

IMAGINING ECONOMICS OTHERWISE: ENCOUNTERS WITH IDENTITY/DIFFERENCE, by Nitasha Kaul, Routledge, 2007. ISBN: 978-0-415-38397-4; 304 pages.

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Nitasha Kaul has written this book from what she earlier¹ termed her “post’ist perspective”, comprising a mix of relatively recent transdisciplinary theoretical approaches such as poststructuralism, deconstruction, feminism, and postcolonial (PoCo) theory. Post’ism, it seems, also is an “anti-disciplinary” or a “disciplinary-under-erasure” (in the deconstructionist argot) perspective.

Initially tempted to use the Postmodernism Generator (www.elsewhere.org/pomo) to deconstruct Kaul’s text, I fortunately opted for a close reading and have concluded that it makes a significant contribution to the philosophy of PoMo economic theory. Within the heterodoxy, postmodern economics (900 Google hits) is presently a minority interest compared to, say, Marxian/Marxist economics (177,000 hits). However, this work is not solely of value to PoMo economic theorists, as it presents an in-depth critique of the – frequently hidden – philosophical underpinnings of almost *all* economic theory/theories (2,667,000 hits).

Neoclassical economic theory is, of course, Kaul’s main target. But she spares neither heterodox economics nor any other post enlightenment *social* science discipline whose knowledge claims are based on one or more of the following:

- values linked to some Value concept;
- irrationality equated to being “uneconomic”;
- misuse/conflation of the category economic, the discipline economics and the entity economy;
- treating societies and cultures as somehow separate from their economies;
- theories that are “rooted” (stay-at-home) rather than “routed” (travelling);
- epistemologies that are timeless, universal and moralised as objective;
- exclusive use of “deductive nomological” (DN) and “inductive statistical” (IS) explanations;
- theory divorced from praxis;
- denying the central importance of identity and difference;
- a “concentric” rather than a “translational” architecture of identity;
- the Cartesian self and Kantian subject with “transcendental pretence”;
- defining Self by denying the Other(s); and
- “identity politics” rather than “the politics of identity”.

This is not an attack on ‘post Galileian’? *natural* science which a few PoMo extremists claim is socially constructed, against hoots of derision from scientists like Alan Sokal, Jean Bricmont and Richard Dawkins. There are 242 pages of text proper, most of them heavily footnoted. From Chapter 1 (The anatomy of a discipline) through Chapter 7 (Writing economic theory an*Other* way) the author marshals her facts, presents the evidence and argues cogently for her thesis that economics needs to be reimagined on different foundations than those listed above.

In line with her book's title, Chapters 3 through 6 address the Self (both 'I' and 'We'), the Other(s), the question of difference, and the "abstract essentialist individual identity" of *homo economicus* (HE) or Rational Economic Man (REM). Leading up to this are chapters entitled 'The anatomy of a discipline' and 'Enlightenment epistemology and the subject-world of economics', in which the author undertakes an 'archaeological excavation' of several enlightenment themes. These include the machine metaphor, causality and a ready-made social world (not an endless work-in-progress) ripe for explanation using Reason, together with the notions of essences and ideal-types, averaging and generalisation (from particulars, which are what really matter). This is no mere history of ideas, e.g. the changing definitions of what we mean by an explanation; it is a careful tracing of their genealogy. The author's final chapter is entitled 'Writing economic theory an*Other* way' and to this I now turn.

Kaul writes "In order to disrupt the modernist disciplinary logic that relies upon creating knowledge based on manufacturing conceptual abstractions and universalising their essence, we need to place difference at the heart of self and identity." This reflects her view that maintaining a HE/REM identity as the Self of economics is done by managing the Other as a limit phenomenon. One is reminded of the quip that the sole reason people like to say they are economic rationalists is: "Who the hell wants to be tagged an uneconomic irrationalist?" HE/REM's averaged, generalised, essential, ideal-type, solid, mainstream identity, with its income-constrained freedom-to-choose, can be maintained only by "epistemic violence". The easy way to keep dissolution of the Self at bay is to maintain that the long tail of marginalised groups (women, gays, blacks, the homeless, the unemployed, tattooed bikers, Third Worldlings ... the usual suspects) are a bunch of unreconstructed uneconomic irrationalists.

HE/REM is said to possess "the concentric mode of identity", whereby he (*sic*) may empathise with expanding circles of family, neighbours, fellow countrymen, ... even unto all of humankind. This ties in with the benevolent cosmopolitan "moral economics" of theorists like Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen. Trouble is, the circles still radiate from an I or a We. Kaul therefore makes a case for "the thinking of identity in a translational mode", translation being the experience of trying to understand that which is different and embedded in its own context; to continually *Other* oneself; to walk a mile in an*Other's* shoes. Far from being solid, the Self is socially-constructed and fluid. She wants to see the "deparochialising of economics". While the Western liberal democracies do constitute a pretty big parish, the numbers infected by the HE/REM meme, though powerful, are small relative to both their own underclasses and the Third World's massive population base.

Kaul's method of writing economic theory an*Other* way involves ditching the conventional one-way relation between theories and an external mind-independent world 'out there'. Instead, theories could be "textual productions" that help "produce the very reality [they] seek to explain", rather than the conventional "collection of causal explanatory variables". Theory should be "an exploration of discontinuous trends that determine" despite the resulting "multiply erupting strands of theory" being difficult to translate. Where she's heading is away from DN and IS explanations and towards PoMo's elevation of *critique* itself to the status of theory. This is opposed to the conventional role of critique *qua* criticism, which acts to reinforce existing theories by forcing marginal corrections and improvements to them.

A monolithic disciplinary “economics” (of neoclassical, or any other persuasion) is out, and a – possibly infinite – set of “econo-mixes” is in. This would annul the divorce between “innocent” theory and the political praxis that flows from it: endless contests between groups, struggles that are interested, material, and often brutal. Societies and cultures would become linked with their “economies”, and we might even come to accept that the entity “economy” is an artificial construct created between the 1930s and the 1950s. The link between variable values (socially and culturally determined) and invariant Value (a conserved quantity like labour time, the numéraire commodity, gold, or money) would be broken. With the Other of HE/REM empowered, with the subaltern granting herself (*sic*) permission to speak, being “uneconomic” would no longer necessarily translate into being irrational. Timeless and universal epistemes moralised as objective are out, and historical, locally-based, contextualised, and contingent theoretical approaches are in.

Interestingly, Kaul discloses that “theory” derives from the Greek *theorein*, “the practice of travel and observation, a man sent by the *polis* to another city to witness a religious ceremony”. So, when theorising, one leaves home and becomes, not rootless, but routed towards one’s destination. “The relation of theorising to travel invites the thinking of location not as a fixed point but as a site for struggle ... Further, in order to appreciate the different contexts arising from encounters with others, we can imagine a continual translation of oneself, a translation which can be conceptualised as travelling”. All is politics, and it is the politics of identity. This the author contrasts with the identity politics that follows from feminist standpoint theory: “Politics of identity is about politicising the identity question – about treating identity and politics as mutually constitutive – while identity politics is generally seen as politics based on given identities.”

If my summary of writing economic theory an*Other* way is passably fair and accurate, I think Kaul’s method too cut by half. In line with all other PoMo practices, it suffers from the circularity of hermeneutics. She repeatedly says she wants us to understand the economy, the economic and economics as *texts*. According to Wikipedia, the Hermeneutic Circle refers to the notion that one’s understanding of the text *as a whole* is established by reference to the individual parts and one’s understanding of each individual part by reference *to the whole*. With her endless string of political-cum-economic theories based on the particulars of individual situations, *Kaul has no whole*. She emphatically rejects the notion of there being any economic entirety.

This is not a good enough reason for passing up an opportunity to read *Imagining Economics Otherwise: Encounters with identity/difference*. The book is well-researched and worth the effort of getting to grips with what the author is saying. Most heterodox schools do have a holistic theory into which Kaul’s insights (some of them, at least) can be embedded. I, for one, look forward to reading specific applications of the method she proposes for reinjecting political economy into economics.

¹ A critical ‘post’ to critical realism, *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 2002, vol. 26, issue 6, pp. 709-726.