

The internationalization of economic ideas. A search for connecting principles¹

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Abstract. The processes of internationalization of economic ideas, in particular those associated with the transmission, assimilation and appropriation in scientific peripheral and semi peripheral countries of ideas originally produced in other spaces, are an important aspect of how economics as a science develops at a global scale. However, in spite of its relevance, knowledge of these processes is still relatively incipient. Explaining the international diffusion of economic ideas entails choosing some sort of connecting principle(s). This paper discusses this issue and attempts to put forward a broader connecting principle than the ones currently available, which is based on the idea that economics is a network of institutionally situated conversations.

Keywords: Connecting principles, international diffusion of ideas, assimilation/appropriation, intellectual peripheries, economics, conversation

JEL Classification: B00

[es] La internacionalización de las ideas económicas. Una búsqueda de principios de conexión

Resumen. Los procesos de internacionalización de ideas económicas, en particular aquellos asociados con la transmisión, la asimilación y la apropiación de ideas en los países científicos periféricos y semi-periféricos producidas originalmente en otros lugares, son un aspecto importante de cómo la economía como ciencia se desarrolla a escala global. Sin embargo, a pesar de su importancia, el conocimiento de estos procesos es todavía relativamente incipiente. La explicación de la difusión internacional de ideas económicas requiere la selección de algún tipo del principio(s) conector(es). Este artículo trata este tema e intenta proponer un más amplio principio de unión que los actualmente disponibles, basado en la idea que la economía es una red de conversaciones institucionalmente situadas.

Palabras clave: Principios conectores, difusión de ideas internacionales, asimilación/apropiación, periferias intelectuales, economía, conversación

Clasificación JEL: B00

I have always known that the words of others help me to think. Quotations (and misquotations), asides, seemingly dead ends, explorations and rummagings, retracing one's steps and leaping ahead — all seem to me valid instruments for inquiry.

Alberto Manguel, *Curiosity* (Yale University Press, 2015, 83)

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1. Introduction

History of economics textbooks are, in general, histories of the contributions considered to have been decisive in the formation of economics as a scientific discipline, i.e. they are largely histories of the scientific contributions to knowledge at the core of the economics profession. The histories of economics in peripheral and semi peripheral countries, like Portugal or Spain, are usually neglected. The implicit assumption is that economics is a “universal”, increasingly global science, and that, as such, giving attention to the national realities of the intellectual peripheries would be somewhat expendable.

This paper starts from a different belief. The processes of internationalization of economic ideas, in particular those associated with the transmission, reception, assimilation and appropriation in scientific peripheral and semi peripheral countries of ideas originally produced in other spaces, are an important aspect of how economics as a science develops at a global scale. Histories of economics in those countries are relevant, not only from a national point of view, but as an input for the historiography of economics in general. Place, travel and assimilation/appropriation are fundamental keywords —and, in the end, as I will show, institutions, networks and conversations.

The making of economics at intellectual peripheries is, to a large extent, a history of international transmission of economic ideas (doctrines, theories, methods/techniques and policy recommendations), practices and institutions (Mäki, 1996). The study of their histories thus provides a better knowledge of how economic ideas and practices circulate at an international scale and allow us to check how globalization is having an impact at the national level.

Unfortunately, in spite of a significant amount of work already done, our knowledge of these matters is still relatively incipient. Several studies have attempted to model processes of international diffusion and appropriation, but we are far from a comprehensive (“general”) historiographical framework allowing for an *explanation* of the occurrences of invention, importation, acceptance, rejection and assimilation/modification/appropriation of economic ideas in intellectually peripheral or semi peripheral countries. In particular:

- What factors in general affect knowledge circulation?
- Why are some foreign influences accepted (to varying degrees) and others rejected?
- Under what circumstances is the original content of imported theories modified or retained?
- How do “internal” and “external” factors condition (promoting, prohibiting or hindering) the international dissemination of economic knowledge?

A mere description of “facts” is not enough. As Vicent Llombart (1995, 32) noted, “We need the help of theoretical models with a capacity to explain the phenomenon of the spread of ideas”. Historical writing is an explanatory endeavor (Mäki, 1996). It is a search for the *mode of production* of phenomena —looking for its *real causes (determining factors)* or *conditions of possibility* and its *generating mechanisms*. In the human realm this entails identifying and understanding the social structures, relationships, capacities and other real conditions that govern, facilitate, or in some way produce, actual relevant social events and states of affairs.

This raises the crucial issue of the role and significance of the connecting principles one chooses to construct models. Adam Smith ([1795]1980) and, more recently, Brian Loasby (1991, 1999, 2005) have taught us that, in order to make sense of what we experience, we invent connecting principles, i.e. organizing ideas and concepts, interpretative frameworks, conjectures about reality that link together phenomena in our minds. I will try to show that *each model of the international diffusion of economic ideas presupposes a different set of (often merely implicit) connecting principles (and metaphors)*, hence the relevance of focusing attention on them.

In a certain sense this is an exercise in putting old wine in new bottles. However, it will, it is hoped, contribute to redirect attention to a fundamental issue in the endeavor of explaining the international diffusion and appropriation of economic thought: the connecting principles underlying the models we build. Moreover, it is expected that it may contribute to guide empirical research on this important issue.

The paper is structured as follows. In the next section, the national/global tension in economics occupies center stage. Afterwards, in

section 3, a brief overview of the relevant literature on the diffusion of economic ideas is provided. In section 4 I show why the choice of connecting principles is so crucial in the modeling of the processes of international diffusion and appropriation of economic ideas. In section 5 the “economics as conversation” metaphor is explored as a basis for a broader framework for the analysis of those processes. Some concluding remarks in section 6 close the paper.

2. The national/global tension in economics

Economics is a plural and complex science, subject to different methodological approaches and constructions not independent from the historical, social and cultural circumstances conditioning them. The vision of economics as a “universal” science, with a unified set of true and absolute concepts and universal procedures of analysis, is misleading. Economics is a heterogeneous space where multiple languages, metaphors, and conversations converge and compete.

Economic theories are often (but not always)³ developed at a “core”, which is itself “locally” shaped, they travel and are assimilated/appropriated in other, peripheral and semi peripheral, contexts and settings⁴. As Almodovar and Cardoso (1998, 2) nicely put the issue:

³ The structuralist approach originated in Latin America with authors such as Raul Prebisch and Celso Furtado being a case in point.

⁴ The terms “periphery” and “semi periphery” are usually applied to classify the economic, political and intellectual realities of some countries and regions. Often, they are used in a very loose way. Almodovar and Cardoso (1998) and Cardoso (2002) considered that a country is intellectually peripheral in economics if it occupies a permanently or quasi-permanently subordinate position, never reaching, or only very episodically drawing close to, the front line of the creation of economic theories. In turn, Bastien and Cardoso (2003, 39) referred to semi-peripheral countries as those intermediate situations between the two extreme types (“core” and “periphery”) whose distinctive character is “their willingness to accept influences from both sides, preserving a certain degree of autonomy and identity”. More precisely, and drawing also on Mäki (1996), we may say that identifying a country as part of the intellectual periphery or semi periphery in economics *within a given period of time* has to be decided in terms of, simultaneously, its (i) *propensity to import* ideas; (ii) the *time lag* it takes between the adoption of ideas in the originating and in the importing country; (iii) the *degree of modification* (appropriation) of ideas in the importing country; (iv) the *willingness of the country to accept influences from both sides*; and (v) its *degree of autonomy and identity*. It is thus not simply a matter of being a net importer or exporter of ideas; the specific contribution of the receiving country and its capacity also to generate influence abroad are crucial.

Economic science has no homeland, though it is represented and conveyed through different tongues, anthems and flags. But, as it is the work of scientists, we cannot ignore the fact that this homeless quest creates links between a huge number of people (researchers, teachers). Although these people are united by a common pursuit of knowledge, they are nevertheless spread all around the world, giving factual existence to schools and other particular institutional environments where science is actually produced and nurtured.

Economics is institutionally situated. Economic ideas are “locally” produced, assimilated and appropriated, in accordance with social, economic, political, cultural, academic and educational conditions, and are expressed in different “locally” shaped ways. Economic ideas circulate internationally and this is not just a matter of *transmission* of ideas produced at the core of the profession to more or less passive receivers on the periphery (a mere case of unidirectional export of ideas from the core to the periphery). Ideas tend to be actively *appropriated* (and as such somewhat produced) in peripheral and semi peripheral countries (Gavroglu *et al.*, 2008). They are institutionally-specific and acquire a national dimension. It is therefore imperative, as Cardoso (1997, 208) claimed, *to analyze the processes that are at the origin of a diversity of national forms and contents of economic thought*⁵.

However, either an exclusively transmission-focused approach (a “historiography of transmission”) or a renovated “historiography of appropriation” (Gavroglu *et al.*, 2008) would be partial and biased. As Marion Fourcade (2006) rightly noted, although we tend to see the internationalization of economics largely as a unidirectional process going from the core to the periphery, a trend towards transnationalization/ globalization is taking place in economics with the very nature of economic knowledge and the jurisdictional control of the economics profession being dynamically reshaped and transformed *both at the core and on the periphery*. The end result of this process, it might be expected, will be “a form of institutional and intellectual convergence between the econom-

⁵ As Argemí (2006, 167) accurately pointed out, the “national” term should be understood here as related to the economic thought of a given cultural, political or legal area in relation to the development of economic thinking in the rest of the world, not to any specific entity of political right.

ics professions in peripheral countries and those at the center, as foreigners and foreign-trained professionals increasingly penetrate local institutions, and as these institutions try to emulate dominant foreign models” (Fourcade, 2006, 152).

Anyway, this does not exclude the asymmetric nature of the relationships established at an international scale. Economics must be understood as a complex *intellectual and institutional system of interacting ideas and practices* in which the asymmetric connections between the “core” and the “peripheries” (and their respective *conditions of production* of economic ideas) are paramount.

3. Modeling the international diffusion of economic ideas: the state of the art

Let us now proceed with a brief overview of the relevant literature on the international diffusion of economic ideas. The first systematic incursion into this subject (Letiche, 1955) took place in the mid-1950s at a session of the annual conference of the American Economic Association specifically organized to discuss the topic, with papers by T. W. Hutchison (1955), J. Dorfman (1955), and comments by J. Letiche, G. Hildebrand and W. Jaffé. These works provided heuristic guidelines for the study of the conditions and factors (favorable, accelerating or obstructive) influencing the diffusion of economic ideas (Cardoso, 2003).

Hutchison’s views are particularly noteworthy as he believed that “[w]ith the vastly increased number of translations and of widely circulating specialist journals, including international journals, and with the increasingly mathematical character of advanced economic analysis”, it would be “very unlikely that good new ideas, whenever or wherever they do arise, will not have a reasonably fair chance of being heard and of making their way” (Hutchison, 1955, 14-15).

Such an optimistic (and “universalistic”) view was contested at the time (e.g. Letiche, 1955) and on other occasions thereafter (see Lluch 1999). Several constraints to the smooth exchange of economic ideas, namely those related to the development of the media of transmission, the existence of enduring disequilibrium relationships between exporting and importing countries, and the specificities of economic realities, social and political insti-

tutions, and scientific environments of the latter countries, have been pointed out (Cardoso, 2003, 625).

Since the 1950s several works and case studies have been published on the international flow of economic ideas. This is not the time or the place to recapitulate all this literature⁶. For my purpose here, it suffices to look, in a very selective way, to a few representative instances in order to assess its nature and highlight the relevance of choosing appropriate connecting principles for an explanation of the processes of internationalization of economic ideas, practices and institutions.

Coats and Colander’s (1989) *The Spread of Economic Ideas* is a landmark in this endeavor although it does not give direct relevance to the issue of the international diffusion of ideas. In the introduction to this book, their editors consider three models for the study of the spread of economic ideas: (i) the infectious disease model; (ii) the model of the market for ideas; and (iii) the information theory model.

In the infectious disease (or epidemiological) model the dissemination of ideas is likened to the spread of a *disease* (e.g. AIDS). The focus is on the contacts between individuals and groups (as if “points of contagion”) and on the incentives and barriers to the propagation of ideas.

The model of the market for ideas considers the dissemination of ideas in terms of supply of and demand for ideas, and the competition among them, as if these were *commodities* transacted in a market. Economists are seen as optimizing agents pursuing some goal —be it truth, attention, recognition, access to funding, status, income, fame or some such— which they try to maximize under constraints (costs). The focus is again on the incentives to the dissemination and reception of ideas, but now based on the application of the economists’ conventional framework to the analysis of a reputational science.

The information theory model sees the processes of transmission, selection and adaptation of economic ideas in terms of *information theory*. The focus in this case goes to the analysis of the four elements of a communication process: the *source* of ideas; the *receiver* (and

⁶ For those interested, Cardoso (2003; 2009) are excellent references.

its milieu); the *content* transmitted and the *media* (or channel) of transmission.

Mäki (1996) provides an important development of this model, namely with his emphasis on the need to distinguish internal and external factors at different levels (theoretical/non theoretical within the cognitive aspect of science; cognitive/non cognitive within science; and science/non science within society), each of them leading to the consideration of a different object of historiographical explanation and, of course, to a different approach—“cognitive”, “scientific” or “societal”—to the analysis of the role of internal versus external factors in the development of economic thought.

Previously, Ernest Lluch (1980) had already taken a significant step forward in the study of the international flow of economic ideas by linking it to a variety of national processes of assimilation and appropriation, which justify the relevance given to the national histories of economic thought (Lluch, 1999, develops and improves this initial innovative move).

José Luís Cardoso must also be mentioned as a key reference here. For a long time now (e.g. 1997, 2002, 2003 and 2017), he has been emphasizing the need to adopt a *comparative approach* to the analysis of different national experiences. In his view, “it is in the diagnosis of national problems and in their resolution that innovative and genuinely national forms of economic thought emerge” (Cardoso, 1997, 214). The national perspective, Cardoso and Lluch (1999, 478) jointly stated, “introduces a number of additional details and makes it possible to develop and modify the theories and doctrines that are appropriated and used.”

Cardoso (1997, 226-227, and 2002, 143) explicitly detailed a whole program of research, which included:

(i) Assessing the levels of understanding, familiarization and misrepresentation in the importing countries of the concepts, principles and theoretical relationships developed at the core;

(ii) Analyzing the processes of reception, assimilation, adaptation and social appropriation of the economic discourse produced abroad, taking into account the social and economic specificities of the recipient country;

(iii) Studying the institutional and technical mechanisms for the dissemination and access to economic discourse (quantity and quality of translations; circulation and reading rates of national and foreign bibliography;

ease or otherwise of access to relevant journals; mastery of foreign languages; conditions for the establishment of international contacts; linguistic adaptations, etc.);

(iv) Analyzing the conditions of production and dissemination of economic knowledge and practices;

(v) Studying the processes of formation and gradual enrichment of a tradition (or various traditions) of economic thought and explaining its repercussions over time.

Several empirical works have been developed over the past few decades on the study of the diffusion and appropriation of economic ideas at an international scale (e.g. Hall, 1989; Llombart, 1995; Bastien and Cardoso, 2003; Girón, 2006; Montecinos and Markoff, 2009; or, more recently, Cunha and Suprinyak, 2017).

Llombart’s work was particularly noteworthy. It analyses the reception of physiocracy in Spain explicitly based on a market for ideas approach (complemented by other contributions, namely those coming from the information theory model). In this study the reasons why economic ideas circulate—being accepted, ignored, modified or rejected in a given historical period—are found in the logic of a *demand-driven “special” market for ideas*. These are considered to be exogenously determined and to have characteristics of a “pure public good” (as such not having a price). It is assumed that ideas spread according to a *logic of “consumer’s choice”*, based on considerations of *utility* and *transaction costs* (conditioned by “institutional, political and administrative variables” as well as by “feelings and passions”).

A second study that I would like to emphasize here is the one by Carlos Bastien and José Luís Cardoso (2003)⁷ as it studies a more unusual case—the diffusion of ideas and techniques from the periphery (Latin American) to a semi peripheral European country (Portugal)—and adopts a substantively different approach. Bastien and Cardoso highlight, through a comparative analysis of Latin American structuralist and developmentalist ideas, concepts, analytical tools and policy recommendations and the corresponding ones in Portugal, the proximities and differences between the economic thought at the origin and at the importing country and outline an explanation of the diffusion process based on the political, economic and academic conditions and features of the latter. This study

⁷ See also Cardoso (2009).

can be thought of as an instance of what Bastien, in his PhD thesis (Bastien, 1989), called a “Critical and Explanatory” or “Sociological” History. According to Bastien⁸, national cases should be understood as “fields” (in the sense of Bourdieu)⁹, and studied as socially and culturally determined, demand-driven markets for ideas. By highlighting the working of those scientific fields we should be able to define the needs and conditions for the import of ideas. Export of ideas would, obviously, follow different rules.

Taking stock of all this literature, we may say that, in spite of all relevant developments—both theoretical and empirical—we are far from a “general theory, or even specific theory, about how ideas spread”¹⁰. However, against Llombar’s (1995, 32) claim, “[t]he lack of generally accepted models, and even skepticism as to their full viability often shown by the principal scholars in the subject”, instead of being “a serious difficulty”, is, as I will try to show in the next section, inevitable. A “general” theory may be just a utopia that leads us to go on walking and searching for better connecting principles.

4. The structuring role of connecting principles

Knowing is establishing connections, creating categories and imagining patterns and causal linkages between them as representations of the world. As Loasby has consistently argued over a considerable time span, “knowledge grows through a fallible process of making connections” (2001, 398) and “wherever we start *there are, in principle, very many directions in which we may look for connections*” (*ibid.*, 401, emphasis added), “each move opens up a new set of possibilities” (*ibid.*), that is, we work “in large combinatorial spaces” (2003, 301).

Knowing is a *fallible* and *plural* connecting process. Our knowledge is inevitably partial and incomplete. Error is unavoidable and coordination of different contributions to knowledge indispensable. A well-developed science is a dense network of inter-connected propositions about a set of phenomena, a set of connections that grows by making novel connections (sometimes involving destroying and

substituting other connections). Like a rope, such a network is stronger than each of its constituting links (“any one strand breaking will not bring down the edifice” [Dow, 2012, 222]).

Thus, Loasby’s (2001, 401) conclusion that “the best way to improve knowledge is to encourage many people to imagine connections, and to try to arrange that different people will imagine different connections “seems appropriate. Of course, such a pluralist approach does not dispense with the need to decide which options should be accepted and developed and which must simply be discarded or modified.

Crucial here is the way we *organize* ideas in order to make sense of the world in which we live, that is, what concepts and *connecting principles* (or interpretative frameworks) we imagine (and adopt) in order to link together phenomena in our minds.

The choice of connecting principles is obviously central in the modeling of the processes of international exchange of economic ideas. Let us see why by returning to the three models of the spread of economic ideas considered in Coats and Colander (1989).

It is manifest that each of these models presupposes a different set of connecting principles, a different interpretative framework. Ideas are in turn likened to a “disease”, “information” or “commodities” and treated as such. As a result we are led to “see” different things. We build different “realities”. Each model highlights a relevant aspect (or aspects) of the international diffusion and “local” appropriation of economic ideas. However, it is also the case that each of them conceals or distorts significant aspects or dimensions of these processes. The analogy made between the diffusion of an idea and the propagation of a disease, for example, obscures the fact that while a disease spreads regardless of our will, ideas can be voluntarily accepted, modified or rejected. The epidemiological model excludes the volitional dimension involved in the spread of ideas. Also, in treating ideas as commodities and by putting the emphasis on the metaphor of economists as consumers and adopting categories such as marginal utility, transaction costs and consumer’s choice, the model of the market for ideas, although catching relevant dimensions of scientific activity, misses, distorts and even corrupts some important features, experiences and meanings of the practice of economics as a science, as also happens when the market metaphor is applied to nonmarket decisions such as constituting a

⁸ Personal exchange (email dated from 7 March 2017).

⁹ See Bourdieu (1976).

¹⁰ Intentionally, I use here the words that Coats and Colander (1989, 15) wrote to assess the state of the art at the time. The situation, in this regard, has not changed significantly.

family, becoming involved in politics, donating blood or relating to friends.

The point I wish to emphasize here is that by adopting different connecting principles (and metaphors), that is, different ways of organizing phenomena—different *sets of elements* and/or different *links* between them—we are led to different *ways of dealing with* the international circulation of actors, worldviews, scientific theories and models, professional practices and policy recommendations. Their discussion is therefore of utmost importance.

5. Towards a broader connecting principle: economics as a network of institutionally situated conversations

A set of principles should be as comprehensive as possible¹¹. Also, if our theories are to have some sort of connection with reality, our principles should be conceived so that a maximum degree of *ontological integrity*¹² is preserved. Hence, in this section an attempt is made to explore a broader (and, it is hoped, ontologically sounder) framework, based on the idea that economics is everywhere a “bunch of conversations” (Klamer, 2007, 15) and increasingly a global network of institutionally situated conversations.

The conversation metaphor, as developed by Klamer (2007), is obviously focused on the idea of “conversation “but, I submit, has the potential to capture the essential *institutional* and *intellectual* dimensions of the processes we want to describe and explain. It puts the emphasis on the social, cultural and relational as well as the rhetorical and hermeneutic features of the practice of economics and allows us (or rather, it demands) to consider its institutional settings—the “local “specificities and the connections (the internal and the external factors that promote/inhibit/constrain the international travelling and assimilation/appropriation of ideas and practices).

The conversation metaphor may raise understandable skepticism, not only because of its colloquial connotations, as Klamer himself recognized, but because it would apparently

miss the *foundations* underpinning conversations. In spite of its undeniable charm, it would be, in the end, just “abundant foam that quickly fades”¹³.

However, I believe, the conversation metaphor (put in the context of relevant *networks, institutions* and *relations of power*)¹⁴ allows for a very broad framework. As Klamer (2007) shows, it involves the idea of science as a social process and, at the same time, draws attention to the linguistic, discursive and relational aspects of science. It allows us to look at the practice of building knowledge, but also taking into consideration a world of “passions, discriminations, incriminations and abuse” (*ibid.*, 15), as Klamer (1984) and the interviews contained in that famous book so vividly showed. A conversation encompasses both formal and informal forms of interaction, conversations in print (books and journal articles) as well as participation in conferences, writing and reading, rigorous formal (usually mathematical) argumentation but also gossiping, sharing of ideas (cooperation) and controversy/dissent (tension and conflict). To be part of a conversation requires a range of skills, the adequate diplomas, “the mastery of econspeak” (*ibid.*, 16) —that is, the use of the right vocabulary and rhetorical devices, a certain way of arguing—and, in the end, the ability to attract attention, be recognized and appreciated in the relevant network(s). It involves an art of speaking (rhetoric) and an art of listening and reading (hermeneutics).

Ideas only get attention if in a conversation. Conversations are attention spaces (Klamer, 2007, 55). Taking part in a conversation entails being part of a social and intellectual *community*.

Scientists cluster in universities, set up barriers to entry, organize professional associations in order to organize conferences and issue journals, constitute schools, subscribe to research programs, develop specialized research communities which will organize specialized conferences and issue specialized journals, and form networks of like-minded souls. All these institutions help to define, bolster or protect a space of

¹¹ “The more extensive the range of a set of principles [...] the better” (Loasby, 1991, 7).

¹² Ontological integrity is meant here to express the adequacy of our theorizing to the fundamental nature of the phenomena observed (see Oakley, 1999).

¹³ José Luis Cardoso (private conversation, email dated from 3 February 2017).

¹⁴ More on this below.

attention, that is, a concentration and intensification of signals interchanged. It helps explain why innovations in science are geographically localized and not evenly dispersed throughout the world (Klamer and van Dalen, 2002, 302).

Conversation, networks and institutions are the relevant keywords here.

Conversation in economics takes place in the context of various (and often overlapping) networks, that is, more or less hierarchical, fluid and dynamic structures of connections linking more or less far away nodes (individuals, schools, organizations, cultural, political or legal geographic areas) whose relative importance evolves over time. Those conversations usually reproduce and reinforce the networks in which they occur, but sometimes lead to dynamic instability and change. They are a source of continuity and transformation in the profession.

Conversations are institutionally molded. Institutions are here understood as “systems of established and prevalent social rules¹⁵ that structure social interactions” (Hodgson, 2006, 2)¹⁶. Institutions “enable ordered thought, expectation, and action by imposing form and consistency on human activities” (*ibid.*). That is, they constrain behavior (through social rules) but, at the same time, they enable choices and actions that otherwise would not be possible. They are a special type of enduring social structures with the potential to mold individual aspirations, capacities and purposes through the rules embedded in shared habits of thought and behavior. Since institutions constrain and mold individual action —“any single individual is born into a pre-existing institutional world” (*ibid.*, 7)— they are a source of continuity in social life (“they have strong self-reinforcing and self-perpetuating characteristics” (*ibid.*). But, at the same time, they depend, for their existence, upon the thoughts and activities of individuals, so they are not unchangeable. Institutions are simultaneously objective realities “out there” and inter-subjective mental models “in here” (shared, or at least mutually consistent, cognitive processes and habits of thought). Individual action and institutional structure, as Hodgson has made clear, although distinct, are

“connected in a circle of mutual interaction and interdependence” (*ibid.*, 8).

In spite of its significance, Klamer’s approach basically provides an inward-looking perspective of economics as a science. The political context in which the practices of economics occur, the implications of the increasing marketization of academia and the commodification of knowledge (tighter university budgets, pressures to fierce intra- and interuniversity competition, metric-based research assessment patterns), the molding role of funding structures and agencies, the structures of power conditioning economic research (not only within academia), the complex links established with governments, international organizations (such as the IMF, World Bank, OECD, ECB, etc.), think tanks and corporations, are all largely absent (or at least substantially neglected) from his writings.

Analyzing the international diffusion of economic ideas from a “network of conversations” point of view should not ignore these aspects. It must look at *how economic conversations work and develop* (on the national and the international scale) and this requires, if a proper explanation of these conversations is to be achieved, taking into account the economic, political, social and disciplinary *institutional* settings in which they occur.

The emphasis then goes to the characterization of “local” conversations and the kind of networks they demand, promote or prevent. This includes attention to the following aspects:

- i. The identification of relevant individuals and organizations¹⁷, their characteristics and positions in the global system of knowledge production *and* of the structure and dynamics of the (more or less hierarchical) relationships (the patterns of connections) individuals and organizations establish among them.
- ii. The explanation of how institutions, understood as the rules of the game¹⁸ —the overall institutional structure in which economic research takes place, including the structures of power (academic, economic, political) and

¹⁵ A social rule is “a socially transmitted and customary normative injunction or immanently normative disposition, that in circumstances X do Y” (Hodgson, 2006, 3).

¹⁶ Language, money, law, systems of weights and measures, table manners, firms and other organizations are the examples Hodgson (*ibid.*, 2) provides.

¹⁷ As Hodgson (2006, 8) maintained, “[o]rganizations are special institutions that involve (a) criteria to establish their boundaries and to distinguish their members from nonmembers, (b) principles of sovereignty concerning who is in charge, and (c) chains of command delineating responsibilities within the organization.”

¹⁸ Klamer and van Dalen (2002, 301) rightly acknowledge that “[i]nteraction based theories are [...] not sufficient to understand science, one also has to explain how institutions —the rules by which the game of science is played— come about and change.”

the funding schemes affecting the way economic research and teaching is organized and practiced— affect the conversation process.

iii. The identification in each country of the relevant “attention spaces” for economists’ work and the explanation of how these attention spaces condition their work, both at the core and on the peripheries. Understanding how attention is formed and distributed in the community of scientists is, as Klamer and van Dalen maintain, “the key to understanding the creation and diffusion of ideas” (2002, 296-297).

iv. An analysis of the elements of communication¹⁹, with a particular focus on the rhetoric and hermeneutic aspects of discourses (including attention to what fosters or hinders the construction of relationships at an international scale).

v. The meanings and values economists attribute to things and activities and the meanings and values they realize with their actions²⁰.

An approach such as this calls for a research strategy based on a variety of methods, from social network analysis to interviews and content analysis. Of course, it is only at the level of practice, of undertaking specific pieces of empirical research, that such a strategy may be further detailed.

6. Concluding remarks

In order to make sense of our world we cannot avoid inventing connecting principles. These are the basis of any explanatory endeavor. In this paper I have tried to show their relevance in building models of the international diffusion and appropriation of economic ideas, practices and institutions. Some structuring ideas have been put forward in the previous pages:

i. Economics is a complex, “locally”-shaped system of interacting ideas, practices and institutions. The connections established between the “core” and the “peripheries” of the profession are an important aspect of how economics as a science develops on a global scale.

ii. A “general” framework to explain the international diffusion/appropriation of economic ideas is still far from our reach and may be even unreachable.

iii. Knowing is a fallible and plural connecting process—a pluralist approach to knowledge is, then, justified.

iv. Any model of the international diffusion of economic ideas presupposes a given set of connecting principles. Different models usually entail different connecting principles.

v. Connecting principles should be as comprehensive as possible and conceived in order to preserve the maximum degree of ontological integrity.

vi. The idea of economics as a network of institutionally situated conversations may constitute a powerful basis for a broader and richer explanatory framework than the alternatives used so far. Approaching the internationalization of economic ideas from a “network of institutionally situated conversations” point of view is worthy of further elaboration and may provide relevant heuristic guidelines for new empirical work.

vii. Obviously, the “proof of the pudding”—the usefulness of the proposed framework—can only occur at the empirical level. Actually, it is my view that a richer and broader framework for the analysis of the historical process of internationalization of economics must come from a dynamic movement back and forth between theoretical-methodological elaboration and comparative analyses of empirical case studies.

Be that as it may, the exploratory nature of the present endeavor should be emphasized. Other connecting principles might be considered—it is the case of thinking the diffusion and appropriation of economic ideas as part of a complex system in which economics is seen as “a dynamic entity, which generates a self-reproducing, evolving, complex system of interacting ideas” (Colander *et al.*, 2004, 486)— and specific models developed. In this exercise the purpose was basically to discuss the significance of the connecting principles one adopts in the endeavor to build an adequate framework for the explanation of the processes of internationalization of economic ideas, practices and institutions.

The approach here espoused is pluralist. It does not preclude consideration of other possibilities. The advantage of starting from the idea of economics as a network of institutionally situated conversations (as outlined in this paper) is that it allows for the adoption of a very broad, multidimensional perspective.

¹⁹ As pointed out by the information theory model.

²⁰ “[T]he main purpose of studying the behavior of people is to sort out, interpret and characterize the meanings and values that people attribute to things and activities, and the meanings and values that they realize with their actions” (Klamer, 2016, 18)

7. References

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