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Book Review

Book review of Earl, Peter E.: Beyond Misbehaving: Changing Universities, Pluralism, and the Evolution of a Heterodox Behavioral Economist

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Book review of Earl, Peter E.: *Beyond Misbehaving: Changing Universities, Pluralism, and the Evolution of a Heterodox Behavioral Economist*

Westlake, Australia, 2024 (439 + xvi pages, PE:AT Publishing, softcover, also available as ebook, ISBN 979-8-224-14517-1)

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This is a really intriguing and original book, which combines an autobiography, advice to doctoral students and starting scholars about how to avoid mistakes in their career plans, as well as elements of economic theory based on the various articles and books that its author wrote over the years. Peter Earl has just retired from his position at the University of Queensland. He is best known for his work on behavioural economics. He was one of the two co-editors of the *Journal of Economic Psychology* from 2000 to 2004, but he has also written extensively on marketing and monetary economics. His 1983 and 1986 books on consumer behaviour, incidentally published by Edward Elgar when he was still working for Wheatsheaf, were a main influence on my own writings on post-Keynesian consumer theory (Lavoie 1994; 2022: ch. 2). Indeed, Earl's latest book is of particular interest to readers of this journal because he was an undergraduate and doctoral student at the University of Cambridge from the mid 1970s to the mid-1980s, and thus at a time when Cambridge was still a stronghold of post-Keynesian macroeconomics. Earl's teaching and scholarly works have always reflected this Cambridge background.

Over the last 30 years, several books have been devoted to interviews of economists, including post-Keynesian economists. These interviews are sometimes more revealing than the scholarly works of the interviewees, as they help to understand the motivations and the goals being pursued by these economists. In a sense, Earl's book is like a long interview: it is quite fascinating to follow his reflections on the topics that he addressed throughout his career, the choices that he made, his experiences in the four universities where he taught, his evaluation of the evolution of scholarly careers in economics and his reflections on how best to motivate students.

The book is made up of nine chapters. The first two chapters recall his youth, when he was already observing with a critical eye the consumer choices of his parents. Chapter 3 describes his undergraduate years at Cambridge, detailing the peculiar Cambridge teaching system and its tripos. Chapter 4 is devoted to a description of his years as a research student, and the difficulties that he had in choosing and finally getting his thesis topic approved. In these two chapters we encounter many of the famous post-Keynesians, and both chapters describe what was being taught and discussed in the post-Keynesian Cambridge. Chapters 5 to 8 are devoted to his time in the four universities in which he worked: Stirling University (where he met Sheila Dow), the University of Tasmania,

Lincoln University in New Zealand, and finally his 20 years spent at the University of Queensland in Australia. Each of these four chapters follow the same outline. He discusses how he tried to introduce pluralism in the courses that he taught, his obligations in administration and service, a description and the evolution of his work on heterodox behavioural economics, his participation in conferences and a summary of his published output. The ninth and last chapter is devoted to the warnings that he draws from his own experience: lessons for undergraduate and doctoral students and how they should be trained and supervised; and lessons for scholars, in particular publication strategies in order to achieve promotions and get jobs in good universities within the ever more challenging mainstream environment. Earl recalls that, already in 2002, he thought about writing a short book on such ‘survival strategies for heterodox economists’, at the initiative of the late Frederic Lee. The project was left on pause for 20 years because of other engagements.

Besides this, Earl’s book, *Beyond Misbehaving*, is intended to be a response to the book *Misbehaving*, written by Richard Thaler (2015), where the 2017 Nobel Prize laureate provides an account of his career and contributions to behavioural economics, a story that Earl judges to be misleading since it takes no account of past and current heterodox contributions to the field.¹ Indeed, Earl points out that it was a revelation to him when, in 2007, he read Esther-Mirjam Sent’s (2004) article where she clearly distinguished between *new* and *old* behavioural economics. Strangely, he says that he had not yet fully realized then that the (mainly) US-based work in behavioural economics that was gaining traction in mainstream economics, and ever more so after the 2008 financial crisis, ‘was essentially a set of ad hoc modifications to the established view of choice in closed settings’ (p. 315). This was completely different from his own view of behavioural economics, inspired in particular by the work of Herbert Simon, barely mentioned by Thaler and other new behavioural economists.² Earl was bemused by the fact that his own survey of behavioural economics, published in a well-known journal, the *Economic Journal* (Earl 1990a), had attracted a low number of citations. One of the reasons, he thought, was that his articles spelled ‘behavioural’ in the English way, whereas US contributors spelled it as ‘behavioral’, so that (mostly) US economists using searching tools would be referred to *new behavioral* contributions instead of *old behavioural* ones.

Earl’s book is a very detailed account of his years as a student as well as his 40 years as a teacher and researcher. Either Earl has kept a written record of all his encounters, job interviews, conferences and interactions with various colleagues, or he has a phenomenal memory, and very likely both! Another obvious quality of the author is his ability to write abundantly and easily. This can be ascertained in general by the very large number of books and papers that Earl has published over the years. More specifically, this 400-page book was apparently written within nearly a single year, after the author’s retirement from the University of Queensland at the end of 2020. In the meantime, he had completed the publication of another book, a large advanced textbook, *Principles of Behavioral Economics* (Earl 2022), with an American spelling (!), the subtitle of which indicating that its intent is ‘bringing together old, new and evolutionary approaches’.³

1. Earl (2018) also published a paper on Thaler’s work, which gathered over 30,000 views, thanks to the decision of Steve Pressman to make it open access in the *Review of Political Economy*.

2. Gerd Gigerenzer (2008, p. 86) reports that Simon was himself fooled by new behavioural economics, initially thinking that cognitive illusions and biases were consistent with his views of rationality, only realizing they were not in 1997 when he discussed this with Gigerenzer.

3. I read this textbook, but found it less attractive than the present book.

In its autobiographical part, Earl is very harsh with himself. On a number of occasions, he mentions that he failed 'to have the kind of career and impact that [he] might have had' (p. 2). This he attributes to the fact that he did not play the academic game adequately and made several bad choices. With respect to the field of behavioural economics, he points out as a major factor that he should have done more good empirical work based on large research grants. With respect to publications, he mentions that he should have targeted well-ranked journals more frequently; should have published less works as book chapters, submitting them to journals instead; and should have spent more time on well-researched articles and less time on papers of lesser quality. He wonders whether he did too many book reviews, too many edited books and too much refereeing duties, sometimes due to the bad influence of some of his 'patrons'. Interestingly, Earl suggests that it is better to have one's work appear in a working paper series that can be accessed by search tools than to publish in some little-known journal that few university libraries can access. From his past experience, as described in the first eight chapters, Chapter 9 provides no less than 52 pages of 'do' and 'don't' lessons so as to avoid failing to realize one's potential. One might say, ironically given his heterodox background, that Earl provides the rules that would permit scholars to maximize their academic success, subject to the constraints imposed by their deans and research assessment agencies.

Despite the presence of several well-taken suggestions, all of this is a bit distressing from a heterodox point of view. Heterodox or post-Keynesian journals, with a few exceptions in some countries, are rarely considered to be highly ranked. If younger scholars were to strictly follow the advice of Peter Earl, it would lead to the disappearance of some of these journals and to a highly-reduced flow of articles based on heterodox economics, and hence a reduction in the pluralism of economics output.⁴ Furthermore, a successful career in terms of promotions and remuneration within mainstream economics is not necessarily conducive to well-being. There are instances of economists with heterodox beliefs, who choose to work with mainstream models, but whose health was badly affected by this inconsistency. It might be better, as old behavioural economists would say, to pursue a 'satisficing' strategy.⁵

Earl himself, as is clear from his bibliography, did not follow his own pieces of advice. As he says, he did not compromise his 'key academic principles as a researcher and teacher' (p. 350). On the teaching front, he relentlessly examined his students through open-ended questions, despite the complaints of some of his students who were used to deterministic answers or to multiple-choice questions. He pursued the research topics in which he was interested: behavioural economics following the heterodox approach, as applied to consumer theory, managerial theory, cost-plus pricing theory and even macroeconomics; methodology and the future of heterodox economics; an examination of the economics of G.L.S. Shackle and of Herbert Simon; and he wrote two books on monetary economics. I discovered that Peter Earl had written *Monetary Scenarios* (1990b), a book of which I was totally unaware despite the fact that monetary economics is my main field and despite the fact that the book

4. Indeed, there are examples of well-established journals, especially when printed in languages other than English, which have disappeared, for lack of submitted articles, because the students of those running these journals were told that they would not get tenure unless they published in highly-ranked US journals. For instance, in Canada, *L'Actualité économique*, a journal in which all the famous French-Canadian economists of the past had published, folded after 96 years of existence.

5. Imad Moosa (2024) underlines the detrimental consequences of the 'publish or perish' rat race, in particular due to the demands to publish in 'good' journals.

benefitted from several book reviews. This demonstrates how difficult it can be to keep up with the literature!

Beyond Misbehaving reads almost like a novel. It is really an entertaining book, full of enlightening anecdotes, which is hard to put away. Older post-Keynesian scholars will recognize several of the characters that they have met through the years. Besides the lessons of the last chapter, younger scholars will learn how a proficient and prolific researcher has constructed an eclectic research programme and how links can be made between various research traditions. They will learn a lot about the contents and the modern evolution of 'old' behavioural economics. They will meet an advocate of behavioural economics who believes that both its old and new versions, but mostly the former, can be combined with post-Keynesian and evolutionary economics and contribute to their improvement.

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