

Green Economy, Red Herring

This year sees Rio plus 20 years and much activity especially from United Nations (UN) related institutions to push forward various agendas which the environmentally concerned might welcome. The financial and banking crisis signals for many the tip of the iceberg of reality into which modern industrial economies must inevitably run. Growth of material and energy throughput is then doomed to sink. However, the reports and rhetoric prepared for Rio have little to do with attempts to revive the anti-growth and limits to growth discourse under de-growth or décroissance (a topic explored in a special issue of *Environmental Values* next year). No, the thrust of the argument being put on the agenda is that re-establishing growth as fast as possible is good, if not essential and unquestionable, but it should be a bit greener. We might venture to ask why this is deemed an adequate response to biophysical limits, increasing social inequity and general systems failure?

At the base of the international response is a dispute over ‘what is the problem?’ in the first place. If you are amongst the top few per cent of the worlds’ population who own the vast majority of its wealth and run its business interests then there is no problem. A financial crisis is just another opportunity to make money by switching assets (e.g., out of dollars or Euros and into gold) and then switching back when the time is ripe. War, famine and environmental disasters are all opportunities for the business men and women with the right goods and services in the right place at the right time. One man’s poverty is another man’s cheap labour and source of cost-efficient profit making. This line of thinking is what we now see being expressed far and wide as necessary to address environmental problems from climate change (Stern 2006) to biodiversity (TEEB 2010) using newly created financial instruments (Spash 2010a; 2011).

The approach has been nicely encapsulated in the UN’s promotion of the ‘Green Economy’ with a more than 600 page report released last December. A UNEP policy brief aimed at informing Rio 2012 provides a succinct explanation of what this means:

In the transition to a Green Economy, policymakers should ensure that the full range of goods and services provided by ecosystems, including those which are currently non-monetised, are fully integrated in decision making and public policy. [...] Placing a value on ecosystem services through mechanisms that facilitate investment in ecosystems will at the same time benefit local people and the private sector who are rewarded for good environmental stewardship. (UNEP 2011: 3)

Faith is required, namely faith in market mechanisms and the ability of technical experts to first value the environment and then capture those values with market institutions and private property rights. Yet the message is simultaneously intertwined with expressions of concern for the poor, the seriousness of environmental

problems and the need for change. We are told that, the Green Economy 'is a new development path that is based on sustainability principles and ecological economics' (UNEP 2011: 2). The model is of course not new but involves rapid deployment of a growth stimulus package which is now Green because it will use 'economic models for wealth creation, to focus increasingly on the value of ecosystem goods and services and natural capital' (UNEP 2011: 7). 'Compared with previous development paths, the uniqueness of a Green Economy is that it can directly turn natural capital into economic value whilst maintaining it, and conduct total cost accounting' (UNEP 2011: 8). As if the smell of herring were not strong enough to lose the environmental trail, we are also informed that the aim is for 'a common language of comprehensive ecosystem valuation'. The environment neatly slips off the agenda and is replaced by growth, jobs, capital investment and wealth accumulation. The environmentalists, conservation biologists and ecologists can be replaced by accountants.

Industrialisation and the spread of markets and consumerism was long ago recognised as corrosive of social and individual values. In this issue, Cannavò (2012) shows this concern formed an integral part of Jeffersonian Republicanism and the writings of Thoreau. The struggle for a more meaningful life which is environmentally benign is both a personal and community challenge. Thoreau's ideal appears as a halfway house between living in towns to toil for needless luxuries and realising personal integrity and moral virtue from living in wild lands. What the Green Economy lacks is the essential reconnection with Nature that would put humans in context as members of a larger community of organisms. This divergence from conquering Nature is one that separates Thoreau from Jefferson, the environmentalist from the developer. The aim of Thoreau is to tread lightly on the planet while gaining basic requirements for personal flourishing, as exemplified by his experiment growing beans within a semi-wild natural setting. The point is rather different from maximising production while hoping to avoid destroying the basic systems upon which we depend.

The links between human social and environmental relationships are too easily neglected in favour of the simplistic splitting of the world into us and them, man and nature, culture and wilderness, economy and environment. As Matthews (2012) explains, the ontological human-animal distinction has been employed at various points in time to designate women, children, indigenous peoples, and 'others', as non-human. This serves to justify violence and oppression. Nature as object for economic exploitation falls within this same frame. Matthews calls for us to deconstruct how we think and conduct our lives so that we might feel, think and act differently.

The complexity of meanings of Nature is too easily brushed aside by calls for comprehensive total cost accounting. Ioris (2012) refers to the technobureaucratic rationality of monetisation and water pricing as removing the plurality of meanings associated with the allocation, use and conservation of

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water. Environmental economics is described as having subverted other values. He recognises a sentient ecology in which knowledge emerges out of feelings, sensitivities and skills developed through long experiences in particular environments. This bears a striking resemblance to Thoreau, and also attacks strong social constructivism as implying human cognition outside the world of Nature. At the same time Ioris argues for the values of water being generated from a perpetual interplay between individuals, their social groupings, and the multiple forms of socio-ecological interaction. Water takes on different meanings for different people. He concludes that systems of valuation are intensely politicised, involving struggles between groups. Thus, no single value dominates but multiple systems of values overlap and meaning is constantly reconstructed in relation to material, symbolic and discursive practices.

That the conceptualisation of reality is subject to contestation and change is exemplified by Van Assche, Bell and Teampau (2012). They argue that knowledge and power are intertwined. An imposed scientific discourse for environmental protection is shown to have in part alienated Romanians in the swamps of the Danube delta. The lack of trust in outside authorities creates a dismissive attitude to the value of wildlife and ecosystem protection. When this mixes with the personal experience of working directly in the swamplands and traditional and cultural values, the result can be confused and self-contradictory discourses. The same birds are at one moment described as beautiful and the next as ugly, while socio-economic problems are blamed on particular species that are derided as needing extermination because they compete with humans. The recent privatisation of common resources (fish and reed) that local people once depended upon did no more to help than earlier development plans and fish farms of the Soviet era. Both economic models have identical core features of growth and exploitation with an imposed technocentric value frame that fails to relate to local people.

Rejecting a single correct discourse challenges the traditional approach of science and claims to truth based upon objectivity. Western governments are increasingly aware of the potential for open scientific debate to undermine policy positions, which they claim are scientific, factually based and objective. Muzzling government scientists to prevent them talking to the media is now openly practised in Canada (Ghosh 2012) and was my personal experience in Australia (Spash 2010b). Contrary to the claims of the Green Economy, protection of the environment is in opposition to traditional economic interests and therefore the discourse must be controlled. Once again a series of dichotomies are employed to support a black-and-white, us-and-them mentality in which rhetoric replaces reason. Such a conflict is discussed by Robins (2012) for the case of genetically modified crops in Australia. The problem goes beyond one of different discourses and values and exposes changing reality through technology. The result is to remove whole ways of life and relationships to Nature.

A core of concern running through the papers in this issue relates to the metaphysical (ontological) questions of what exists, what are the primary entities of concern, what are their most general features and relationships? The ontological understanding of the world we inhabit appears challenged in a changing social and economic system that is undergoing crisis. One tendency, as seen in some of the papers, is to move from the realisation that knowledge is created in contested social and political contexts to assuming that all reality is a social construction. From there it is a small step to claiming all positions are equally valid. However, this seems to confuse ontology with epistemology. The distinction is between what exists and how we form knowledge about the world and what then is the meaning of truly knowing something.

The environmental movement has long depended upon scientific investigation, empirical evidence and the acceptance of a biophysical reality. At the same time the social context and community aspects of valuing and relating to the world are accepted and seen as important, from Thoreau's good life to the social norms preventing littering, as investigated by Torgler, García-Valiñas and Macintyre (2012). The vision for the future must, then, combine social ecological and economic understanding – but not in some simplistic unifying language of a Green Economy, nor through denying basic realities.

Societal, economic and environmental crises are unified as the result of an old but common deception that growth is good, more is better and there can be more for everyone. In the Green Economy the poor are promised environmental riches, recycled materials and renewable energy can be exploited without environmental impact, and technology always finds a substitute for what runs out. All things can be made compatible by ignoring the basic contradiction between ever-expanding human activity and a finite world. The illusion grows thinner every day, but in Rio expect to see people wearing green tinted spectacles and waving smoked fish at each other.

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