

Forbidden Knowledge - The Language of Power

Ross Welcome to Renegade Inc. On this show, as you know, we cover economics a lot, and one of the big challenges that we continually grapple with is finding guests who are versed in economics but from varied and diverse backgrounds. So why does only one section of society really get a seat at the economics table? And what can be done about this? Joining me to discuss why the dismal science of economics is predominately old, white, pale and male are the head of economics at University of Bristol, Sarah Smith and head of research and schools at the charity Economy. Ali Norrish. Welcome to you both. Thank you very much for swinging by. Ali, when we started Renegade Inc. The current incarnation is called Renegade Inc. but it started its life as Renegade Economist.

Ali Norrish Right.

Ross And people had a visceral reaction to the word economist so they'd read Renegade and think oh!, yeah alright, and then see Economist and huh!, no.

Ali Norrish Okay.

Ross Why do people have such a reaction to the word economist and economics?

Ali Norrish One of the reasons I think that's the case that people have such a strong reaction to it is because it's so present in the world around us. And like political media communications, for example, that people have built up a very strong sense that it's something important, but that they don't know anything about it because we don't have education that matches the significance of it in society. So we don't have the access to it, but we talk about it as if it is incredibly significant all the time.

Ross So when people see that word or hear that word, they just go, you know what, don't want to do it, don't want to know do. It's out of my league, beyond me. And I just I can't access this.

Ali Norrish Yeah. I mean, so I did research where I talked to like 35 people around that I sourced from around the UK and in interviews. And it was prompted, actually, because we started asking people - my charity is called Economy - and we started asking people to talk about economics, which is kind of what we're trying to do, and they kept doing the economy face, which is that, can you talk about the economy? And they they do this.

Ross Like they've got an ice cream headache?

Ali Norrish Yeah, maybe that's it. Just like a visceral flinch. Like you say, there's a really visceral reaction to it. But then there's also outrage, I think, because people also understand that it's important to them. So like when we asked people in 2016 whether they find economics spoken about in the media by politicians, accessible and easy to understand. Twelve percent of people said yes, which is made up of 15 percent of people with higher income households and seven percent of lower income households. So a really big divide. And then 83 percent of people think economics is important to them. So I'm giving you that

information to set the stage for why people are outraged about it. So we understand that the economy is really, really significant and impacts on all of our lives, but we feel very cut out from the conversation. So I would say that people do feel like those barriers to enter the language, but they also have a really legitimate voice and things to say about the fact that those barriers exist that I think economists could listen to. So I think it's important for us not to try to only do education, for example, that raised people's understanding of jargon so that they were able to access the proper kind of dialogue, but instead thought, is there something about the language that we're using with economics as cutting people out and it doesn't connect to everybody's everyday lives.

Ross Shortly after the 2008 crisis, the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, said economics is way too important to be left to economists. Do you think that's the case? Do you think that it is that economics is now so important that actually just leaving it to economists is remiss?

Ali Norrish Yeah, I think that's really, really important. And, you know, one of the things we want to talk about today is diversity in economics. And so I don't think that the types of people going into economics reflects the lived experience of everybody in society. And so it's really important economics is for everyone otherwise it won't deal with the problems that people face in society, like in a broad range. Economics is fundamentally a social science, so it should get involved and ethical questions of the way that we want our society to look, as well as thinking of itself as if it's a natural science so as if it just reflects reality as it is, because the idea is that we've got about what people are and how they behave and how that reality shapes it itself. You can see that when we think about the types of ways that democratic decisions are framed which is one of the key ways we've got influence over the future of society. So I think that's really important. A good example, actually, that was really relevant recently was Steven Mnuchin of the US Treasury criticizing Greta Thunberg and saying Greta should go to get an economics degree and then she should come back. So who is she? Is she the chief economist? And I think that shows you so much about the way in which economics considers itself to have great power in society and ultimately an authoritative take on the way that we should sort out social questions.

Ross Sarah, if Greta Thunberg went and did an economics degree - right, let me venture this - that actually she'd be told that we are rational, rational human beings, profit, self-serving profit maximizing, that all the externalities in the world i.e. smashing the environment up, actually someone else can deal with that. I'd venture that if she went to do an economics degree, she'd be sent off down the wrong track if she's trying to solve the global climate breakdown.

Sarah Smith Well, I think if she went to do an economics degree, she might actually get a slightly more rounded view of people than you're suggesting kind of economics has to offer. So, you know, there's a lot of economics in thinking about climate change. It's fundamentally about trade-offs between what we do today and what we do tomorrow. And I think economics can really help us to understand, you know, the nature of those trade-offs. And in fact, some of the most important work in this area was done by an economist, Nick Stern, and he, you know, he made a point as forcefully I think as Greta Thunberg that, you know, we have to do something about climate change now. And he did that by sort of trying to, you know, provide an estimate of how damaging, you know, failure to do over climate change

would be. I think there's a real gap between how people think economists think and how economists actually think. And I think that's been really damaging to economics. You know, we're seen as having this very, very narrow view of, you know, how people behave. But it's actually, I think, much richer than that. Also, I think it really helps in terms of framing trade-offs in quite useful way.

Ross Do you accept, though, that the economics discipline and the profession has become incredibly siloed, i.e. people now specialise in a very specific area, very narrowly defined and actually to get them to come out of that and look at the bigger picture is often quite difficult?

Sarah Smith In a way it's probably true of scientists in general, right? So, if you're doing scientific research, then it does help to specialise. You know, you build up your expert knowledge by focusing on a relatively narrow area because, you know, then you kind of have the expertise in terms of the data or the sort of technical understanding that helps you kind of make real advances. I guess what we should be doing, you know, you can be expert in one thing. It doesn't necessarily mean you can't comment usefully on other areas. I think economists have been quite reluctant to move sometimes a little bit away from their area of expertise when it comes to commenting more generally on the debate. I mean, I think if you look at economics in the U.K. and most other countries, I think there is a problem with it, because the point at which most people can access it as a subject is, you know, possibly at A level if they're lucky or at university, you know. It's not embedded throughout our curriculum. So it's almost kind of, you know, put to an advanced level in our education system. And I think that's also a real problem, because if it was much more sort of comprehensively introduced through our education system, then people wouldn't see it as something which required, you know, some advanced level of understanding in order to access. But I do think we need to change the conversation about economics because I was actually really interested in what Ali said. You know, so you ask people about economics or about the economy. I mean, if you ask people to talk about education, if you ask them to talk about their income distribution, if you ask them to talk about equality, if you ask them to talk about, you know, globalisation, people have views on this. So we should almost kind of get it down to the substance of economics and to let people see that that's what economics is about. It's about health and education, inequality, globalisation, climate change. That's what economists are talking about. They're not just talking about the economy, although all these things are part of the economy.

Ross Do you not think it is quite interesting that up until a certain politician came to power in the 80s, often politicians would talk about society. Then Thatcherism came along and then we started talking about the economy. So you hear politicians now all the time say, 'ah, but the economy', 'ah, but the economy', 'if you do that, it'll do this to the economy'. But very few economists talk about society.

Sarah Smith But politicians are essentially making a value judgement. So there's nothing in economics that says we have to maximize GDP. I mean, you know, economics would just say, well, you know, this is the way you might want to maximize GDP. But actually, you know, you might want to trade off maximizing GDP for saving the planet in the future or going for growth vs. going for greater equality. So I think economics just helps you to think about those trade-offs. Economists don't have, you know, a single blinkered view that, you know, the only thing that politicians need to do is maximize GDP. That's the argument the

politicians adopted because growth has been seen as the only goal. But I don't think that's something necessarily that economists would be pushing. And in fact, we have a lot of economists now who are, you know, interested in inequality and that the real damaging effect that increasing inequality is having on people's lives.

Ross Let me just read something to you. It's a quote, though. It says, "In 1903, Cambridge University separated the study of economics from the study of moral sciences. The impact of this seemingly innocuous step has been entirely negative, halting many of the moral advances ignited by the Enlightenment.

Sarah Smith Right.

Ross Big words.

Sarah Smith Right.

Ross What do you think about that? Because what you're saying, and your point is that, you know, economists don't actually, and shouldn't, make a value judgement because...

Sarah Smith I think they should be clear that they are making a value judgement in a way, or if they are sort of reaching those sort of policy recommendations, should make clear that that has in it a set of value judgments.

Ross Right, but at the moment they seem sort of agnostic to that and saying, 'it's not not over to me, gov. You're the politician you make those decisions..

Sarah Smith It depends. You know, economics isn't you know, it's not a one size fits all set of tools. You know, sometimes what economists are interested in is producing really detailed empirical analysis of a specific problem. So, for example, Raj Chetty in the US is doing some fantastically interesting work where he's analysing leads a census data to understand what drives social mobility in the U.S. So it's kind of motivated by his interest in trying to, you know, improve social mobility. But it really is quite an empirical exercise. So, you know, a lot of modern economics is very empirical. So, I think many economists would see themselves as producing really useful evidence that can shed light on a problem. I think, you know, that is sort of pretty value free because you are just trying to look at some evidence and help people to understand the problem.

Ross A lot of economists do think that they are disconnected from the social outcomes of the policy that they recommend. And your work seems to be to say to the public, actually, what happens here does have a real-world effect over here.

Ali Norrish Members of the public would definitely agree with that. I mean, people perceive that their quality of life is linked to the economy. That's partly why politics has been able to be framed by the economic, like the strength of the economy. The phrase, even just in terms of the phrase and which phrases get used in political communications, the words the economy, the phrase the economy, has squeezed out the phrase, society and the society we want, say, because the economy is presented as if it's a kind of objective reality that can be measured objectively and will grow and shrink and will plummet and it will have all these

physical qualities to it. Whereas I think society gives us more. It emphasizes the fact that society is something we can shape and which is made by humans. The economy risks - the way we talk about it at the moment - it risks being seen as if it's a physical force, as if it's a weather system. And that's something that we can't control. And I think that's mostly down to the way that it's communicated about. But it's not true to say economics is just purely a toolkit, because the ideas that shape what economics looks at have value systems behind them. And everybody's values are shaped by the background that they have. It is important to say that while economics as a discipline has lots of different schools of thought in it, and Sarah's right to say the heterodox economics is like growing in significance and importance and being recognised more, the majority of curriculum time at most universities is spent on neoclassical economics, and that has a particular way of looking at the world. And you know, our values are shaped by the salience of things. This is something that behavioural economics which would notice, wouldn't it? So you know that tells us two things. The fact that the economy is so salient in our political communications takes up so much space, what else does it squeeze out? How does that nudge us towards thinking in a certain way? And the same could be said of the value systems that are set up in economics training. So if economics degrees are fundamentally, you know, if the curriculum time is given over mostly to neoclassical economics, then that is going to shape the type of economic questions that those students even have time to ask in those in those degrees.

Ross Welcome back to Renegade Inc. Before we talk more about the economics diversity problem with Sarah Smith and Ali Norrish, let's have a look at what you've been tweeting about in this week's Renegade Inc. index. First up, we have a tweet from Juan Carlos Suarez: 'Of 468 Econ PHDs awarded to US/ Puerto Rico citizens, 34 went to minorities, one American Indians, 15 black, 18 Hispanic. Problem number one, many did not get academic jobs. Problem number two, these numbers are way too low. We need a stronger pipeline AND a profession that will hire minority economists'. What do you think of that?

Sarah Smith Well, I certainly agree on the pipeline issue. I mean, economics is really lagging behind. STEM, for example, who have been putting a lot of effort into trying to improve the pipeline, whereas I think economics is now only really just waking up to the fact that it has this huge diversity problem coming through the pipeline. So if you look at economics departments, we know that women are underrepresented, that there aren't many minority academics, whereas STEM is trying to improve the situation through who's coming through undergraduate and PHDs. That's just not been the case in economics. And I think it's really time for economics to take this really seriously because it really matters. You know, who studies economics really matters. What economic studies and you know, how the discipline kind of evolves. If we're not diverse enough, then we lose the opportunity to innovate, to be creative. And also, you know, we have to worry about where economists are going. Economists go and work in really important places and, you know, in government departments at the Bank of England. And we want them to represent the society that they're helping to shape.

Ross Next from Liz Plank: 'Behind every woman with an economics degree, there's a man who read The Economist once explaining things to her'. Do you think that's fair, Ali?

Ali Norrish It reminds me of a message, actually, that our Economy's economics editor received the other day which was criticizing the economics content of our articles and saying

you should read an economics textbook. And she's like me. We've both got English degrees. So she's a fantastic writer. And you don't have to have got an economics degree in order to write decent analysis about economics. So I think it's definitely true that there's a lot of kind of mansplaining around economics. And she was reflecting on the ways in which she's exposed to that.

Ross And finally, from Maxim Ethan Orr: 'Just had an economics lecturer go through the last 2000 years of global economic history without mentioning colonization'.

Ali Norrish Yeah, so Economy's sister charity is Rethinking Economics which is an international student movement to reform the economics curriculum to make it more pluralist and to look at heterodox schools of thought. But they're also now doing stuff about decolonizing the curriculum, which is really, really important, because while we can improve the pipeline of people that go into economics, if they're fundamentally alienated by the stuff that they're going to learn about, and if it feels like it silencing experiences from the global south or their voices and not reflecting lived experiences that might be different depending on...

Ross Then they don't have the historical context to make the decisions and understand the economy for what it is?

Ali Norrish Yeah, I mean, I think in general as a society, without a sense of our economic history, we don't have the right historical context to make decisions.

Jason Hickel (video clip) I think that if the discipline of economics brought in more diverse voices, then we'd have a much clearer picture of what's going on in our world and how to address the problems that we face. To me, I guess the easiest way to think about this problem is to think about the way that we're taught economics in school textbooks, right, in terms of the history of the rise of capitalism. Because the story that we're normally told is basically that James Watt invented the steam engine. And basically, you know, wealth just poured forth from that basically. It's a story of the revolution that thinks only about what happened within England's borders, right, or within Europe's borders. And it completely ignores the fact that for the entire period of the early history of capitalism, there was already this profound integration in the world system between Western Europe and the rest of the world. Just think about like the key commodities of industrial evolution themselves like sugar and cotton, you know. Without cotton, you have no industrial revolution. And yet miraculously, cotton does not grow in England or anywhere in Western Europe. So cotton has to be had from somewhere. And where does the cotton get grown? It gets grown on lands, you know, forcibly appropriated from indigenous people in the Americas and then grown on plantations by enslaved Africans. So all of a sudden already we're seeing that's, you know, that the core commodity of the industrial revolution relied for its extraction and processing on the colonial process and the Atlantic slave trade. I think one of the reasons that this story doesn't enter into the kind of dominant economics teaching is that the discipline of economics has unfortunately completely abandoned, you know, political economy and history, right. So political economy is a separate discipline from economics and so too is economic history. And so as a consequence, when academic economists teach economics to undergrads, for example, they're not teaching, you know, the history of capitalism, like maybe a kind of fairy tale version but no actual sort of empirical engagement with the history of capitalism. I think

that also, you know, there's like the reason for the persistence of this fairy tale is it's largely because it's kind of comforting because the implications of thinking about the rise of capitalism as it affects one of the most violent, tumultuous periods, you know, in world history that's relied heavily on brutal colonization and the utter, you know, the debacle - the moral debacle - of the slave trade. It's simply too much to really internalize. I mean, it opens up to many questions about the system that we have today.

Ross When we talk about the diversity problem within economics, it's really clear that there is an access problem, but there's also an aspect of privilege insofar as if you've come from the right background and if you want to go into banking, if you were going to politics and all that, you are by sort of default, really, more pull towards doing an economics degree. How do you begin to unwind or unpick that really wicked problem?

Sarah Smith I think it's a sort of combination of a number of different issues. So I think, you know, economics has a diversity problem largely because it has an image problem. So, you know, we've talked about....

Ross You're telling me economics has an image problem? The dismal science has an issue with image?.

Sarah Smith You know, it's not only an image problem in terms of what people think the subject is about, but also an image problem in terms of, you know, who people think an economist is. If you look at Google images, for example, an economist is, you know, a man with a tie and a suit and some kind of like, you know, dollar or pound signs and floating around his head. So, you know, that's what people think an economist is, you know. So it's going to attract the sort of people who want to identify with that type of person. So in that respect, it has an image problem. You know, people don't really understand what economists do or what you do with an economics degree. So they don't see that kind of, you know, the diverse range of opportunities that it can open up. I think if people saw economists as people who, for example, might go into the field in developing countries and kind of, you know, figure out how to improve education systems, you know, I think they might think about economics very differently. And there's also plenty of economists working at Google, for example, you know, figuring out the algorithms, the markets. And I think that would probably seem quite a bit more exciting then, you know, or at least appeal to a different set of people than are attracted to the City. And that's one respect search has an image problem. And then also this idea that it's seen as being very narrow in terms of its scope, bringing a narrow set of assumptions. And, you know, from a student's point of view, I mean, we know this because of some work we've done, that people fundamentally see it as a subject about money. And so long as people see it as being about money, that's really going to affect who's attracted to studying it.

Ross We talked about in the first half that 1903 the moral sciences were divorced from economics. Should we actually begin to put those two things back together? Because if you think about it, you can't really talk about economics without very quickly getting to philosophy. If I want to come up with a bunch of economists to run a society in a certain way ultimately, philosophically, I have to be sure that that is the type of society I and others want to live in.

Sarah Smith Well, I think that sort of really relates to how economics fits into the curriculum in schools. So, you know, economics really doesn't come into play until at least A levels.

Ross See, that's a big problem isn't it?

Sarah Smith .You know, I think so too. So, you know, clearly someone has thoughts about, you know, the range of subjects that students need to study and hasn't put economics in their.

Ross Why? Because if I was conspiratorial, I'd say, well, actually, in state schools and other places, you know, we're actually keeping that out the mix because, you know, back to Fred Taylor and all the rest of them, you know, you need workers and you need people who can manage the workers.

Sarah Smith Well, you know, it's interesting to know if it was a deliberate attempt to keep, you know, the tools of power away from the masses. But I think if it was in the curriculum then it would allow people to make the types of links that you're talking about, right? Many people get, you know, some philosophy, religious education. They get some geography, they get some history, they get some maths in it. Why not get some economics, too, and then allow people right throughout their education to see economics as part of a broad curriculum and to make the links themselves?

Ross On the diversity theme, are you not going to solve an awful lot of problems if you just start teaching economics to kids at a younger age across the education system, whether it be state grammar, private, whatever it is? Is that not going to solve an awful lot of these problems?

Ali Norrish Oh, yeah, definitely. I think so. And that's what I'm campaigning for as part of my job. So we think economic literacy, at least, should be for everyone. So that's not necessarily learning economics, but we're talking about learning the way to access economic language as it appears in media text, as it appears in political communications, for example. So that's essential for everybody because everybody's going to become a voter. And if politics is framed in economic terms, they need to be able to understand right language. And one thing that's important about that, is that then it breaks down the cycle of thinking that you can only start doing economics if you're gonna be good at maths. One of the things that does is it introduces economics as if it's to do with society and questions about our future. And those are the types of questions that might interest, for example, more women to go into sociology or psychology. It would introduce economics as if it's related to people which it fundamentally is, and about human behaviour.

Ross Now, I'm interested. Now. I'm hooked. Whereas your discipline, to date, have just had, I don't know, maths envy. You've looked at the physicists and thought, 'we'll have a load of that'. And actually we should be talking about philosophy, ideas, the history of ideas, what this should look like.

Sarah Smith I think I mean, certainly I mean, economics is about the things that really matter to people. So, you know, but certainly in schools, you know, it's very legitimate to have conversations about health, education, income redistribution, how the government

should spend its money, you know, whether we should be going for growth, what are some of the disadvantages of going for growth, how people behave, are people really selfish?, why do they give to charity. You know all these questions are questions that....

Ross No, I'm interested. The crew have finally come out of their slumber. They're like that.

Sarah Smith I think we should stop talking about economics as if it's just about the economy or at least redefine what we mean by the economy. Really, we just mean the sum of everything that people do rather than, you know, GDP and you know, the aggregate level of unemployment or interest rates or something, which do seem quite divorced, I think, from people's conceptual way of thinking about their everyday lives.

Ali Norrish I definitely think that's a really important starting point, because what Sarah was saying about how economics is to do with people's everyday lives and it treats problems that they're really interested in, like education, health. How do we how do we create better quality of life for people. Completely true. But economics has never really attempted to have a bit of a meta discussion about what economic's role is in society is.

Ross What does meta mean?

Ali Norrish It's just a way for us to talk about what the phrase, 'the economy' means, I think and to translate to out of that phrase, which is like a nothing phrase. When we think about the economy, we kind of think about big circle with nothing in it. People dont have very much connection to this phrase because it's bandied around and it's become an empty phrase because it's talked about so much without the real beautiful picture of human life inside it.

Sarah Smith I think to be honest it's largely the politicians and the media that talk about the economy, I think economists tend day to day, to talk about people, they talk about behaviour, they talk about evidence. I mean, that's really the language of economics, not the economy. I think economists very rarely talk about the economy, although when the media wants to invite an economist on to talk about something, they'll go, 'oh, you know, I need to know something about the economy, I will ask an economist'. But that's really not what, you know, we dont all sit there studying the economy.

Ross Finally, what's the one thing that people can do when they hear economists banging on and hearing politicians banging on and the media banging on? What can they do to engage?

Sarah Smith I think to use a much misused phrase, I think we should take back control. So I think people should stop seeing economics as being something that's just the preserve of, you know, white men in suits. And they should see something as being a place where they should have their voice and that, you know, a place where they should be willing to contribute. You know, economics is not just about the economy as we keep saying, it's about everything that matters in people's lives.

Ali Norrish I definitely agree with what Sarah said, but I think that as much as an education there needs to be better communication from economists, because a lot of people would say, like, I want to get involved in the conversation, but the reason is I'm shut out because of the language that's used. I want them to speak in a language I understand.

Ross I think Sarah's done an amazing job. I think she's communicated beautifully all programme.

Ali Norrish Yeah, I won't criticise Sarah for her communication, it's really, really good. But as a general rule.....

Ross You've got to sort it out. You've got to go and tutor these people. Sarah, Ali, thank you both very much. That's it from Renegade Inc. this week. You can drop the team a mail, studio@renegadeinc.com or you can tweet us at [renegadeinc.com](https://twitter.com/renegadeinc). Join us next week for more insight from those people who are thinking differently. But until then, stay curious.