

**THE LAUNCHING OF ‘SOCIAL CHOICE AND WELFARE’
AND THE CREATION OF
THE ‘SOCIETY FOR SOCIAL CHOICE AND WELFARE’**

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1.

I wish to ask the readers to forgive me for what could appear as a partial scientific autobiography. May I convince them that all I have written is not the result of a paranoid behaviour.

In 1966, I was a fourth year undergraduate economics student at the University of Caen (this was the level corresponding at that time to a ‘licence’, in the economics curriculum in the French university system). At this level, a traditional course in this French university system (and probably nowhere else; French generally believe that they are right against all others, but, in this case, I can tell you that they were wrong!) was entitled ‘Systèmes et structures’ (I suppose you do not need any translation).¹ Alain Cotta, a rather well known French economist (he was well known and I mean he is still well known; for instance, he is often invited to participate in TV talk shows) was responsible for this course in Caen. Rather than really teaching, he had decided to ask his students to give talks based on the chapters of a book of his, just published (the book was outrageously priced and his Caen students and the department of economics library there formed probably a large percentage of the total customers). I was not particularly enthusiastic, and because of my lack of enthusiasm, I was ‘selected’ to give a talk on the last chapter (enthusiastic students volunteered to give talks on the preceding chapters!). This chapter was entitled *Décisions individuelles, décisions collectives et accumulation du capital*.² I read it, but I must say that I did not understand exactly what was going on. It was mainly, as far as I can even say today, about production, the rôle of the state, public oligopoly and collective goods.³ To prepare my talk, I used another French book by Abraham and Thomas simply entitled *Microéconomie*. Abraham and Thomas’s book was a lot more mathematical than Cotta’s. Incidentally, it is indicated on the jacket of Cotta’s book that ‘reading it implies some mathematical knowledge, in particular of the rudiments of the theory of sets’. I have been unable to find in the book anything, even rudimentary, that looks like set theory, even the most naive set theory. And the chapter on which I had been assigned to work hardly includes any mathematics except some linear algebra disguised as matrix equations. More importantly, there was no mention of Kenneth Arrow’s impossibility theorem nor, for the record, any mention of Edmond Malivaud’s papers on capital accumulation (though I am

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This paper is partially based on a note I wrote in 1989. I was then asked not to circulate this note, which I did. I am very grateful to two persons who played a major rôle in my life. My wife, Annie-Claude, has been constantly supportive, though the described ventures had many implications for our family life, including the choice of the locations of our vacations. All I did, I would not have done without Prasanta Pattanaik. It is only because he accepted to share responsibilities with me that all these things happened. I am also very grateful for his comments on this paper.

¹Structuralism pervades then every discipline in France, including economics.

²In the table of contents, the title is in a different order, *Accumulation du capital, décisions individuelles et décisions collectives*.

³Regarding pure collective goods, there are some interesting remarks about the poetry of interstellar space—nothing in common with the great record by John Coltrane—, which could justify the public expenditure in spatial programs.

fairly sure that Edmond Malinvaud is a French economist). On the other hand, Abraham and Thomas's book had a chapter on the 'collective economic optimum' and Kenneth Arrow's work was mentioned and described (?).⁴ I was then fascinated by the subject and totally hooked, and I am still fascinated and hooked. My talk was not very successful. I suppose that Alain Cotta and my fellow students did not understand what was exactly going on. I am not sure that I understood it myself. Our knowledge of microeconomic theory, even after four years of university studies was minimal, not to say totally non-existing. Except for some introduction during the first two years, this theory was only taught in the scientific 'grandes écoles'. Moreover, in most universities, the teaching of economics was very weak.

When I came back from the Army in 1970, I got a position (non tenured) as assistant (more or less equivalent to a US instructor) and could start working on a doctoral thesis. I was rather lucky that, not only could I read Kenneth Arrow's book (1963), but also the recent books by Y. Murakami (1968), Amartya Sen (1970), Prasanta Pattanaik (1971), and the papers by Ken-ichi Inada (1969, 1970) and Peter Fishburn (1970). They probably will be surprised today (except for Y. Murakami and K.-i. Inada who, unfortunately, are not anymore with us) to learn that they were the unique thesis advisors I ever had and the only ones I recognize as such. It is rather difficult to think of a better committee! One of the greatest regret of my life is that, though I knew that there was a brilliant school of French mathematicians working on these and related topics (at the 'Centre de mathématique sociale'), I did not contact them; I was too shy and, perhaps, was scared of a possible contemptuous attitude they could have for a young provincial economist. I now know how I was wrong. Another regret is that, though I was recommended to contact Serge-Christophe Kolm, I did not do it, for the same reasons. At this time, I also began to (self) study mathematics, more exactly enough mathematics to understand most of advanced microeconomic theory. Two or three years later, I started to write to some social choice theorists. I have in my files letters from Charles Plott and from Prasanta Pattanaik dated 1973 and 1974. My correspondence with Prasanta became rather regular and in 1975, we met at the world meeting of the **Econometric Society** in Toronto where I made my first presentation of a paper ever. I also saw one of my two gods, Amartya Sen (I saw the other one, Kenneth Arrow, in 1985 at the world congress of the same society at the MIT). And I met Salvador Barbera and Georges Bordes, a young French economist who had the same kind of French experience as mine. I remember a conversation with Salvador (in French; everyone knows that Salvador is as fluent in French as he is in English—and, I assume, in Catalan and Castilian) in which he suggested that we established an informal network of the handful of European researchers in our domain. This conversation is probably at the origin of the 'Society'. In the following years, I corresponded with Georges Bordes, Wulf Gaertner (met in Paris in 1977) and Richard Wendell regarding joint papers and, extensively, with Prasanta Pattanaik.

In the Report of the Editor of *Econometrica*, in 1979, one could read:

One area in which the number of submissions is extraordinary large is social choice and voting theory. Even with the subject narrowly defined..., approximately nine per cent of our submissions last year were in this area. I am asking referees to impose high standards in judging these papers.

I had (and still have) the greatest respect for *Econometrica* and for the **Econometric**

⁴Though the definitions were almost correctly stated, it was said that K.J. Arrow proved that the only rules (more or less, social welfare functions) that satisfied the Axiom 1 and 2 were those that defined the social preference as the preference of an individual (they assumed individuals had linear orderings). As far as I have been able to guess, their Axiom 1 is generally known as *non-imposition* and Axiom 2 is a monotonicity property (positive association). Of course, this statement was obviously false, which I did not know at that time.

Society (I think that I am a member since 1970), but, I must confess that I had been very surprised by this kind of logic. The premise was apparently *the number of submissions is extraordinarily large*, but obviously had to be read *the number of submissions is too large* and, consequently, the conclusion should be read *the standards in judging these papers must be higher than for other papers*. There was nothing about the intrinsic quality of the contributions. As a matter of fact, there was nothing else about social choice and voting theory. The Editor of *Econometrica* at that time was Hugo Sonnenschein who had significantly contributed to social choice theory (I consider that his joint paper with Andreu Mas-Colell in *The Review of Economic Studies* in 1972 is a masterpiece). It is probable that he was the spokesman of a number of economists who thought that social choice and voting theory did not belong to ‘economics’ or, at most, touched it marginally. I have heard a few years later famous economists uttering this opinion. What was also clear in Hugo Sonnenschein’s report was that a shift away from ‘highbrow theory’ had to take place. Reasons for this shift are still unclear to me, but have been, in a way, totally successful (one can compare the contents of *Econometrica* say in the beginning 1970’s with the present ones). I do not want to discuss this point any further here. What was clear is that, henceforth, it would be very difficult to have papers on social choice accepted for publication in *Econometrica*.

It seemed to me that it was time to start a high-quality journal on social choice theory and welfare economics. I wrote to Prasanta Pattanaik to know his point of view. He then decided to start to get the opinions of scholars active in the subject and we both wrote to North-Holland to know whether they had ever received a proposal for such a journal.⁵ We got rather negative reactions from both sides. North-Holland were launching *Mathematical Social Sciences* and they mentioned that the material in our field could be very well included in this journal (it is obvious that a journal on social choice theory and welfare economics cannot be exclusively restricted to mathematical papers so that this reaction was not entirely satisfactory). The opinions we got from several people seemed to be against the publication of a new journal. Prasanta summarized the given arguments as follows:

1. If there is a specialized journal on collective choice, it will reduce the willingness of existing journals such as *The Review of Economic Studies* and the *Journal of Economic Theory* to publish papers on collective choice.
2. There are some advantages in publishing papers in a journal of general interest since more people are likely to notice the papers.
3. For a border-line area like collective choice, it is a bit risky to have a specialized journal since the area may cease to be considered to be part of mainstream economics.

Consequently, we both decided not to pursue our journal project any further.

Our promotional activities for social choice theory and welfare economics were devoted in 1980 mainly to the organization of a conference at the University of Caen. The conference took place after the world meeting of the **Econometric Society** in Aix-en-Provence and, though its local organization was far from being perfect, was, I think, scientifically successful. Part of the contributions to this conference was published in the volume entitled *Social Choice and Welfare* by North-Holland in 1983.

2.

In November 1980, I wrote again to North-Holland, mentioning that at the European meeting of the **Econometric Society** in Vienna (in 1977), they told me that they intended to publish a journal on welfare economics. Their reply was rather surprising. Not

⁵North-Holland had launched quite a lot of economics journals in the 1970’s, which explains why we wrote to them in the first place.

only it was negative, but they informed me that they had a project of a journal on health economics (which eventually appeared in 1982). They probably thought that the overlap between health economics and welfare economics was larger than it is in reality.⁶ On his side Prasanta Pattanaik had some contact with the economics editor of Basil Blackwell. We met him in Oxford in April 1981. He considered our project to have a journal on social choice and welfare economics with great sympathy, but expected that the University of Caen would pay for the production costs, which was, of course, totally unrealistic.

At the beginning of 1982, we decided to send a form to a selected group of colleagues to know whether they thought that our project was reasonable. Since 1979, the situation had changed somehow, since the aforementioned arguments (1) and (3) were beginning to vanish. In an editorial of *The Review of Economic Studies*, Oliver Hart and Mervyn King wrote:

The Review is probably best known for papers in the area of pure theory—in particular, general equilibrium theory, growth theory, social choice theory, and the economics of uncertainty. The present managing editors feel that in the next few years it is desirable for The Review's coverage to be broadened. In particular we hope to encourage more submissions in the areas of applied theory, econometrics (especially applied econometrics) and macroeconomics... Since it is not planned to increase the number of articles published per year, publishing more in these new areas will mean that some other areas which The Review has traditionally emphasized will receive less attention than previously. One field in particular in which we require an especially high standard of acceptance in the future is social choice theory.

No reasons were given for this choice of social choice theory, but the only sensible explanation is the same as the one given for *Econometrica*. In Hart and King's opinion, social choice theory is less interesting than other topics or, more surely, social choice theory has a nearly empty intersection with economics.

The response of most of the people we contacted was enthusiastic, even if some respondents had some reservations. Among these, it was indicated that the number of economics journals was rapidly increasing. Others suggested that we should try to have an agreement with the editors of *Public Choice* asking them to enlarge the editorial board to cover social choice theory.⁷ Consequently, we pursued the matter further and contacted several publishers in May 1982, including two French publishers. The French publishers did respond to say basically that they were not interested.⁸ The most positive reaction we had came from Springer-Verlag. We had, of course, a strong preference for them as well known international scientific publishers with famous series of books in mathematics (at least we knew that among their activities they had famous series of books in mathematics). Things then proceeded quite quickly, due to the efforts of the economics editor of Springer-Verlag, Dr. Werner Müller. Dr. Müller, Prasanta Pattanaik and I had a meeting in Caen in October 1982 during which the definite decision to start the journal was taken. Another important decision was to ask our friend Wulf Gaertner to share the editorial management of the forthcoming journal.

⁶I suspected that, for them, health and welfare were two concepts covering the same idea. Since that time, as the Secretary of the **Society for Social Choice and Welfare**, it happened that I received various documents related to retirement homes or hospitals indicating that welfare was (only) a question of good health.

⁷*Public Choice* had special issues devoted to the more mathematical aspects of voting theory and had published important papers in this area. However, questions related to, say, social justice, for instance, was out of the scope we could perceive.

⁸We wrote to Masson and to Dunod who were respected French publishers. However, they were French, i.e., not ready to take any risk at the international level. You may find funny that Dunod is today part of Vivendi-Universal, but probably not for long!

At the end of November 1982, we started to forward letters inviting a number of scholars to join the board of editors. Later we invited potential contributors to send submissions. In July 1983, the board of editors was nearly established. However, Werner Müller, Wulf Gaertner, Prasanta Pattanaik and I thought that, in spite of the great number of editors affiliated with American universities, the fact that the three managing editors were (at that time) European residents could appear as a bias towards Europe. It was then decided to ask an American editor to join as managing editor. We unanimously agreed on Jerry Kelly's name. Jerry Kelly accepted our proposal. In December 1983, our board was in its final form. The first issue of *Social Choice and Welfare*⁹ appeared in May 1984. The first volume had 320 pages. Since then a number of new journals were created on similar topics or specific topics within social choice theory, for instance, the *Review of Economic Design*, the *Journal of Public Economic Theory*, the *Journal of Theoretical Politics* and, to some extent, *Economics and Philosophy*, and *Politics, Philosophy and Economics*. Moreover, *Mathematical Social Sciences*, under Hervé Moulin's editorship, slightly shifted towards social choice and voting theory. I feared first that too many journals will generate a decrease in the number of submissions. But, on the contrary, the number of submissions steadily increased. This proves the good health of the subject loosely defined.

3.

The journal circulation increased during the eighties. However, due to German regulations, it was impossible for Springer-Verlag to offer a reduced price for individual subscribers. The only possibility was to have a scientific association whose members could receive a personal copy of the journal. In 1985, such a society was created from the *Journal of Economic Theory*, the **Society for the Promotion of Economic Theory**. However, it seems rather strange to have an association only to deal with this sort of circulation problem. Scientific associations are basically created to promote the development of their subject-matter. A publication is only one among many other means to reach this objective. The organization of meetings, conferences etc. is also very important. The 1980 Caen conference can be considered as one of the first conferences of its type, at least at the international level.¹⁰ A number of conferences were organized after 1984, in particular in Brussels and Namur by Claude d'Aspremont and Louis Gevers, and in Marseilles by Louis-André Gérard-Varet and Bernard Monjardet. At the beginning of July 1989, Salvador Barbera, Hervé Moulin and Antonio Villar organized in Valencia a meeting entitled again *Social Choice and Welfare*. The organizers invited the members of the board of editors of the journal *Social Choice and Welfare* and some other scholars. I consider this meeting as the direct ancestor of the meetings of the Society. At the end of the Valencia conference, it was suggested that we should have gatherings of this type organized on a regular basis. I think I did make this suggestion, but I am not sure it was me who did it! I must confess that, though I wished to have these regular meetings organized by an official association, I was rather reluctant to work this out. At the beginning of 1991, as things were not taking off, I finally decided to draft statutes for a **Society for Social Choice and Welfare**. I also proposed the names of the President (Kenneth Arrow), the President-elect (Amartya Sen), the Secretary-treasurer (Maurice Salles!) and the council members. During this same year, we obtain from Werner Müller an offer fixing the price to be paid for the members' subscription to *Social Choice and Welfare* to 90 DM. The dues for membership in the Society were then established at 350 FF. This amount is still

⁹Thanks to North-Holland, we were authorized to use for the journal the title of the Caen 1980 conference volume.

¹⁰Previous conferences were organized by Jean-Jacques Laffont in Paris in 1977 and a mainly French round table in Aix-en-Provence by Pierre Batteau, Eric Jacquet-Lagrèze and Bernard Monjardet in 1979, see Laffont (1979) and Batteau & al. (1981).

the same (or its Euro approximate equivalent, 54 Euros).¹¹ It was decided to organize the first international meeting of the **Society for Social Choice and Welfare** in Caen in 1992 and to have such meetings every other year.¹² Hervé Moulin, who became the fourth President of the Society in 1998, had the heavy duty to chair the programme committee.¹³ Kenneth Arrow, Amartya Sen and John Harsanyi participated in this first meeting, as well as their successors as Presidents of the Society, Hervé Moulin, Kotaro Suzumura and Salvador Barbera. The Society was declared as an ‘Association régie par la loi du 1er juillet 1901’ in November 1992.¹⁴ The Society had 35 members in 1992. Since 1997, we had about 120 members depending on the year (with a maximum of 148 in 2000).¹⁵

4.

I will conclude with some optimistic remarks. It is clear that social choice theory and welfare economics is an interdisciplinary domain. After all, the origin of social choice can be found, on the one hand, in voting theory, that is in Condorcet and Borda, of course, but also in Pliny the Younger, Ramon Lull, Nikolaus von Cues..., and, on the other hand, in Bentham’s utilitarianism. A proof of this interdisciplinary characteristic can be found in the editorial board of *Social Choice and Welfare* which includes (or included) economists, mathematicians, philosophers, political scientists, sociologists. Furthermore, I think that the kind of excommunication met in 1980 is not as fashionable these days. Or, what was called by Hugo Sonnenschein ‘highbrow theory’ in 1979, is today in a similar situation as social choice was then. For reasons you can easily understand, I have some difficulty to understand why ‘highbrow theory’ is not fashionable. But as everyone knows, fashions are ephemeral, in economics as elsewhere. On the other hand, there are still mainstream journals regularly publishing social choice and voting theory, for instance the *Journal of Economic Theory*, *Economic Theory* and the *Journal of Mathematical Economics*. More reassuring is that some of the most recent (and excellent) advanced microeconomic theory textbooks such as Mas-Colell, Whinston and Green (1995), but also Jehle and Reny (2001) devote a significant number of pages to social choice and welfare with chapters entitled ‘Social Choice Theory’ or ‘Social Choice and Welfare.’¹⁶

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¹¹The journal had 372 pages in 1992 against more than 900 in 2002. We must be very grateful to Dr. Müller and to Springer-Verlag for their support during all these years, in fact, for their support since 1982.

¹²The 1994 meeting took place in Rochester thanks to William Thomson, the 1996 meeting in Maastricht—organized by Hans Peters—, the 1998 meeting in Vancouver—organized by John Weymark—, the 2000 meeting in Alicante—organized by Carmen Herrero—, and the 2002 meeting in Pasadena—organized by Matthew Jackson.

¹³A selection of the papers presented in Caen appeared in Barnett & al. (1995).

¹⁴An ‘Association “loi de 1901”’ is the French equivalent of a ‘non-profit organization.’

¹⁵The ratio of participants in the international meetings to members is rather strange, since the number of participants in the meetings exceeds 200.

¹⁶Mas-Colell being one of the authors of the first one, this was not surprising. The other, from this point of view, is more interesting.

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