

Towards rethinking economics in South Africa: reflections on REFA

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This article complements Stephanie Craig’s insightful look at the status of economics in South African universities (see pg 22). The writers give us an insider’s view of the Rethinking Economics Festival (REFA) that took place at the University of the Witwatersrand in September. It questions the narrow, technical approach that has

been adopted by economics departments in universities and the neoclassical (and, in recent decades, neoliberal) assumptions that are the foundation of this approach. Importantly though, it sketches a new vista that is opening for the teaching of economics, thanks to a vibrant coalition of students, activists, academics and civil society organisations.

In his seminal book, “Capital in the 21st Century”, Thomas Piketty wrote,

To put it bluntly, the discipline of economics has yet to get over its childish passion for mathematics and for purely theoretical and often highly ideological speculation, at the expense of historical research and collaboration with the other social sciences. Economists are all too often preoccupied with petty mathematical problems of interest only to themselves. This obsession with mathematics is an easy way of acquiring the appearance of scientificity without having to answer the far more complex questions posed by the world we live in (2012: 36).

As we reflect on ten years since the 2008 global financial crisis, Piketty’s criticism of mainstream economics, dominated broadly by the neoclassical school, is particularly relevant as the prescriptions and theories of mainstream economists are increasingly challenged in public discourse. Despite this, many universities and government



departments have yet to shed their obsession with mathematical representations of the “economic problem” of our era. Neoclassical economics continues to dominate the economics curricula with discredited policy choices, such as austerity, still on the agenda for South African government policymakers.

There has, however, been a growing call to “rethink” the discipline, something embodied by both the student-led movement, *Rethinking Economics*, as well as the academic-led *Reteaching Economics*. While these movements began in the UK, they have direct relevance to South Africa where much of economics almost slavishly follows the same curriculum as the majority of US and European universities.

At most universities, the core curriculum (usually a series of compulsory modules on macro and micro economics) is predominantly based on the assumptions of the neoclassical school. With scarce regard for the evolution of economic thought, this is presented as a *value-free truth*, the only approach to economics, rather than just one specific, partial and narrow perspective.

Alternative schools of thought, like Marxist, feminist, ecological or Keynesian perspectives, are brushed over if taught at all. In addition, the absence of historical sociology or political economy means that it is extremely difficult for undergraduate students to conceive of solutions to contemporary South African social and economic problems or even develop a basic understanding thereof. The curriculum presents complex problems such as wage or income inequality, the provision of basic services or poverty as a function of narrow, technical problems often requiring micro interventions.

Indeed, “the economy” itself is taught as something limited, narrow and technical rather than the complex,

interrelated system that it is. Teaching the economy this way ignores how a myriad of other factors are involved in the construction of a capitalist economy. These could range from the wielding of public power through states or corporations, the forces of social reproduction to the role of the environment and nature. Effective approaches to public policy are hence also stymied, as the political and social dimensions of macro policy, for example, are rarely considered. As a result, economics in South Africa is marked by a series of tensions between the dominant norms and traditions of the discipline and the credible and growing challenges posed to it by our very real social and economic problems, which are now close to crisis point.

The implications of this stretch far beyond undergraduate, or even postgraduate, education as students

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move out of university and into corporate, government or policy roles. Not only are they poorly equipped to adapt to working outside of academia, they have a highly limited understanding of what is at stake in questions of the economy and the few tools to address these.

It is in this context that the Institute for African Alternatives (IFAA), alongside partner organisations including the Institute for Economic Justice (IEJ), hosted the inaugural *Rethinking Economics for Africa (REFA)* festival in September 2018.

The festival brought together academics, students, activists, policymakers, researchers and members of the public for a discussion about the present and future of economic thinking, teaching and public debate in South Africa with the aim of contributing to the building of a more just and equal society. We present here a summary of IFAA’s work at the festival alongside personal reflections on the broader question of what it means for a fundamental rethink of economics.

THE FESTIVAL STRUCTURE AND IFAA’S STREAMS

The festival was subdivided into five streams across a range of interlinked topics. IFAA staff were responsible for conceptualising two streams, which they jointly developed with the *Rethinking Economics for Africa (REFA)* student organisation at the University of the Witwatersrand. The first stream was titled, “*An Economics curriculum for contemporary African realities*” and aimed to explore what sort of economics discipline is best suited to contemporary South African and African realities while questioning whether our current economic curricula satisfies these needs.

The stream began with a session that allowed students from across the country to present their ideas about what does and does not explain the material reality of life in their communities or country. This was followed by a workshop on understanding Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which not only critically reconceptualised how we measure progress and development but also reimaged the pedagogical methods we use to teach key economic concepts. The question of pluralism and how it is understood by South African academic economists as well as how the curricula impacts on graduates entering the workplace were also discussed.

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One of the most relevant topics was the proposed new economics curriculum: the Curriculum Open Access Resources in Economics project (CORE). CORE is an internationally-developed, open-access economics curriculum which is being adopted at the University of Cape Town and the University of the Witwatersrand and piloted at a variety of other South African universities. While CORE addresses some of the critiques of how economics has been taught, it has been argued that it doesn't go far enough to address the fundamental questions contained in the critique of the discipline.

The second stream, “*Pluralism and Political Economy*,” presented the rich and diverse historical roots of economics, which have been largely ignored in the discipline since the latter part of the 20th century. The stream criticised the narrow, mathematically loaded approaches that presume to depict how the economy operates. In this stream, discussions explored how economics can adopt a more pluralist approach; what economics can learn from philosophy, sociology, social theory and statistics; as well as the under-theorisation of colonialism in Africa's underdevelopment. It also hosted a workshop on Fanon and class-formation in post-colonial Africa and a

discussion on Marxism in Africa. One of the highlights of the programme was a lively debate on whether markets are really efficient from a neoclassical, post-Keynesian and Marxist approach.

In addition to vigorous contestation on the content, this was a prime example of how students can be taught in different ways about the key assumptions of other schools and be stimulated to engage with them, something which we would hope can be duplicated in formal classroom settings.

STUDENTS AND THE MOVEMENT

The REFA festival and the broader movement, Rethinking Economics for Africa, did not emerge in a vacuum. The 2015 #FeesMustFall movement presented many challenges to universities for solving the serious problems that South Africans face in their daily lives. The festival reflected on these challenges in its programme. IFAA and IEJ felt that it was imperative that a wide selection of student voices



were heard at the festival. To this end, sponsorships were made available to 30 students and young activists from nine universities across the country to join students from Wits and the University of Johannesburg (UJ). A key component of the festival was to give students an equal voice in discussions, not as a mere token of representation but out of a strong belief that students and young people are often confined to the margins in these discussions. This often results in learning processes that are far removed from the experiences of a significant segment of our country's population.

Prior to the festival, IFAA, IEJ, REFA, Wits and UJ held a workshop centred around student perspectives on the state of curricula in South Africa. Students outlined the content of the current curricula; their lack of application at undergraduate level; their highly abstract nature; their apparent lack of grounding in African realities; the paucity of African economists and scholars in the curricula; the lack of exposure to other fields; and a host of other issues. This session helped students form an understanding of the status quo and exposed them to similar struggles faced at other universities.

The organisers of the festival realise that its broad aims will only be achieved by linking various social groups who want to see the transformation of economics as a whole. This means working with progressive forces in civil society, sympathetic academics and all those who are supportive of the call to *rethink economics*. Students recognise that the transformation of economics curricula and economics in general will not be a quick process. Accordingly, they identified a set of actions that they can carry out to facilitate the process and supplement what they believe to be missing in the curricula. These include the hosting of workshops, seminars,

reading groups, public debates and many others.

Over the course of the inaugural REFA festival, students from across South African universities and beyond were engaged in meetings, workshops and debates centred on the current state of economics and potential alternatives. The solutions that students collectively developed have been compiled and are presented here as a call to action for rethinking economics for Africa:

- **“Organise students in our universities to engage in the process of Rethinking Economics for Africa by forming societies to supplement the existing curriculum and challenge the status quo.** Organise reading groups, talks, conferences, debates and panels. Involve other organisations and activists to grow a movement for Rethinking Economics for Africa.
- **Promote Pluralism: the teaching and application of different schools of thought and ways of thinking about problems inside and outside our universities.** Demand curriculum reform to include the history of economic thought and courses on different schools of thought.



It is imperative to also ask the deeper, philosophical questions about what purpose economics serves in our contemporary economy.

- **Challenge the curriculum so that it is critical and relevant.** Challenge the neoclassical dominance of economic practice in our universities and in society by being critical. Demand that essay writing forms a crucial part of the curriculum to build on qualitative skills and move away from the existing mathematical obsession in the syllabus. Introduce a critical thinking course in the curriculum and advocate for the curriculum to be critical throughout.
- **Decolonise economics curricula.** Have a component that includes African thinkers and professors that is rooted in the everyday experiences of South Africans, one that empowers us to solve the problems that we face. Practical assignments need to be given out to allow the students to develop an informed viewpoint of the South African economy
- **Democratise economics by making it accessible to members of society, drawing knowledge from the ground up.** Engage with civil society, communities and activists of all stripes in a bilateral educational process. Demystify economic discourses to empower all citizens.”

This call to action is indicative of a student body that wants to be critically engaged with the state of economics in South Africa and situate it in the realities of the many South Africans who are currently excluded from the economics discourse, despite forming an integral part of the economy. To democratise economics means abandoning the top-down approach that has historically characterised the discipline and to rescue universities from being sites of elite knowledge production towards a transformative agenda. The call for concrete links between various stakeholders reinforces this radical departure from the status quo.



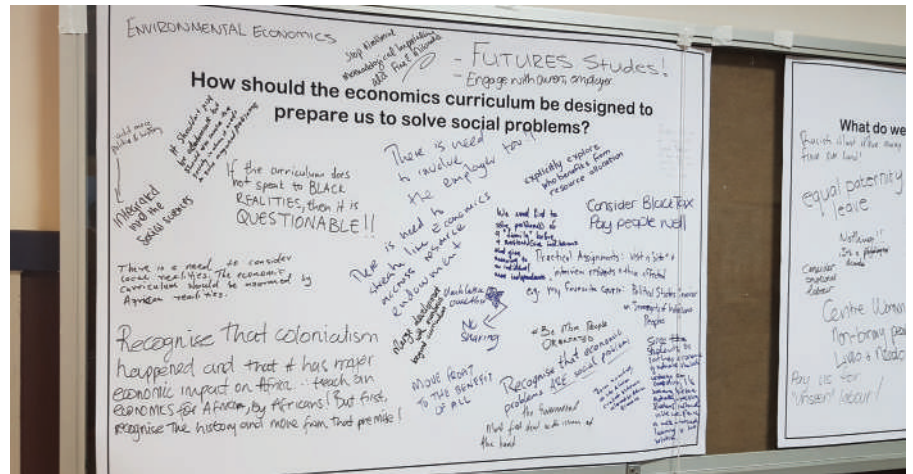
To paraphrase UK Rethinking Economics student leader Samiah Anderson, in contrast to the caricature of millennial youths, students are asking to be taught *more*, not less. The REFA student movement provides a solid foundation for the post #FeesMustFall student activism landscape: it has a clear programme, it has begun forging concrete links and is committed to bringing about change in both the university and broader society.

GOING FORWARD

A snapshot of the South African economy in 2018 compels us to rethink economic policy in this country. One way to do this is to ensure that the next generation of economists and policymakers are trained in a broad, contextually grounded and pluralist way. While the development of REFA organisations, the adoption of CORE and the hosting of the REFA festival are necessary and promising developments, it would be wrong to conceive of change in a narrow technical fashion that looks for easy, palliative responses to the deeper problems. It is crucial to understand how economics departments have become embedded in a particular neoliberal ideological paradigm for reasons that relate to global structures affecting higher education as a whole.

Changing university curricula requires understanding how they fit into this broader paradigm. The use of American textbooks, American models and even the types of research produced by university departments are not merely metaphysical concerns. Rather they are bound up in a structural project with a set of unequal material interests. Ironically this is something that the economics curriculum prevents most students from grasping.

This structure is also not limited to economics. Rather, it is at the core of how higher education has developed under neoliberalism, intrinsically



bound up in a global trend towards managerialism and corporatisation at universities disguised as striving for *excellence* and *global relevance*. As Andrew Nash points out, “The pursuit of excellence seeks to create an academic equivalent for the ideology of the market, in which value can be quantified precisely, although not always by monetary value” (2013: 43).

Excellence, within this paradigm, has a particular meaning with strictly administered boundaries and measurements that are not conceived in relation to the pursuit of truth, knowledge or “the good life” but rather to finding work in a competitive labour market. Nash argues that, “In this way, excellence allowed higher education to become compatible with the needs of capitalism” (2013: 44). This pursuit of “excellence and global relevance” has had huge implications for universities in the Global South. It has meant conforming to these ‘global standards’ even if it is at the expense of a curriculum grounded in local realities.

In this way, excellence encourages academics to take on norms and problems which are not their own and which, all too often, they can understand only at a remove — in the way that someone understands instructions given from above rather than projects formed for yourself. Someone from a poorer country, when seeking excellence in this global

context, learns to speak in a voice that resembles that of an audience they may never have encountered, or may have encountered only on brief visits to the global centres, rather than finding ways of engaging with the communities in which they work and live and the traditions developed in their own societies. In short, excellence brings the cost of a systematic alienation of the intellect” (Nash, 2013: 50).

It is imperative to also ask the deeper, philosophical questions about what purpose economics serves in our contemporary economy and in the citadels of knowledge. Why do we teach economics at our universities? What is the study of economics about? Which objectives do we want to achieve from teaching students economics? How do we define the standards or criteria for evaluation? On what ethical or moral foundation do we ground these? Whose interests are served by the way the discipline is taught? It is through attempting to answer these questions that we can truly begin to rethink economics for Africa.

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