In an essentially contested subject such as philosophy, it makes little sense for a small Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) Panel to make judgements across the whole breadth of the discipline, however well-intentioned that panel might be. As I work between the ‘continental’ and ‘analytical’ traditions – in the field of feminist philosophy, which was (and always has been) completely unrepresented on the RAE Panel – I feel this very acutely.

In practice, little work in feminist philosophy was submitted in the course of the RAE to the Philosophy Panel. But that is precisely the problem. I know from discussions in the Society of Women in Philosophy (UK) that many junior (and sometimes also senior) colleagues working in this field were either dissuaded by their heads of department from submitting ‘feminist’ pieces, or were persuaded to submit ‘outside’ Philosophy, under the entirely inappropriate heading of Sociology, for example. Such a strategy prevents the development of the discipline of philosophy – and also fails to register the 180 plus women who are part of this network, including those who have responded to recent SWIP questionnaires in ways that show that many see their academic future in fairly grim terms.

If we have to continue with the absurd process of RAE assessment (as I fear we must), it is absolutely essential that the discipline recognizes the need for separate sub-panels for different philosophical traditions. There was nobody on the panel this time, for example, who had skills in recent French philosophy, and ‘Continental Philosophy’ is certainly not a homogeneous tradition, even though it is often equated with all that is not ‘analytic’. In Europe, after all, a similar RAE exercise would have a variety of ‘Continentals’, and probably only one person who was supposed to have skills in the whole ‘Analytic’ area.

My suggestion is that next time round there be at least four sub-panels. It has been suggested by some that there might be sub-panels in ‘analytic’, ‘continental’ and ‘applied’ philosophy. However, I would like to add to this suggestion by requesting that consideration be given to a further sub-panel that should be set up to deal with interdisciplinary work in philosophy. Furthermore, I would propose that some person or persons on this interdisciplinary sub-panel should have the skills necessary to judge work on sexual difference and race: work that emerges from a variety of philosophical traditions, but that is usually not ‘applied philosophy’. It should be clear that ‘applied philosophy’ is an inappropriate category for assessing work in such lively research areas as feminist epistemology, feminist meta-ethics or feminist political philosophy. Nor can ‘applied philosophy’ embrace my own two primary areas of research specialism: feminist metaphysics and feminist aesthetics.

Interestingly, when I recently assembled the self-descriptions of the women serving on the editorial board of the Women’s Philosophy Review (UK), what was striking was the impossibility of telling from the lists of research expertise whether a particular board member was trained in the analytic or continental traditions. Here, what matters more is the necessity forced on those working within
feminist philosophy to familiarize themselves with a broad range of philosophical argument and interdisciplinary debates.

The RAE process is already acting like the Medusa’s gaze, freezing the discipline of philosophy into anachronistic modes of self-definition that block innovation. If the only philosophy that is financially rewarded as ‘good’ philosophy is ‘pure’ philosophy – and if ‘pure’ philosophy is judged in a way that marginalizes interdisciplinarity – then we might expect further ‘cuts’ and ‘blocks’ to the development of radical and ‘non-standard’ philosophy (including feminist philosophy). And what should be a vigorous discipline, open to a plurality of voices and conceptions of philosophy, will be unable to defend itself effectively against those university managers and administrators who are looking for easy targets in this time of financial stringency. As we are already seeing, the RAE judgements have already meant that posts are ‘axed’ or ‘frozen’, and at least one English philosophy department is threatened with dispersal and closure. It is urgent that we discuss questions of future strategy now before too much more damage is done.

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The case of economics

The Research Assessment Exercise carried out by the Higher Education Funding Councils (HEFC) for England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland and their predecessors was established as an institutional mechanism to provide the government with a rationale for distributing research funds among university departments of a given subject area. Central to the Exercise is the subject assessment panel made up of pre-eminent peers who rate the research excellence of a department and thereby determine the amount of research monies it will get. Perhaps not initially intended to affect the areas of research carried out by British academics, the assessment panels in fact have that capability through their control of the allocation of research monies.

The first exercise seemed to have little impact on economists and their research. However, by the time of the 1989 RAE, the so-called ‘Diamond List’ of core mainstream economic journals had been drawn up and there was a strong belief amongst economists that this list was used by the assessors to inform their judgement of the quality of research in economics departments in British universities. Attempts were made to extend this list for use in the 1992 RAE. At the 1994 Royal Economic Society Annual Conference the chairman of the economics panel for the 1992 RAE claimed that the assessors did not discriminate against non-mainstream research and that the research assessment exercise should not be used by economic departments to do so. He added that he did not believe that British economists would actively discriminate against non-mainstream economists and their research. However, at the same conference a flyer appeared which announced
that one old university was in the market for nine economists who would raise its economics department research profile in mainstream economics. Advertisements for posts in other institutions similarly specified that applicants must be working within mainstream economics and linked this explicitly to either maintaining or improving their ranking in the assessment exercise. It is clear that, as a result of the RAE, economics departments were discriminating positively in their hiring practices towards mainstream economists and their research as a way to maintain and/or enhance their rating in the next research assessment exercise.*

Central to the assessment exercise is the peer review system, which can be defined as a system by which the intellectual excellence of a piece of research is judged by a committee or panel of researchers working in, or close to, the field in question. According to researchers on peer review, for the system to work it is necessary that each member of the panel be pre-eminent in the specialism(s) they have to evaluate; that the pre-eminent panel members be selected from across the relevant academic community; that the actual method of selection is open, democratic, and involves as much of the academic community as possible; and that the panel be open to unorthodox and interdisciplinary research. Since the RAE utilizes the peer review system, the HEFC based the selection of panel members on pre-eminence in research and on the range of specialized expertise needed to cover the spread of research in the subject area to be assessed; however, they were not concerned whether or not the methods of selection of the panel peers were open and democratic and whether the peers may have an interest in the outcome of their deliberations.

The process by which economists were selected for the economic panels for the 1989, 1992 and 1996 RAEs was not open or democratic in that the majority of economists had little say in the selection process. In particular, the panellists were selected by the HEFC and its predecessors, the Royal Economic Society in conjunction with the heads of economic departments, and the chair of the economics panel. All in all, less than 10 per cent of British economists had any real say in the selection of the panels; moreover, the selection of nearly a third of the panel members was done without any consultation whatsoever. Although the main criterion for panel selection was pre-eminence in research, nearly a third of the nineteen panel members in the three RAEs had published on average fewer than three articles over a twenty-five year period and hence did not fulfil the criterion of pre-eminence in research. As for the subject coverage criteria for panel selection, after closely examining the journal publication records of the panel members, it can be concluded that none of the assessment panels covered all of mainstream economics as represented by the core mainstream journals. Furthermore, our examination revealed the near absence of publications in non-mainstream economic journals by members of all three panels (except for the lone Post-Keynesian economist on the 1996 assessment panel), which suggests that the panel members did not have the expertise or knowledge to judge the quality of non-mainstream economics submissions. The consequences of this is made clear in our survey of the 1992 RAE publication submissions of seven 5-rated, eight 4-rated, eleven 3-rated, and three 2-rated university economics departments. The survey revealed twenty-five publications in non-mainstream core journals. Four of those publications were in three 5-rated departments, none were in 4-rated departments, fourteen were in eight 3-rated departments, and seven were in two 2-rated departments. Thus it appears that if a department publication submission included a significant propor-

* Economics can be divided into a mainstream, called neoclassical economics, and a non-mainstream, which broadly consists of Marxian, Post-Keynesian, Institutional and Sraffian economics.
tion of publications in core non-mainstream journals, it would most likely receive a 2 or 3 rating.

The combination of peer review and the RAE has produced an institutional arrangement in the form of an economics panel which, because of its control over funding, has the power to affect the type of economic research carried out by British economists. Since the selection process ensured that the members of the economics panels were nearly all mainstream economists, the message that the panels sent out was that research in mainstream economics and publication in core mainstream journals were what was necessary for university economics departments to maintain or increase their research funding. This message was reinforced by the evaluation of research submitted to them and the ranking of departments. Consequently, since the 1992 RAE economic departments have taken steps in the areas of recruitment policy and the direction of both departmental and individual work to emphasize mainstream research and de-emphasize and discriminate against non-mainstream research.

**A shift towards the mainstream**

We undertook a questionnaire survey of British economists regarding the RAE. The findings of the survey showed that there has been a noticeable shift towards a mainstream recruitment policy, with a concurrent positive disinclination to recruit non-mainstream economists. Advertisements for posts ranging from lectureships to chairs predominantly favoured mainstream economists, while departments’ criteria for making appointments narrowed to publications in core mainstream journals. This resulted in interviews where candidates were directly asked in which core mainstream journals they intended to publish. It also meant that non-mainstream economists on probation or temporary contracts were coerced into doing mainstream research. Thus the impact of the RAE on hiring has been to reduce the employment possibilities of non-mainstream economists in British university economics departments and to ‘pressure’ those departments most open to non-mainstream economists to hire mainstream economists as well. Furthermore, the survey revealed that large numbers of British economists felt themselves directly affected by the economics panel’s apparent view that national and international research excellence was restricted to mainstream economics and publishing in core mainstream journals.

The real threat of financial sanction by the economics panel has, in light of the declining financial support for universities and research, driven British economics departments to discriminate against non-mainstream research and the hiring of non-mainstream economists, as well as to restrict if not eliminate the teaching of non-mainstream economics to students. This cleansing process clearly gained steam after the 1992 RAE and has been accentuated by the results of the 1996 RAE. The ongoing discrimination against non-mainstream economists and their research has resulted in few young non-mainstream economists obtaining university teaching and research positions. As a consequence, within ten years or so, the number of non-mainstream economists in British university economics departments will decline significantly. Such a decline will result in the virtual disappearance of non-mainstream economists from the vast majority of economics departments, with the remainder ageing and increasingly invisible.

From the beginning, it has been apparent that the research assessment exercises represent a thrust towards managerialism in UK higher education, with increased competition among institutional providers in quasi-markets and the introduction of ‘performance indicators’ to judge quality and determine funding. The fact that this has been achieved under cover of peer review is of no consolation, as it ignores
intellectual authority relations. The RAEs give those dominant within a discipline the power not only to define quality but also to ensure that only that type of research is done which fits in with their often narrow definition of excellence. Whilst this is most obvious in a paradigm-bound social science such as economics, preliminary analysis of Harley’s new research findings in other disciplines would indicate that similar processes may be at work.

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This article is based on research on the impact of the RAE on economics, the full results of which are contained in S. Harley and F. Lee, ‘The Academic Labour Process and the Research Assessment Exercise: Academic Diversity and the Future of Non-Mainstream Economics in UK Universities’ (Human Relations, forthcoming), and F. Lee and S. Harley, ‘Economics Divided: The Limitations of Peer Review in a Paradigm Bound Social Science’ (unpublished). Radical Philosophy readers who would like copies of these articles are welcome to write to Dr Frederick S. Lee, Department of Economics, De Montfort University, The Gateway, Leicester LE1 9BH.