into either HE or mainstream economics. Yet, very many of the treatments in the literature treat HE and mainstream economics as strictly distinct.

### **Classification and ‘Heterodox Economics’**

The eminent zoologist Mayr (1969) claimed that all animals engage in classification, e.g. of what to eat and what not to eat, what is predator, what is prey, etc. Bowker and Star



(1999) claim (above) that it is human to classify; and that all human societies have produced classification systems<sup>3</sup>. In fact, what we call classification often covers the related activities of creating systems of categories, naming them, and identifying where individuals fit into them. The literature on the nature of HE demonstrates all three activities. Commentators above have defined HE based on some criteria(on), they have attached a particular label to it and then in some cases gone about claiming that economist *x* is heterodox<sup>4</sup>. So, for instance, Dequech (2007) has reached a general conclusion about the membership of the set ‘HE’ based on observing the single common factor between different characterisations of HE (i.e. as non-mainstream). Dequech’s reasoning is an induction, but also draws upon an *a priori* characterisation of HE (as being oppositional).

Treatments of HE can resemble classifications of creatures into species. One might imagine heterodox and mainstream economics as being like lions and tigers, both big cats (from the same genus, *panthera*), or even as different breeds of dog; or one might consider their difference as more like that between a llama and a lizard; as very different classes of animal. In zoology, there are clear grounds for distinguishing between a llama and a lizard; whereas in economics, these grounds are less clear. Indeed, classifications of economists seem quite messy, changeable and affected by many factors which at first glance would appear distant from zoological procedures. ‘HE’ looks like a very different type of category from ‘lion’ or ‘tiger’.

---

<sup>3</sup> Several treatments can be found which illuminate the problems of classification. Goto (1982) discusses zoological taxonomy. Bowker and Star (1999) offer discussion of social classifications such as the NIC or the ICD. Malik (2008) discusses race specifically.

<sup>4</sup> The literature on critical realism in economics has done similar things, although the emphasis here has tended to be on identifying individuals who may or may not be (inspired by) critical realism (see, for example, Fleetwood (1995) on Hayek, Pratten (1996) on neo-ricardians).

Two questions from taxonomy are relevant here: what is the method of constructing the category – particularly the way data are analysed; and what is the status of the category. These two questions are connected. The relation between them has been changing as the discipline of taxonomy changes. Mayr (1969) offers a treatment of the history of taxonomy. He sees three main stages: 1) typology; 2) inductive empiricism; and 3) biological taxonomy<sup>5</sup>. The stages are associated with such figures as, respectively, Aristotle and Linneaus; Lamarck and Cuvier; and Darwin<sup>6</sup>. However, it would be incorrect to view these stages as a linear progression. Rather, there are loops and apparent backward and sideways movements; one such example is the development of numerical taxonomy, which postdates Darwin but often has more in common with inductive empiricism. Typological definitions of species are still used, often for convenience: elements of *a priorism* remain in modern taxonomy. Current practice seems to employ all three of the approaches. Goto (1982) discusses a range of different types of taxonomy which focus on different aspects of species<sup>7</sup>. Further, descriptions of species tend to discuss various types of identifiers.

---

<sup>5</sup> Goto (1982) defines three stages in modern taxonomy: alpha, grouping of things which appear similar; beta, the ordering of taxa; and gamma, examining origin, or in Simpson's (1961) terms, contiguity. Appearance can refer to size, colour, bioluminescence, patterning, etc. In humans, phrenology and facial features were once used to determine race (Malik, 2008: 135, 228). However, 'appearance' here can mean a variety of things including behaviour, which itself contains a massive variety of criteria, such as sounds made, mating rituals, hibernation patterns, nest building, etc.

<sup>6</sup> Within these three stages, there are further variations, such as cladism.

<sup>7</sup> In addition, location of the creature aids its classification. Some creatures are categorised by examining their relations to other species. For example, some species may be identified by the presence of a parasite common to them. Related to that, immunotaxonomy attempts to categories on the basis of the antibodies present in animals (Goto, 1982: 25). Related to that, other taxonomic procedures examine the proteins present in creatures; and this is just one form of chemical taxonomy; which is itself one form of taxonomy which focuses on internal aspects of the creature being examined rather than external criteria. Cytotaxonomy is the classification according to cells, in terms of their structure, biochemistry, genes and other physiological data (Goto: 45). Chromosome numbers have a similar function. Each one of these distinctive set of criteria also have associated techniques. For example, one might use measurement techniques which break down the frequency of sounds made in the songs to find similarities across birds

Under the typological approach, a sample of creatures is assessed. This led to the creation of types which described appearance, behaviour, habitat and the like. These types act as standards for identifying future creatures. Questions can be raised about the method of constructing the category; but for now we focus on the type of category created. One might call the category ‘classical’; an alternative nomenclature might be Aristotelian, or even Cartesian. A classical category had certain characteristics: each category is mutually exclusive and is ideally fixed. The category would be an element in an exhaustive classification system. The goal of this system (or at least its creator) is to accurately describe the world as it is. “A classification is a spatial, temporal, or spatio-temporal segmentation of the world” (Bowker and Star, 1999: 10) and thus a good classification should segment the world accurately. Divisions in categories reflect divisions in reality. Divisions are often based on differences in essence. A good classification should have no normative or instrumental motivation or force. The segmentation does not displace the world, nor should it have any causal power. Categories reflect the world: a tiger is a tiger because of its capacities, not because it is classified as a tiger. Indeed, a key ontological assumption made in classification – essential for the operation to proceed – is that the object to be classified stays essentially the same during the process. Similarly, *nomenclature* should have no effect on the nature of the thing being named.

Two factors in taxonomy led to the typological approach being displaced by others. First, biologists objected to the *a priorism* of the method and demanded that more empirical rigour be applied to classification. Second, the methods by which data were

---

(Goto: 34). This set of techniques points to a number of different ways in which HE could be defined; and by which heterodox economists could be identified.

analysed changed. These methods shall be discussed further below. However, other elements of the classical category remain largely in tact. Although major revisions of taxa do occur (see for example, the work of the Angiosperm Phylogeny Group: see Palmer et al, 2004, and papers in that issue) they are quite rare. New species are found and others die out, but their classification remains, and retains a classical character.

However, in human societies, classification systems rarely resemble closely this classical model (see Bowker and Star, 1999). Not only are the methods of collecting and analysing data more in line with numerical or biological taxonomy (stages 2 and 3 in Mayr's schema), but additionally the resulting categories are of a different character. We might call them 'modern' categories in contrast with their classical predecessors. Modern categories are often fuzzy, in non-exhaustive (having large 'other' classes) classification systems, which are constructed for a particular purpose. This purpose may be empowerment, as in the case of the Nursing Interventions Classification, which highlighted the activities of nursing staff which had been neglected previously (Bowker and Star, ch. 7); or it may be largely oppressive, as in the case of race (see Bowker and Star, ch. 6; Malik, 2008). The categories are often highly flexible and changing. The quotation at the beginning of the paper, from a former South African interior minister, shows the farcically arbitrary nature of the apartheid system; which reflects the arbitrary nature of racial classification (Malik). Modern categories in everyday use are highly provisional, and reflect competing classification systems and associated interests. (Accordingly even the terms 'classical' and 'modern' here should be regarded as working prototype classes). It could be argued that the debate over the definition of HE is a competition between prototypical classes. Further it may be that some authors treat HE as

a classical category when it ought to be treated as prototypical. However, both of those conjectures also depend on the nature of HE as an object.

This brief discussion of a vast field is important for the treatment of HE in several ways: 1) the method of data collection is important; 2) the status of the category is important: the category may be more a) classical or b) ‘modern’; 3) there are two types of biological approach which could be applied to categories: a) one based on the essence of entities; and b) one based on identifying things to categorised from breeding populations; 4) there is a vibrant mixed approach to classification even within zoology; 5) when applying categorisation to the socio-political and economic spheres, classical categories are less likely to be good descriptors; 6) in those spheres description may not be the goal.

Additionally, the treatments of HE discussed above may beg more questions about HE than they answer. These include: what is the unit of analysis – and indeed what is the evidential base – of the treatments of HE? What logic of inference is being used by the commentators? What are the goals of the commentators? What is the role of historical and biological treatments of HE? What kind of object is HE? What kind of category is ‘HE’? What is the relation between object and category? What is mainstream economics (and what is orthodox economics) and what is the relation (what is the nature of the distinction) between HE and it? The remainder of the paper investigates these questions.

### **Evidential bases and inference**

It is worth revisiting Bowker and Star’s claim, quoted above, that it is human to classify and all human societies have engaged in classification. That is in fact a two-fold claim:

one about the nature of humans and the other about human societies. On the one hand, they make a claim about the essence of humans (we tend to classify). If that claim were true, it would be surprising if the second claim were not true. Also, though, we can view the claims in a different causal order and as an inductive inference: Bowker and Star could observe a number of human civilisations and note that all have classification systems, leading them to regard the tendency to classify as essential to humans. There are several issues here: one is whether investigators identify an essence of the object of study. Lawson (2006, 2009) explicitly claims that a non-insistence on mathematical modelling is the nominal essence of HE, and that this reflects its real essence, i.e., a specific social ontology. However, setting that aside, whatever is the nature of the claim about the object, a second issue is how to reach that conclusion. Several authors argue for a definition of HE based on factors or characteristics common to or shared by a sample of subjects (Lavoie, 2006b; Lawson, 2006, 2009; Backhouse, 2000; Dequech, 2007). However, the unit of analysis chosen by these authors is often different: sometimes the unit is individual economists (Mearman, 2009) or specific exemplars (Lavoie, 2006b<sup>8</sup>); more often, the unit of analysis is pre-existing schools (Lawson; Dequech, 2007; Backhouse, 2000) or research approaches (Davis, 2009). In other cases, though it is clear a survey is being done, the evidence base is not explicit (Colander, 2009; Lee, 2010a<sup>9</sup>; Wrenn, 2007<sup>10</sup>; Backhouse, 2004; Dow, 2000).

However, one feature common to the zoologist and the commentator on HE is the need to decide where to begin looking. Why study creature A rather than creature Z?

---

<sup>8</sup> Lavoie explicitly criticises Davidson's (2003-4) evidential base as too narrow.

<sup>9</sup> It should be acknowledged that Lee (book) does offer a comprehensive discussion of evidence available for the assessment of heterodox economics.

<sup>10</sup> Note: although it is clear what Wrenn's own evidence base is (historians of economic thought) it is not clear what evidence base those subjects use.

Why study J.M. Keynes and not R.E. Lucas? Commentators on HE have tended to look in two main areas: a) literature which explicitly calls itself HE (Colander, et al, 2004; Lawson, 2009); and b) literature in areas *traditionally regarded* as HE (Backhouse, 2000, 2004; Dow, 2000; Lavoie, 2006b). The second area is somewhat questionable because it implicitly derives a definition of HE from pre-existing schools and makes implicit assumptions about connections and similarity between them. The former is marginally preferable, therefore; but not free from the criticism of circularity. For an individual to identify him/herself as heterodox presupposes a definition of HE; given the myriad available definitions, it is entirely possible that two self-identified heterodox economists could hold very different understandings of what HE is. An assumption must be made that there is some shared, common sense understanding of what HE is. So, even using self-identification as a criterion for being heterodox does not illuminate much what HE is.

In modern taxonomy, species are defined (roughly) via breeding populations: if creature A can mate successfully (not including non-reproducible hybrid creatures) with creature B, they can be said to be part of specie  $x$ . Specie  $x$  is then defined in terms of a range of its characteristics. Creature C may then be identified as also a member of  $x$ . One of the drivers of this investigation has been to try to apply methods of taxonomy to HE. Clearly, there are barriers to such an attempt. It is not trivial to make an analogy from contiguity to economists here; however, in some senses it is possible to apply these principles to examining populations of economists. Some of their phenotypic (appearance) criteria might be the holding of particular theoretical positions, or working with a particular method. Clearly, groups of economists exchange ideas, and as such, could be said to be reproducing. Individual case studies of economists can be used to

examine their ‘origins’ either in terms of PhD supervision or other study, or simply by studying their citations<sup>11</sup>. Mearman (2009) adopts a numerical taxonomy approach in defining HE as a population of individuals, specifically the membership of the AHE. However, this approach was also limited because it took HE to be exhausted by *ideas* held by economists and ignored other factors, such as institutional structures and other sources of power. However, by, for example, defining a journal X as heterodox and a journal Y as mainstream, the commentator once again introduces a typological definition of HE, which we are seeking to avoid.

In summary, establishing the evidential base for making claims about HE is important but often neglected. However, those claims raise questions of other types, for instance about the nature of HE and about the logic of inference used. Several authors look for common elements across their data sets. These articles use elements of analytic induction to arrive at conclusions about the nature of HE. These inductions are usually done via verbal methods of analysis, although Mearman (2009) uses statistical techniques such as cluster and factor analysis.

Many of these treatments might be said to be working at the surface. However, is there something deeper at work here? Almost all authors avoid explicit statements about the ontological status of their claims. Lawson (2006, 2009) is unique in discussing HE in terms of essence. For Lawson, as stated, HE has a nominal essence (way of identifying it) and a real essence (which drives the nominal essence). Lawson’s approach has an explicit ontology of depth realism underlying it. Colander et al (2004) talk in terms of HE as a complex system. Dow (2000) has an underlying ontology of schools of thought as

---

<sup>11</sup> As Malik (2008) argues, culture has replaced genetics as a determinant of individual categorisation; this may be assessed via anthropological techniques.



structured, distinct and open. Davis (2009) is clearly committed to an ontology of agents embedded in social structures. Other treatments of HE which tend not to state their ontology all involve one, which is evident in what they consider useful in identifying and defining HE. The fact that many discuss HE in terms of groups or schools suggests that they consider groups ontologically important. The role of journals and citation in defining HE is evidence that it is understood as irreducible to individuals.

Despite these implicit ontologies, it is not always clear what logical move authors on HE make, because it is not clear what they aim to achieve when drawing conclusions. Specifically, it is not entirely clear what type of factors might be common and what status they have. Is HE defined in terms of an essence (nominal or real), a causal factor, a common heritage or descent, or mere family resemblance, a la Wittgenstein? For the majority of the authors surveyed, the answer to this question is not clear. Yet, the nature of the factor that defines HE also affects the logic of inference being used. For surface similarities, the use of a simple induction might suffice (notwithstanding the problem of induction). At this point, it might be objected that the definitions of HE offered are far from surface phenomena in that they drive many higher level concepts and behaviours: for example, a belief in open systems (Dow, 2000) strongly affects the status of theories, empirical methods used, and the types of agents portrayed in theories. It might then be argued that by moving below the surface, these authors have engaged in a different type of logic. However, as discussed below, it might equally be the case that the authors have simply chosen a level of abstraction at which a simple definition of HE – and a strict distinction between it and the mainstream – can be achieved. Further, if these authors are engaged in a logic of, say, moving from specific events to the structures and mechanisms

which caused them (retroduction), it is difficult to find this explicit claim. Even Lawson – who might be expected to explicitly discuss his logic as retroductive – does not do so, and instead appears to be finding common characteristics or features.

This section has argued that existing treatments of HE do not always clearly state their evidential base, or unit of analysis, or the logic of inference being used, or the status of the definition being proposed. It is held that future treatments of HE ought to be clearer on these points. Thus, and further, it is possible to conclude that while biological treatments of HE may provide some insight into its nature (alongside intellectual and sociological treatments), so far this has been only limitedly the case. One might argue that the techniques of numerical taxonomy have been employed; but then again these are mainly the techniques of statistical induction. While some historical treatments of HE exist (for example, Lee, 2010b; Davis, 2009; Backhouse, 2000; King, 2002) there is only a limited sense in which the biological concept of descent is evident in them. Further, while some work (Lee, 2010b; Mearman, 2009) does investigate populations of breeding economists, most do not. In defence of these existing treatments, though, the mixed approach to defining HE adopted by many authors does reflect the current state in zoology<sup>12</sup>. The issue of simple definitions will be returned to. However, first a discussion of the likely nature of HE needs to be developed further.

---

<sup>12</sup> An exhibit at the Leiden University ‘systematic garden’ emphasises this point. “What do a rose and a stinging nettle have in common? Difficult to see with the naked eye! Visible similarities are the toothed leaf margins and the inflorescences, in which flowers are arranged in cymes. Anthers are arranged in more than two whorls, which are usually not joined to the petals. Petals are often arranged on the rim of a cup-shaped receptacle (hypanthium), but in many families the flowers are too small to observe this... The present composition of the order *Rosales*... is based on: molecular characters [such as characteristics of the plant DNA]... the presence of nitrogen fixing bacteria of the genus *Frankia*... the presence of dihydroflavonols... the presence of prismatic crystals in some cells... the presence of mucilage cells” (italics in original). Thus the order of Rosales is classified in terms of genetic structure, but also appearance. (Source: author photograph of exhibit – need permission?)

## **What type of object is Heterodox Economics?**

Any definition of HE inevitably reflects epistemological and ontological beliefs<sup>13</sup> held by the investigator. Whatever data are used, they are interpreted through those beliefs. Given Lawson's (2006, 2009) claim that heterodox economists hold a particular social ontology in common; given Dow's (2000) claims that heterodox economics holds that the world comprises open systems; and given that most of the authors (and the vast majority in this sample) who comment on HE would describe themselves as heterodox or at least sympathetic to it (Backhouse and Colander), then it would be surprising if those authors did not hold a similar ontology; and it would be even more surprising if they did not conceive HE as reflecting that ontology.

Potts (2000) defines heterodox economics as holding a particular ontology, more akin to complex adaptive systems than the unified field theory he says is held by mainstream economists. Several commentators explicitly describe HE as a complex system (Colander, 2009; Colander et al 2004; Davis, 2009) or use language which suggests that is a complex object. Colander et al argue that there is no single unifying element to HE; Colander is however prepared to claim that both HE and mainstream economics are defined in terms of attitude to method. For Lawson (2006, 2009), although he identifies HE as holding a specific ontology leading to a non-insistence on mathematical modelling, he recognises the multi-faceted nature of HE. For Lawson, HE comprises schools with different theoretical positions and different foci. For Lee (2010a), HE is a "concatenation" (8), again suggesting a complex object. Wrenn (2004) also

---

<sup>13</sup> The use of the word 'beliefs' here should not be interpreted too strongly. 'Theory' could instead be used quite effectively. However, 'belief' communicates that often, ontological commitment is made: the author holds that the world is a particular way – provisionally, but often strongly.

provides support for the notion of HE as a complex, multi-faceted object, comprising theories, individuals, and groups. As discussed above, several authors see HE as a grouping of schools of thought. For Dequech (2007: 280), HE is at “a higher degree of generality” than these schools. Backhouse (2004) adds another layer of complexity, describing individuals within economics who are themselves multi-faceted. This view accords with the theory of agents as purposive and having real choice propagated by many heterodox authors. One of these, Davis (2009) adds another dimension to HE by identifying multiple strands of its definition, and adding in dynamics to classify different approaches in economics. He argues that all approaches have an origin story and an orientation. For Davis, HE may be an individual or group which has become excluded or never had access to the mainstream, and has a generally outward orientation. However, he notes that some heterodox economists are inwardly orientated. A reasonable conclusion based on these treatments is that HE is a multi-faceted object.

One aspect of being a complex system is that the object is a set of elements with connections between them (see Potts, 2000). In some cases, the connections are strong, in others less so. For example, in terms of the relations purported by Lawson (2006, 2009), the bonds between the different (ostensibly) heterodox elements are strong<sup>14</sup>. However, in terms of other relations, the connections are much weaker. For example, there is little in common politically between Austrians and Marxists. Indeed, in terms of politics there is much more in common between Austrians and *some* mainstreamers. Further, if we claimed that ‘the mainstream’ holds a belief that most of the time, the social provisioning problem can be best solved by markets with a little government assistance (cf. Lavoie,

---

<sup>14</sup> However, Davis (2009) objects, claiming that, for example, neo-Ricardian economists do not employ Lawson’s ontology or his position on methods.

2006a), a commonality of approach could be found between the mainstream and many Keynesians. We could carry on with this analysis: it would show that each of the simple definitions of HE offered creates exceptions, or people who do not fall easily into either HE or the mainstream. Further, Mearman (2009) shows that the strength with which self-identified heterodox economists hold core beliefs about economics (such as the importance of power in studying the economy) varies considerably; as does the extent to which they consider themselves heterodox, and mainstream. Mearman shows also that core members of the group have strong agreement on many issues, but more peripheral members have fewer strong agreements and fewer agreements of all kinds with either the core or each other. Lee's (2010b) extensive investigation of heterodox communities shows further that connections between 'heterodox' groups and 'heterodox' individuals, measured via memberships of groups, subscriptions to journals, citations of work, and the like, are very complex.

In summary, a cursory sketch of HE as an object would need to include a range of facets and elements. HE might be thought of as a complex system involving a vast array of elements and connections of varying strengths between them. The elements involve individual agential economists and their ideas. Those ideas reside at various layers, such as theories, policies, ontologies, epistemologies, methods, methodologies. Other elements present – some of which are sources of connections between them – would be publication and research outlets, such as journals and conferences. Many of these in turn are organised by associations of economists. These associations are a subset of other social relations, which are in turn related to policy makers, funders, corporations and other actors with power. Included in these power brokers are mainstream economists. Given

the common definition of HE as oppositional to mainstream economics, it is clear that mainstream economists and economics form part – if only a peripheral one – of the HE system. HE would display properties of an open system, and depth; as such, any individual heterodox idea or heterodox economist would be multiply and contingently caused. Another relevant causal factor – reflecting particularly the taxonomic concern with lineage – is the descent from one economist to another, for example via PhD supervision; similarly the history of economic ideas would be causal. Reflecting the importance of history, HE would be a dynamic, changing object.

### **What type of category is ‘Heterodox Economics’?**

Given these complex descriptions of HE as a complex object (if not explicitly a complex system), and given that authors are explicit about this, what might we expect about ‘HE’ as a category? We might expect it to resemble much more a ‘modern’ category. However, this is often not the case. Many of the definitions treat HE as a classical category.

First, though, we should address an assumption which has been smuggled in: that there ought to be some correspondence between category and object. That may of course appear controversial given the welter of literature on the realisticness of models and assumptions, abstraction, instrumentalism and further related issues. However, two strands of literature seem to justify the use of the assumption. The first is that in what is regarded as heterodox economics, realisticness is generally regarded as desirable. Many of the authors surveyed here have explicitly argued for realism in economics (Lawson, 1997, 2003 is an obvious example). Such realist approaches argue that theories ought to

be based in reality<sup>15</sup>. Second, many of those authors have explicitly stated or strongly implied that the goal of their survey is to provide a description of heterodox economics. This seems most strongly the case in Colander et al (2004), Wrenn (2007), Dequech (2007), Backhouse (2004) and Davis (2009), who comments that the “reference of the term ‘heterodox economics’ is quite different from what most economists, heterodox and orthodox, believe it to be” (83). Backhouse’s aim is to “classify current schools of thought in an intuitively acceptable way” (2000: 149). We may ascribe the goal of explanation to Lawson (2006, 2009) and Davis (2009). That these are the apparent goals should not surprise anyone – at least anyone familiar with the common conception of science, or indeed with the classical category described earlier.

### *Exhaustiveness*

To what extent do treatments try to create exhaustive classification? Some treatments explicitly avoid doing so. For example Lee (2010a) states explicitly that mainstream and heterodox economics are not the only existing approaches (he cites Islamic Economics as an approach which is neither mainstream nor heterodox). In other work, implicitly exhaustive categories are produced. Colander (2009), Lavoie (2006b) and Lawson (2009) seem to employ exhaustive classification. The fact that Colander discusses heterodoxy within the mainstream still results in exhaustive categories. Even Dow (2000), who had previously written of the perils of dualism (1990), can be read as employing only the two

---

<sup>15</sup> One possible objection to our argument should be noted: that complex objects can have simple descriptions. For instance, a tiger can be described as *panthera tigris* quite easily. However, of course that name, or indeed ‘tiger’, is merely a name. As made clear above (fn. 10) modern descriptions of species have multiple aspects. Further, these descriptions have as their basis, specific genetic data, in addition to data on appearance, behaviour, etc.

categories mainstream and heterodox. Indeed, even where a commentator discusses variety within either heterodox or mainstream, or even overlaps between heterodox and mainstream, if they define heterodox as non-mainstream, often they result in a classification system exhausted by those two categories. Given that this aspect applies to most of the commentators discussed here (discussed below) we can ascribe most of them with exhaustiveness. Backhouse's (2000, 2004) treatments may also be regarded as exhaustive, albeit perhaps with more categories. His classification system could be read as exhausted, by orthodox economists and dissenters, with heterodox included with dissenters; or as orthodox, dissenters, heterodox; or as orthodox, dissenters, heterodox plus non-economists (2004: 269). In Backhouse's case, the categories appear to exist on a continuum.

As Dow (1990) has argued, exhaustive classification systems may be regarded as problematic because the grounds for making such a claim may be weak. Having said that, practically, as Bowker and Star (1999) suggest, in their discussion of the International Classification of Diseases, classification systems tend to aim to be exhaustive. This may be through the use of an 'other' category; however, if that category becomes too large, the system may collapse. In economics, for instance, if there were held to be two main market structures, perfect competition and monopoly, plus 'others', as it became apparent that the other market structures dominate in reality, more theorisation of them would be



demanded<sup>16</sup>. At this stage, though, the main point about classifications involving HE is that they are mostly exhaustive. In this sense, then, HE is a classical category.

### *Fixity*

To what extent do the treatments of HE create fixed categories? Again, this varies across the sample of commentators, to a greater degree than was the case with exhaustiveness. Several authors explicitly wish to avoid a fixed definition. Lawson (2006: 483-4) states that he does not want to reify the category of HE. Wrenn's (2007) interviewees were clear that HE changes. Davis (2009) criticises existing treatments of HE as being fixed, and as attacking a concept of the mainstream which is significantly out of date (c. 1980 in his estimate). Therefore, he builds origin and orientation of economists into his definition of HE, which suggests fluidity in the category. Backhouse (2004) anticipates Davis' concern, claiming that many definitions of HE "simplify away the dynamics of the profession" (268). Lavoie (2006b) claims that heterodox differs in different spheres. Dequech (2007) is careful to define HE 'in the current period' and complains that definitions of HE are not careful enough to state to which period they refer (280). Interestingly, Dequech's complaint is that definitions of HE that focus on theoretical content or other intellectual criteria are often incorrect because of the fluidity of the concepts found therein. Thus, one reason he favours sociological definitions of HE is that they are valid for longer. He seems, therefore, almost to advocate a fixed definition, or at least one that endures. Perhaps ironically, the analytical definition of HE as non-

---

<sup>16</sup> It is interesting to note that the JEL classification scheme is dominated by mainstream concerns. There is very fine granulation of categories for some topics, for instance category C, mathematical and quantitative methods; yet the granulation of B5, current heterodox approaches, is much lower.

mainstream would achieve this endurance. Meador (2009) embraces this longevity by suggesting that HE has had an extensive period of coherence; that is because he defines HE as non-mainstream, and defines the mainstream in terms of logical positivism, and thence traces it back to the Vienna Circle.

Fixed categories can be problematic for a number of reasons. They run the risk of losing engagement with a changing reality, and thereby becoming useless. As Bowker and Star (1999, ch. 6) report, the apartheid system was full of absurdities, for example of people changing their designated colour (reinforcing the absence of any real basis for race: Malik, 2008), another reason it lost credibility. Further, given the difficulties of arriving at firm definitions of objects, authors such as Dow (1990) argue that they should always be provisional. Several commentators discussed here try to avoid fixity because they explicitly recognise some of its problems. One such problem is via labelling. Heterodox economists, labelled or self-labelled as such, may start to act in particular ways, or only take designated heterodox concepts or methods seriously. Alternatively they might suffer from confirmation bias or group polarisation (see, for example, Myers and Lamm, 1976). Thus, future re-examinations of HE would more likely arrive at the same key concepts as defining HE. Some of the definitions of HE offered may be so strict that they generate this labelling effect. Thus, despite not wishing to reify the category, Lawson's (2006, 2009) strong definition of HE may change behaviour of some economists, for instance by eschewing statistical techniques – as their interpretation of Lawson rather than his recommendation – reinforcing the definition of HE he offers. Indeed, the power of Lawson's critique may have already had that effect on the practice of heterodox economists.

In summary, then, though many commentators on HE explicitly wish to avoid fixity, the strength of their definition may render HE effectively fixed for a long period. Sociological definitions of HE may be particularly problematic in this regard. In this way, HE again reflects a classical category. However, there seem good reasons to avoid fixed definitions of HE. One reason is the large number of competing definitions. As discussed below, many of the commentators accept that HE is a complex object and discuss various aspects of it; however when they come to define HE they arrive at a single criterion. Taken together these offer a multi-dimensional definition of HE. Taken as individual definitions they suggest a competition. That in turn suggests that HE ought to have the status of a prototypical category, and not be fixed.

#### *Mutual exclusiveness*

One of the main ways HE seems to resemble a classical category is that often, strict distinctions are made between it and other approaches. As discussed above, mutual exclusivity can be traced back to exhaustiveness: if HE is non-mainstream, this creates exhaustive and strictly distinct categories. Given that many of the definitions of HE have it being non-mainstream as a starting point, strict distinctions are immediately apparent. Beyond that, more specific definitions attempt to find a single criterion which strictly distinguishes mainstream (or orthodox, in some cases) from heterodox. Sociological definitions focus on the location of power. Mainstream economists have the power and heterodox economists do not. However, as Colander *et al* (2004) point out, there are degrees to which different groups in the mainstream have power. They argue that there is

an elite in the mainstream which really holds the power to determine the direction of the profession. The remainder of the mainstream follows this agenda. Some of these people have ideas which could be regarded as heterodox. Sargent, for example, who once propagated rational expectations theory, has change tack towards complexity. Arrow has made a similar turn. Backhouse (2004: 267) identifies Stiglitz as using formal tools to make anti-market arguments.

In terms of intellectual definitions of HE, some authors claim a strict distinction between it and the mainstream. Meador (2009), Lee (2010a) and Lawson (2006, 2009) seem most clearly to be pursuing a strict distinction. For Meador, HE and mainstream have completely different epistemes. Lee (2010) describes them as “completely different” (page) and indeed as non-comparable (*passim*). Dow (2000) uses a strict distinction for analytical convenience. Davis (2009) suggests a core-periphery distinction between them. On the other hand, Colander (2009) argues for a heterodoxy within the mainstream. For Lavoie (2006b) the difference between economists or groups of them is defined in terms of strength of connection, which can vary between substantive concerns. Wrenn’s (2007) interviewees agreed little about which schools to label as HE and identified several ‘boundary objects’ or bridging groups which straddled any divide. Backhouse’s (2000, 2004) analysis suggests that the distinction between HE and mainstream is much fuzzier than in some of the other treatments discussed here. Similarly, Davis (2009) offers a set of criteria for heterodoxy which can be partially met by individuals, ideas or groups.

Dow’s (1990) arguments against strictly separable groups apply: the world may have an underlying unity, or be too complex, to be adequately described in terms of scientific categories. Further, limits to human knowledge and differences in epistemology

may also render categories inaccurate or inappropriate in other ways. Given the concrete experience of economists, strict distinction may also be impossible. If, for instance, the mainstream is defined in terms of what is published in the *American Economic Review*, it is confined to a very narrow range of individuals indeed. An individual economist could be doing work on similar topics, using similar methods, with similar theoretical and other principles underlying it, but still not be a ‘proper’ mainstream economist. Such individuals would have fuzzy membership of both mainstream and heterodox sets, with their membership score higher for mainstream. Such a formulation is arguably superior to one in crisp sets because it allows overlap and allows some commonality between groups of economists to be recognised. One flaw with treatments like Lee’s (2010a) is that they ignore common aspects between economists. It is obvious that economists are studying something similar, albeit from different starting points.

Blurred boundaries are inevitable in real world situations, but create problems for categorisation. However, there is growing recognition that blurred boundaries can be incorporated into systematic thinking. One way in which this can be done is via fuzzy sets. Whilst in a crisp set, individuals have either [0,1] membership, in fuzzy sets individuals can have variable membership. So, an economist can be heterodox in many ways – and therefore clearly a member of that set – but also a member of another (say, the mainstream) set. Mearman (2009) asked self-identified heterodox economists to what extent they would agree with a statement that they are heterodox. On average, they responded that they agreed about 85%. However, they also agreed about 20% that they were mainstream (they also agreed about 80% that they were pluralist).

However, both crisp and fuzzy sets suffer from the same problem: they rely on single definitions of the set. Also, they are generally flat. As was discussed earlier, HE is an object which may be best characterised as complex, perhaps with depth. So, as a starting point, a set-based conception of HE is problematic. While Dequech (2007) is the only author surveyed here who talks explicitly in terms of sets, many of the others can be interpreted as doing so. Thus, as descriptions of the object, the category appears fundamentally flawed. Further, it should not be forgotten that if heterodox is defined as non-mainstream, it is internally related with the mainstream and therefore cannot be treated as entirely separate. So, we face a paradox: many of the authors surveyed here propose HE as a complex, multi-faceted object, but many (and in many cases the same) authors define HE as a category with a single, simple definition, and as strictly distinct from the mainstream.

These strict distinctions occur because the authors choose a level of abstraction which creates them. In taxonomy, a distinction is often made between ‘lumpers’ who like to group objects together, and ‘splitters’ who like to separate objects. Lumpers will generally create fewer categories while splitters will create more categories. Lumping can be advantageous because it creates simple, easy to communicate systems (which as such are likely to survive); but lumping can also create categories which quickly appear insufficiently finely grained and annoy their members and users. In some respects, our sample of authors are lumpers, in that they generally arrive at two categories; but viewed differently they are splitters, focusing on differences between economists (or groups of) rather than commonality.

Lumping or splitting are tendencies in thought, which could be motivated by a number of factors, for example that fewer categories generally work better, or that more categories capture reality better. The question is: what motivates the authors sampled to reach their strict distinctions? A classical or scientific category should be driven by the desire to describe reality well. All of the authors state that they wish to provide good descriptions; they often imply that by criticising other descriptions as inadequate (see for instance, Davis' (2009) comment on Lawson's (2006) description, and Lawson's (2009) comment on Davis' description in reply). Explanation is another motive, and it can be seen in many of the treatments discussed.

#### *Non-normative and non-instrumental*

However, other motives are possible (albeit very difficult to identify). Indeed, that is one of the differences between a modern category and a classical one. One of these motives might be rhetorical, i.e. as being able to persuade others of one's view. As Bowker and Star (1999) and Malik (2008) note, classifications are often driven by the needs of the designer, for example to label, control or suppress a target group; or by the needs of the user, for example for ease of data entry or implementation. Another motive might be to advocate for a particular group. It is interesting that the category 'HE' has been created by heterodox economists, not by mainstream economists trying to marginalise them. As a counterpoint to the lack of power held by heterodox groups, they have acted to mobilise jointly. However, for this to happen, some rallying point for HE must be identified. That this is a goal of many authors is clear. Lee (2010a) attempts to argue for a completely

separate heterodoxy which can exist with almost no reference to orthodoxy. Colander (2009) explicitly wants to work in the opposite direction but agrees with Lee that a more tolerant environment is necessary. Dow (2000) examines a strategic discussion of the possibility of progress for HE. In that, she foreshadows several treatments on strategic pluralism, which also argue against strict distinctions between HE and the mainstream (Davis, 2006; Sent, 2003; Garnett, 2005).

So, while authors aim for descriptions of HE (and often the mainstream) which aim to capture its essential features, their choices of levels of abstraction which create strict distinctions raise questions about other motives they may have. In some cases, they hope to affect the reality they are describing. That then raises questions about the relationship between HE the object and HE the category. It appears that the category may affect the object as well as reverse. In the case of HE, a category of HE may lead to changed perception by economists (or groups of) about their own identities. This in turn may lead to changes in practice. A unified category of HE may create a unified group of heterodox economists, who adapt each others' practices and cross-fertilise ideas. On the other hand, the act of self-identification can involve risk, as those with power may now choose to exercise it against those who stand out. Such considerations are at the heart of the debates about strategic pluralism.

Here, though, our interest is on the relationship between category and object. It might be argued that having a category affect the object it is trying to define is non-realist, whereas the authors surveyed are realist in the simple sense of holding that reality exists separate from descriptions of it. However, the identification stage and the influence



stage can be regarded as sufficiently separate so that category and object are not conflated. There is a dialectic between the two but not an identity.

As a summary, we can say that even though authors recognise that HE is a complex object, it is often described via a classical category. That this occurs suggests that HE the category may have some additional normative or instrumental role, which is one of the hallmarks of what we are calling a ‘modern’ category.

### **Summary and conclusions**

This paper employs a form of meta-analysis of a sample of existing contributions about heterodox economics. Discussion of those contributions is augmented by other evidence, some of which is interdisciplinary. The paper is also predicated on a social ontology which implies that individual economists’ positions are complex, over-determined, caused by deep mechanisms and are reinforced and changed by social structures, which are themselves changed and reinforced by individual agency.

Definitions of HE tend to contain elements of sociological reasoning (based on power relations) and intellectual reasoning (based on key ideas). In both cases, a starting point is to assume that HE is non-mainstream economics. However, the literature suggests that HE is more than *merely* non-mainstream economics. In sociological terms this surplus element is evident in the formation of associations and other networks; in intellectual terms, the surplus appears methodological (defined widely). Another central element of HE is that its members self-identify as heterodox.

On the face of it, sociological explanations of HE are also quite convincing. HE reflects power relations within the Economics discipline. Further, an appreciation of power is apparent in the actions of self-identified heterodox economists. The different intellectual definitions of HE all offer partial insight. However, while biological treatments of HE may provide some insight into its nature (alongside intellectual and sociological treatments), so far this has been only limitedly the case. Additionally the evidential base, unit of analysis and logic of inference for making claims about HE are often neglected. Several authors look for common elements across their data sets. They use elements of analytic induction to arrive at conclusions about the nature of HE. It is held that future treatments of HE ought to be clearer on these points. In their defence, the mixed approach to defining HE adopted by many authors does reflect the current state in zoology.

Almost all authors avoid explicit statements about the ontological status of their claims. However, it seems reasonable to portray HE as a complex object (if not explicitly a complex system). Given these complex descriptions of HE, and given that authors are explicit about this, what might we expect about 'HE' as a category? The paper compared HE the object with types of category, provisionally called 'classical' and 'modern'. We might expect HE to resemble much more a 'modern' category. However, this is often not the case. Many of the definitions treat HE as a classical category. Classifications involving HE are mostly exhaustive. Though many commentators on HE explicitly wish to avoid fixity, the strength of their definition may render HE effectively fixed for a long period. Sociological definitions of HE may be particularly problematic in this regard. The multi-dimensional definition of HE suggests a set of individual definitions in

competition. That in turn suggests that HE ought to have the status of a prototypical category, and not be fixed.

Many of the treatments of HE ignore common aspects between economists and split HE strictly from the mainstream. These strict distinctions occur because the authors choose a level of abstraction which creates them. So, while authors aim for descriptions of HE (and often the mainstream) which aim to capture its essential features, their choices of levels of abstraction which create strict distinctions raise questions about other motives they may have. In some cases, they hope to affect the reality they are describing. That this occurs suggests that HE the category may have some additional normative or instrumental role, which is another hallmark of what we are calling a ‘modern’ category.

What are the implications of these findings? First, it would seem that arguments based on a strong definition of HE may be extremely problematic. Strategically, communication between heterodox and mainstream economists may be more possible than some think. Second, given the implicit ontologies held by the commentators, the use of a classical category suggests an inconsistency between theory and practice. Third, biological treatments of HE based on breeding populations and descent may be profitable, although they are unlikely to answer the question of what HE is: however they might be a partial solution.

The most fundamental question is whether HE should be abandoned as a category. A strong argument would be that unless it better represents its object and therefore the current reality in Economics, it should be at least sidelined. Further it could be argued that until there is a clear understanding of what HE is, it should not be used. An

even stricter position is that HE should be abandoned completely because there is no such object as HE, or at least not one which can be identified.

In short, these arguments can be addressed thus: first, it must be admitted that all categories involve rough simplifications of complex objects and that this does not make them useless. There can be general agreement that a category does not quite capture the object it represents, but that it does so adequately enough. The question, then, becomes whether the object is doing its job(s) of providing a description, gathering people around it, being communicable to others, and so on. Personal experience suggests that self-identified heterodox economists feel reasonably comfortable with the term, although some object that is unnecessarily divisive. Second, there is clearly not agreement on what HE means, but this is not necessarily a problem. The same term can be expected to mean different things in different language games. The question then becomes whether the term helps in playing the game, and the game of games. It is too early to say whether HE is successful in this regard<sup>17</sup>. Third, it seems reasonable as a provisional position to claim that there are areas which are outside the mainstream. Though to lump all these together would seem arbitrary, it is also evident that there is clear development of social structure between these groups, allowing us to claim that there is something which coheres enough to be provisionally given a collective title. The problem appears to arise when that object is treated as utterly separate from the rest.

---

<sup>17</sup> Arguably what might make HE more persuasive is that in this regard HE sits in a long tradition in economics, of categories which are purposefully somewhat vague and flexible abstractions. Loasby (2003) ascribes such categories to Adam Smith; Davis (1999) does likewise for Keynes.

## References

Arestis, P. (1992). *The Post-Keynesian approach to economics: an alternative analysis of economic theory and policy*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Ayers, C. (1936). 'Fifty Years' Development in Ideas of Human Nature and Motivation', *American Economic Review*, 26 (1): .

Backhouse, R. (2000). 'Progress in Heterodox Economics', *Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, 22 (2): 149-157.

\_\_\_\_\_ (2004). 'A Suggestion for Clarifying the Study of Dissent in Economics', *Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, 26 (2): 261-271.

Bowker and Star (1999). *Sorting Things Out: Classification and its Consequences*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Colander, D. (2009). 'Moving Beyond the Rhetoric of Pluralism: Suggestions for an "Inside-the-Mainstream" Heterodoxy', in R. Garnett, E. Olsen and M. Starr (eds) *Economic Pluralism*, London: Routledge.

\_\_\_\_\_, Holt, R. and Rosser, B. (2004). 'The Changing face of Mainstream Economics', *Review of Political Economy*, 16 (4): 485-499.

Davidson, P. (2003-4). 'Setting the record straight on "A History of Post Keynesian Economics"', *Journal of Post Keynesian Economics*, 26 (2): 245-272.

Davis, J. (1999). 'Common sense: a middle way between formalism and post-structuralism', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 23: 503-515.

- \_\_\_\_\_ (2006). 'Heterodox Economics, the Fragmentation of the Mainstream, and Embedded Individual Analysis', in R. Garnett and J. Harvey (eds) *Future Directions in Heterodox Economics*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2009). 'The Nature of Heterodox Economics', in E. Fullbrook (ed) *Ontology and Economics: Tony Lawson and his Critics*, London: Routledge.
- Denis, A. (2009). 'Editorial: Pluralism in Economics Education', *International Review of Economics Education*, 8 (2):
- Dequech, D. (2007). 'Neoclassical, Mainstream, Orthodox and Heterodox Economics', *Journal of Post Keynesian Economics*, 30 (2): 279-302.
- Douai, A., A. Mearman and I. Negru (forthcoming). 'Introduction to the Special Issue on Ecological Heterodox Economics', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*.
- Dow, S. (1990). 'Beyond Dualism', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 14 (2): 143-157.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2000). 'Prospects for Progress in Heterodox Economics', *Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, 22 (2): 157-170.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2004). 'Structured Pluralism', *Journal of Economic Methodology*, 11 (3): 275-290.
- Dugger, W. (ed.) (1989). *Radical Institutionalism: Contemporary Voices*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Fleetwood, S. (1995). *Hayek's Political Economy, the Socio Economics of Order*, London: Routledge.
- Freeman, A. (2009). 'The Economists of Tomorrow: the Case for a Pluralist Subject Benchmark Statement for Economics', *International Review of Economics Education*, 8 (2):

- Garnett, R. (2005). 'Whither Heterodoxy?', *Post Autistic Economics Review*, 34 (October).
- George, D. (2008). *Issues in Heterodox Economics (Surveys of Recent Research in Economics)*, London: Blackwell.
- Godley, W. and Shaikh, A. (2002). 'An Important Inconsistency at the Heart of the Standard Macroeconomic Model', *Journal of Post Keynesian Economics*, 24 (3): 423-441.
- Goto, H. (1982). *Animal Taxonomy*, London: Arnold.
- King, J. (2002). *A History of Post Keynesian Economics since 1936*, London: Macmillan.
- Lavoie, M. (1992). *Foundations of Post Keynesian Economic Analysis*, Aldershot: Edward Elgar.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2006a). *Introduction to Post Keynesian Economics*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2006b). 'Do Heterodox Theories have anything in common? A Post-Keynesian Point of View', *Intervention. Journal of Economics*, 3 (1): 87-112.
- Lawson, T. (1997). *Economics and Reality*, London: Routledge.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2003). *Reorienting Economics*, London: Routledge.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2006). 'The Nature of Heterodox Economics', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 30 (4): 483-507.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2009). 'Heterodox Economics and Pluralism: Reply to Davis', in E. Fullbrook (ed) *Ontology and Economics: Tony Lawson and his Critics*, London: Routledge.

- Lee, F. (2010a). 'A Note on the Pluralism debate in Economics', *Review of Radical Political Economics*, forthcoming.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2010b). *A History of Heterodox Economics: Challenging the mainstream in the twentieth century*, London: Routledge.
- Loasby, B. (2003). 'Closed models and open systems', *Journal of Economic Methodology*, 10 (3): 285-306.
- Malik, K. 2008. *Strange Fruit: Why Both Sides are Wrong in the Race Debate*, London: Oneworld.
- Mayr, E. 1969. *Principles of Systematic Zoology*, New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Meador, D. (2009). 'Comment on "What is Heterodox Economics? Conversations with Historians of Economic Thought"', *Forum for Social Economics*, 38: 71-73.
- Mearman, A. (2009). 'Who do Heterodox Economists think they are?', UWE Discussion Papers, 09/15.
- Myers, D. and Lamm, H. (1976). 'The group polarisation phenomenon', *Psychological Bulletin*, 83 (4): 602-627.
- Potts, J. (2000). *The New Evolutionary Microeconomics: Complexity, Competence and Adaptive Behaviour*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Palmer, J., Soltis, D. and Chase, M. (2004). 'The plant tree of life: an overview and some points of view', *American Journal of Botany*, 91 (10): 1437-1445.
- Pratten, S. (1996). 'The "Closure" Assumption as a First Step: Neo-Ricardian Economics and Post-Keynesianism', *Review of Social Economy*, 54 (4): 423-443.
- Sawyer, M. (1989). *The Challenge of Radical Political Economy: An Introduction to Alternatives to Neo-classical Economics*, Savage, MD: Barnes and Noble Books.



- Sent, E.-M. (2003). 'Pleas for Pluralism', *Post-Autistic Economics Review*, 18 (Feb).
- Sherman, H. (1987). *Foundations of Radical Political Economy*, Armonk, NY: ME Sharpe.
- Simpson, G. (1961). *Principles of Animal Taxonomy*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Taylor, L. (2004). *Reconstructing Macroeconomics: Structuralist Proposals and Critiques of the Mainstream*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wrenn, M. (2004). *What is Heterodox Economics?* PhD dissertation, Colorado State University.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2007). 'What is Heterodox Economics? Conversations with Historians of Economic Thought', *Forum for Social Economics*, 36 (2): 97-108.