

**Our Social Ecological Economic Crises:
Transcript of An Interview with Clive L. Spash
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<http://vimeo.com/55556128>

Yeh, I'm Clive Spash and I'm an economist.

I think of ecological economics as being radical political economy. So if I explain that a little bit. [*Please*] It's radical because it's an alternative from mainstream economics. It's rejection of some of the fundamental tenets of current thinking about the economy and how the economy is structured and the institutions that are running the economy, and also the price theory and the kind of concepts that have been developed over the last hundred, hundred and fifty years. So that makes it radical. It's political economy because it involves politics. Economics can't be divorced from power relationships. Therefore you must have some political element in there. And if you try and have, create an economics that doesn't have it, you're just pushing aside part of the subject area, and you're implicitly dealing with power, rather than it making it explicit. And the classical political economy also had a very fundamental ethical element. So there's a moral and ethical aspect that also can't be separated out. So radical political economy is about combining all these different elements. And also looking for a very different alternative.

Yeh, ecological economics has been developed over time and it's quite tricky to say what hat you wear at different times. So for me ... I have a Chair in Public Policy and Governance which would make me—maybe—a political scientist some people might say. I've always maintained my position as an economist. And then an ecological economist—ecological economics has been used and adopted by the mainstream to some extent, been co-opted by some people. So it's become compromised, in some ways. So I now I talk about social ecological economics, as being the more radical political economy alternative. So,

terminology wise, I would have to say that I am a social ecological economist these days, because that's the position I'm ... I'm advocating—that it's this more radical alternative.

The way that we've constructed the modern industrial economy is heavily dependent on fossil fuels. Fossil fuel supplies are limited. We have a finite planet. There's a limited amount of land and water and so on. And these things are just not taken into account. So, you end-up with a picture of the world that just can grow, without limit, and yet we live in a fundamentally limited world. So this is a real problem then.

So that creates one set of crises—the environmental crises—that we run into constraints and boundaries, and we, we pollute the atmosphere and we go beyond thresholds and systems collapse. We exploit the fisheries beyond the limits and they collapse. So we're continually eradicating species, pushing boundaries, taking over land area, pushing into water and air space and so on. And this is then a real problem in terms of the environment.

But at the same time we have issues around the society we've created—the social structures. So our social structures are really about exploitation—the shifting of costs onto others. So what is it to be a successful, efficient corporation these days? It means that you have to find resources that you can extract at low cost. You make other people exploit ... dig them up at very low cost. You try to avoid regulations. You try to avoid costs for cleaning-up pollution. You find the cheapest labour sources. The cheapest labour sources are in the poorest countries—that's why they're cheap. And this is meant to be economic efficiency. So we have social inequity going along with this system of exploitation. And it's there to provide us with cheap goods.

And then we've got the economics, structure. In terms of the economics and the politics, this then ... we have institutions which are in society, which are established to maintain this system, that are using technology to push the frontiers all the time, to create new markets. They're trying to create new markets, so that they can continually keep the

consumption lifestyle going. So we must consume more. We have to consume more in order that they can sell more, and we have to sell more so we can keep the growth machine going. So you get into a cumulative causation, a spiral effect—that we can't stop, we can't stop the economy from growing, because if it stops then we'll have another crisis—the economic crisis.

And so the whole structure is really in need of a complete, radical change. Right. Otherwise we just run into one crisis after another. An economic crisis, you know, we have unemployment, the system can't be, it collapses every now and again. An environmental crisis, the systems collapse around us. A social crisis, social unrest, social inequity. So the system is moving from one crisis to another, all the time.

Then we've got the real problem is how to get out of this? How do we deconstruct it? How do we actually make a transition to an alternative society? And that's the really big problem because it requires political will. Where does this political will come from when you have institutions in power that are actually invested in the system which is now existing.

So you have to have a change in political structure, change in the institutions. And the biggest challenge then is how do you achieve that and maintain democracy, and maintain a peaceful transition to an alternative society? Because the alternative is that we continue go through crisis and crisis and we end-up with not a peaceful transition. We end up with wars. We end-up with social disruption. And that's what happening now. People are starting to fight over resources. We're already seeing it, we've had two major wars over oil. We're going to see a lot more disruption and social disruption. People who are pushed off their land, due to climate change, due to sea-level rise. They're going to be shifting and where are they gonna go? They're gonna end-up fighting over resources. So there's a real, real problem that the human society is gonna become extremely unstable, unless we're smart enough, and do it soon enough, to actually address how we transition to an alternative society.