

# HES CONFERENCES: A LEARNING EXPERIENCE

BY  
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The history of HES (History of Economics Society) is, to a large extent, the history of its annual conferences. Being part of this story is a great privilege that I share in this testimony, seeking to capture some of the lessons I learned from them during a very significant period of my academic career, with a special focus on the years 1993 to 2009. Over these seventeen years, I participated in almost all HES annual conferences (except for 1997, 2005, and 2008).<sup>1</sup> It was a fantastic learning experience, which I will synthetically approach around three key ideas: academic cosmopolitanism, the invisible hand of HES governance, and scientific tolerance as a guide.

The first time is always unrepeatable. And so it was in 1993 in Philadelphia, at Temple University, under the command of the unforgettable Ingrid Rima. The faint memory of organizational setbacks is of little interest when compared with the vibrant memory of the enthusiasm of participating in the construction of a community in which strangers become accomplices in a common project. This is the essence of cosmopolitanism, which I learned to cultivate by studying political economists from the second half of the eighteenth century, the golden period of the sciences of Enlightenment. The cosmopolitanism of HES conferences has precisely to do with projecting the advantages of an attitude of open-mindedness, of refusing any form of parochialism, of willingness to share knowledge, of insertion in a global community of reference.

The academic sociability that I was used to in my country, as well as in other European countries, had a formality that was difficult to break away from. University hierarchies functioned as criteria of segregation in which younger people felt that their affirmation and acceptance required compliance with rituals of obedience and respect. And suddenly, at a HES conference, we acquire the responsibility of discussing a paper authored by one of the most-cited or most-acclaimed scholars in a given historiographical domain, or we lose the distress of finding someone who discusses our work in a competent and dedicated way, who could either be one of those strong names in the

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<sup>1</sup> My sporadic participation in recent years—to my great regret—is not due to a decline in interest in HES conferences but rather to restrictions resulting from university management positions incompatible with frequent traveling abroad.

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discipline or simply a doctoral student who reveals much better knowledge of what we thought was the topic of our exclusive and safe expertise.

The beginning of my participation in the HES conferences coincided with the beginning of my experience as co-editor and responsible for the editorial management of *EJHET*, the *European Journal of the History of Economic Thought* (whose first issue was published in autumn 1993). *EJHET* was born from the initiative of four European scholars (José Luís Cardoso, Gilbert Faccarello, Heinz D. Kurz, and Antoin Murphy), based on an idea initially proposed by Gilbert Faccarello in the aftermath of a conference that took place at the Chateau de Vizille, France, in 1989, to celebrate the bicentenary of the French Revolution. This editorial project was not associated with any academic organization or scientific association. And it was possible only thanks to the support and enthusiasm of an international publisher (Routledge) interested in creating a new editorial forum dedicated to the history of economic thought. At that time, existing European journals in this area had a limited national scope (mainly in France and Italy), hence the need and opportunity for a new project with a wider audience. The maturity reached by *History of Political Economy (HOPE)*, established in 1969—the only international journal worthy of the name, in this area, in existence at the time—led to the belief that new journals were required to provide outlets for an increasing supply of quality articles.

The editorial work to be carried out to affirm and consolidate *EJHET* was immense, especially due to the fact that, in the early 1990s, there was no European equivalent of international conferences like those organized by HES. Therefore, attendance at the HES annual conferences was essential, as it allowed me to be engaged in multiple activities, such as: develop contacts with authors and reviewers, talk about an editorial project that was taking its first steps, better understand what was happening in other journals operating in relatively small markets, attract the submission of papers that one guessed could be reference articles for the future, request book reviews of recently published and relevant works, and contribute to expanding the possibilities for disseminating knowledge produced in the scientific field we cultivate.

The relaxed atmosphere of HES conferences, the three or four days spent, almost always, on voluntary retreats at university campuses, made it natural to deepen personal and professional relationships, making this opportunity a moment of meeting and sharing multiple and cross-disciplinary knowledge. Therefore, the memory I keep of the HES conferences emphasizes the formation of a sense of community, of an active cosmopolitanism that mitigates the often solitary nature of the profession of a university professor or researcher, while also encouraging the availability of traveling in unknown wisdom territories, going further in the pursuit of knowledge.

Since the first news I had about the functioning of HES, which I was able to corroborate in the first conferences I attended, I was favorably impressed with the relaxed, informal manner, without hierarchical pressures, of its governance system. The idea of making the elected president responsible for organizing the annual conference that precedes the year in which he/she assumes presidential duties, through the presentation of a presidential address, has always seemed to me like a Columbus Egg solution. This annual rotation of responsibility and representative functions was the rule in force before the new HES constitution of 2016. The multiplicity of new functions that in the meantime were created—awards, honours, grants, online resources, young

scholars' activities, etc.—has naturally increased the levels of demand in carrying out permanent tasks.

However, during the period in which I most regularly participated in the HES annual conferences, the feeling prevailed that everything was going smoothly, as far as the day-to-day management of the internal affairs of the society was concerned. Not ignoring the fact that there may have been, throughout the fifty years of HES's history, less happy moments of passing on executive and presidential tasks, the comparison with the way in which its European counterpart works (the European Society for the History of Economic Thought, ESHET, whose conferences started in 1997) allows us to attribute a clear organizational advantage to the American model.

It was precisely this model that inspired the initiatives to hold the first ECHE (European Conferences on the History of Economics, in which I had a direct engagement together with Philippe Fontaine, Albert Jolink, and Robert Leonard), which took place in Rotterdam in 1995 and in Lisbon in 1996. Some preparatory meetings to define the organizational model of the conferences, as well as their continuity in the future, took place at the HES conferences of 1993 (Temple University) and 1994 (Babson College). This is not the place to tell the story of the creation and closure of the ECHE conferences.<sup>2</sup> But I would like to point out that it was the environment of the HES conferences that proved to be conducive to the organizational innovation that a small group of young scholars tried to establish, with the twofold purpose of increasing communication between individual scholars working in the same disciplinary field, and of enhancing the relevance and visibility of European scholars by attracting a wider range of international participants. The lightness of the governance structure underlying the organization of the HES conferences, certainly resulting from a prodigious and benevolent invisible hand, bore fruit beyond American borders, expanding the reach of its undeniably cosmopolitan character.

The third lesson that I would like to evoke, regarding the rich learning experience provided by participating in HES conferences, refers to the strengthening of scientific tolerance as a safe guide for those who practice the *métier* of a historian.

The initial years of my experience at HES conferences correspond to a phase of development and maturation of methodological reflections on the diversity of ways of practicing the history of economics, or the history of political economy, economic ideas, or economic thought. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, seminal contributions by authors who regularly participated in HES conferences, such as Mark Blaug, Bob Coats, Craufurd Goodwin, Peter Groenewegen, Warren Samuels, and Donald Winch (limiting myself here to naming authors who are no longer among the living), enabled a significant improvement of the research perspectives opened up by this historiographical field. The intense debates on the wishful collaboration between historians of economics and historians of science in general, the call for rigorous historical contextualization through the use and study of archival sources, the placement of the intellectual biographies of economists within the institutional framework in which the exercise of their profession took place, the crossing of research experiences developed in the broader universe of the

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<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that it was the success of the first ECHE conferences in 1995 and 1996 that motivated and created momentum for the parallel initiative of the foundation of the European Society for the History of Economic Thought in 1996, whose first president was Luigi Pasinetti and whose first annual conference took place in Marseilles in 1997.

social sciences—on all these matters decisive contributions were made to the enrichment and renewal of the main historiographical traditions with a visible presence in journal articles and published books. This change did not imply the abandonment of more conventional or orthodox forms of practicing the history of economics, namely those based on the reconstruction of the lineage of analytical contents that do not require rigorous historical frameworks, or those that understand the contexts of knowledge production through facts reconstructed by economic history.

The great advantage of historians of economics, political economy, economic ideas, or economic thought is the ability they demonstrate to distance themselves from the political and ideological implications of the works of authors (economists) who, directly or indirectly, are the subject of their reflection. In other words, the historical study of the work of authors such as Adam Smith, Karl Marx, John Maynard Keynes, or Milton Friedman is not compatible with carrying out a faith confession or a manifesto of political proselytism. We know, however, that such a study is a “long and winding road” that can be achieved from different perspectives. And it is precisely this presumption of the superiority of methodological pluralism that assigns historians of economics the privileged prerogative of academic tolerance.

The programs of the HES conferences I have attended, between 1993 and 2009, taught me to respect and appreciate the richness of the works of others, even if they were undertaken in the light of methodological guidelines that I considered less attractive. I believe that this was fundamental learning to understand and actively participate in the construction of such a rich and plural disciplinary field. It is also my conviction that this learning experience is shared on equivalent or very close terms by a broad community of practitioners of history of economics for whom the HES conferences were moments of stimulus and inspiration for the development of their careers. HES and its conferences therefore deserve recognition for the service provided throughout its fifty-year history.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares no competing interests exist.