Parallel Session 14: Science in daily press; a cultural question?

POPULARIZATION OF ECONOMICS THROUGH ARTICLES ABOUT "NEW ECONOMY" IN FRENCH NEWSPAPERS (1999-2000)

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Abstract

The increasing number of articles devoted to economics and especially to the «new economy» between 1999 and 2000 in France raises the question of the vulgarization of economics in the newspapers. We examined five French national daily newspapers, two weekly magazines, and one daily local newspaper between the years 1999 and 2000. We compared the newspapers contents with the articles of vulgarisation on natural science and economics. At last we studied the common points it shares with the hygienist literature of the 19th centuries.

Key Words: Vulgarisation, hygienics, economics

Text

Context: The expression « new economy », which is born in the middle of the 90’s in USA had been enormous media in France where it arrived at the end of the decade. Written articles on “new economy” are interesting because they represent a novelty both in terms of numbers and content of articles, then because they reconcile economics and economy describing a utopian world, a new hoped economy. We would like to determine to what “genre” these articles belong.

Methodology: We examined five French national daily newspapers (Le Monde, Le Figaro, Libération, L’Humanité, La Croix), two weekly magazines (l’Express, le Point), and one daily local newspaper (Le Parisien) for years 1999 and 2000. We choose to pick all articles where “nouvelle économie” was used in title or in body.

Results: What should be established at the very outset is that their content have many common points with the one of vulgarization articles on natural science.

First of all because they consider economics as equivalent to natural sciences: they quote figures, laws (Metcalf’s law, Moore’s law etc.) and famous economists, use charts and tables, technical terms, and neologisms. Secondly articles show the same rhetoric as scientific literature of vulgarisation: authors use paraphrases, analogies, metaphors etc., to simplify their account.

This vulgarization is nevertheless peculiar in many ways. In the first place articles on “new economy” and economical vulgarisation differ about three points:
Our articles never mention the whys of their interest in the “new economy”, whereas thirty years ago, every authors would have underscored the absolute necessity of economical vulgarisation. The standardization of the actual economic discourse is also new: two newspapers, as Liberation and Le Figaro which have obvious different political leanings display to us the same subjects, myths and metaphors and the same treatment.

Secondly we can also distinguish our literature on “new economy” from vulgarisation of natural science. To begin with, articles have a conflictual relationship with the science, they are supposed to popularise. Authors denigrate methods and forecasts of the professional economists, underscore that there are no consensus between economists, and put the “heterodox” economists forward. They also present economics as a harmless science (no “mad scientist” here) and which did not make any “progress” for a long time.

Style of articles also clashes with those of vulgarisation being quite normative: They often take form of advice and above all recommend action. They are also “oriented” and peremptory, using assertions, appreciations and questionable relationship of cause and effect to describe facts.

Theses particularities lead us to suppose that a comparison with the hygienist literature of the 19th would be appropriate. The historical links between the two genres tend to confirm this hypothesis.

The role of scientists in the two literatures is very close: he has to inform and convince the politics in order to make laws and to take decisions for people. He is the only one able to fix the system (economical or medical) and he has a responsibility toward the future that he has to improve for next generations.

In addition the literatures of vulgarisation in hygienics or economics have the same goal: to prevent the crisis, describe the first symptom of illness. They both over and above that used the same analogies and metaphors as those around mechanics. The body is thought in terms of circuit, pump, flow, belt, lever etc. as the country was describe in our articles.

**Conclusion:** The study of the press on new economy reveals possibly an explanation to the joint “rebellion” of the economic student about the teaching of the discipline and the blossoming of the anti-globalisation movement in France. The augmentation of the number of economical articles and the lost of the aura surrounding economics could be taken to mean that articles revealed to readers the domination of the neoclassic theory in the public discourse and cast doubt on the legitimacy of this omnipresence.

The comparison with hygienist literature is interesting in that it lighten the links between authors, publics and scientist in these articles. Journalists seem to have a low opinion of the level of economical knowledge of their readers, they put a matter of life and death in the comprehension and knowledge of economics, and for them, economists as doctors are working for the sake of mankind. An interesting paradox lays nonetheless in the contradiction of their respective contents: promote or discourage public intervention in private life.

**Notes**
i: « économie » has in French the two meanings of « economics » or « economy »

ii cf. how hygienics has economical preoccupations and how it was often connected to economical sections in scientific societies in Bourdelais Patrice (ed) (2001).


References: