

The State of Ecological Economics: A Decade of European Experience

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'Ten Years Are Gone'

The subtitle above comes from a song by blues artist John Mayall recounting a decade of turmoil in which he had run numerous bands with some outstanding musicians such as guitarists Eric Clapton and Peter Green. Never quite able to keep a band together Mayall still produced some exciting music and managed to influence a whole generation of rock and jazz-blues fusion artists. His experience might be summarised as being inspired by new ideas, challenging the orthodoxy, fighting record companies and striving for what he believed was important through creative work.

The recent history of Ecological Economics could be written in similar terms. The desire for something new, and excitement over the potential directions, was very palpable at the first ESEE conference in Versailles. By the late 1980s many environmental economists had become dissatisfied with the state of the profession and its increasingly abstract approach to issues and its apparent lack of policy relevance. Natural scientists were viewed as discussing issues, such as acidic deposition, without paying attention to the political and economic context. Individuals arguing for the importance of combining economics and ecology were often ostracised from their academic communities or at best marginalised. So why not start a whole new agenda and empower all the disparate academics who were feeling left out in the cold or forced to conform their economic ideas in order to make a living?

The desire for a more radical direction was particularly prevalent in Europe amongst the founding members of the ESEE. As I have argued elsewhere (Spash, 1999 which is basically an apologia for Ecological Economics), a more traditional and conservative approach was pursued by many, especially in North America, and seems quite often to have dominated the Society's journal, particularly the special issues. This movement for moderate change has viewed the field as constituting economics AND ecology with links primarily achieved through combining independent disciplinary models, extending cost-benefit analysis, and indeed doing many things mainstream economists would have no qualms in accepting. This can be contrasted with the more radical European element calling for a total rethink and often a different economic paradigm. Social concern and political economy have been to the fore of this school of thought and remain so.

Recently Inge Ropke has written in the Society's journal explaining some of the history gleaned from a series of interviews she

conducted with leading figures in the development of Ecological Economics (Ropke, 2004; Ropke, 2005). This confirms the division of approaches between "ecology & economics" and "social-ecological-economics". The current political climate in the USA seems set to make such a divide continue as being more radical is made hard for academics and everyone else (Spash, 2006). This has also contributed to a tendency towards the pragmatic justification. For example, at the 2005 USSEE conference defence of ecosystems valuation was conducted almost exclusively on the grounds of belief in political impact as opposed to any theoretical basis for the numbers being produced. This was the "If the politicians and business like it then that's good enough for me.", and "Either you're with us and practical or against us and idealistic" school of thought. The term "fundamentalist" was even used to deride theoretical objections! Lucky I left my turban at home that day.

Of course Europe is not devoid of similarly narrow thinking (see Söderbaum, 2005), but generally awareness of history of thought, political science, applied philosophy, social theory and methodological debate have ameliorated such tendencies. I should note that a concern for theory and methodology has not prevented maintaining close input to practical policy, advising government agencies and generally having an impact. Yet the magic bullet approach seems to be a persistent favourite, with single numbers topping the agenda. As if a big number is all that counts (must be a male thing?).

If there is one lesson we should have learnt by now, open debate and deliberative participation is necessary to address value divides and a healthy society is one which allows, enables, encourages and engages in those debates. Ecological Economics certainly has the diversity of opinion for some good debates, and should aim to spread them to society in general. However, too often the more radical ideas seem swamped by the traditional, tried and tested, the means by which institutions have established power and the structures within which individuals have made their niches.

At the ISEE meeting in Montreal deep concern was expressed from the conference floor over the Boulding Award to two prominent neoclassical thinkers: the resource economist, Partha Dasgupta, and the environmental economist Karl-Göran Mäler. Some people were mystified as to what was the concern (including the award committee) while others were shocked that such conservative economists should be seen as representing a prize in honour of Kenneth Boulding and Ecological Economics. There was clearly a divide between the scientists on the

award committee and the members in the audience. The lesson was clear, there are many, even senior, members of Ecological Economics who have no conception of Ecological Economics as something new and innovative with the potential to radically change economic thought. This was brought home to me again at the 2005 USSEE conference where some delegates interchanged the terms ecological and environmental economics, and when questioned why had no conception of any differences.

In Europe we tried to address this issue head on. At the 1998 Geneva conference there were many unthinking pieces on how to place a price on this that and the other. They were often not very good in their own terms let alone as Ecological Economics. The conference was obviously being treated as a close substitute for environmental and resource economics, and possibly an easier option. In Vienna we took a more structured approach to sessions and much time was spent on informing delegates as to directions of research in which the conference was interested. This was taken a step further using Frontiers I and II where the ESEE conferences were restricted to around 100 delegates and tightly focussed on the development of theoretical and policy insights which would not be found in a typical environmental and resource economics conference. Experimental approaches to conference sessions were also employed to encourage greater thought and discussion than typical. The return to a large format conference in Portugal showed considerable success because the focus of the sessions and majority of the papers remained distinct from the type of work on-going in environmental and resource economics. The positive alternatives were coming through.

While those of us who have been working for the Society over the last decade might have hoped to have gone further we must be proud of what has been achieved in a relatively short time. We do tend to be excessively self critical; as I noted in my address to the Cambridge conference, often we appear like a teenager always looking in the mirror and searching for spots to burst. Two decades ago there were few opportunities for an economist who wanted to study the environment, the posts available tended to be for mainstream economists who might dabble on environmental issues and then they were expected to maintain neoclassical credentials, do mathematical modelling to the exclusion of much else and basically avoid anything looking like other social sciences. Collaboration with natural scientist was seen as more safe because there was no perceived connection with economics. There were no post graduate courses in the area and few undergraduate ones, let alone summer schools. The world has indeed been transformed with the potential to study Ecological Economics through higher education, get a job and achieve professorial status without compromising on interdisciplinary ideals. I'm not saying this is

the easiest option but it is a feasible one, which it was not in the past. You may find yourself in a Geography Department, Business School, Development Studies Institute or some similar abode, where diversity is more openly accepted than in Economics, but you can have a career. In the past you might have wondered if you were the only person in the world who questioned economic orthodoxy due to your concern over environmental problems, but now you can attend regular European and international meetings where you will meet like minded colleagues. This success is in part due to the existence of a professional association and the presence of several journal outlets with editors ready to welcome work in the field, as well as to the dedication and perseverance of colleagues without much thanks and often in the face of adversity.

Neither should we forget the success in winning research funds, establishing research groups, and conducting a range of major research and networking projects (e.g., VALSE, EVE, FRONTIERS, CIVICS, ADVISOR, PATH to mention just some of those with which I've been involved). The members of ESEE have been particularly active within the European Commission's research programmes. For example, in the mid 1990s Martin O'Connor was particularly successful in this regard and his and Sylvie Fauchoux's efforts strongly helped establish important European networks which in turn spawned further research projects. Another success story is that of Fritz Hinterberger who since the mid 90s has run an independent Ecological Economics research institute by consistently winning competitive grants, and in so doing has provided a nurturing ground for many colleagues. There are now numerous clusters of ecological economists around Europe within Universities and research institutes. More generally young researchers have been free to conduct agendas of which one might only dream twenty years ago. The research being produced by all this research also helps offer new directions and alternatives to the tried and tested.

The Next Ten Years

The question we as a Society must ask ourselves now is what should Ecological Economics do next? The membership has changed over the last decade so that some good people who were critical thinkers and active are no longer members, while many young people are interested in the potential the Society seems to express but have little depth of knowledge. For me there are several reasons we have maintained this association:

- (i) fellow feeling,
- (ii) relief at finding like minded individuals,
- (iii) empowerment for those previously isolated who had been forced to adopt (mainly neoclassical) approaches in order to maintain a career or job,
- (iv) the chance to make a real impact on policy,

(v) travelling and meeting people across the globe, (vi) the prospect of making others aware of the diverse bodies of work relevant to economy-environment interactions (from sociology to psychology, from philosophy to soil science).

While these are unifying forces the points also identify some of the greatest challenges. Whereas 15 years ago there were relatively few formal associations in the area, today there are a growing number of professional societies and journals, which include those addressing science and society, integrated assessment, environmental politics, environmental history and the sociology of consumption. In trying to combine all these perspectives the Society finds itself competing for peoples attention relative to their specific interests. The future requires stronger links with other professional societies including those from the natural sciences.

The communication with natural scientists has been made easier in as far as the policy context has changed to favour placing science in a social context. For example the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has moved from a totally scientific assessment to addressing social and economic impacts in a more open fashion. However, there remains a large divide in terms of understanding (Spash, 2002). Natural scientists still far too often see socio-economics as an add on to assuage political needs rather than an essential element in understanding the problem. The use of monetary valuation, the return to accounting approaches of the 1970s, and the prevalence of benefit transfer, all show how simple socio-economics is demanded by natural scientist who would be appalled if their own areas of study were treated in the same simplistic manner. I am still amazed that ecologists who have contributed so many interesting concepts, including the complex adaptive system, expect to skip lightly though the political minefield that is economics and human affairs.

If there is an area of endeavour in which I think Ecological Economics can really make a difference then it is understanding the complexity which constitutes human behaviour. Progress has been made in getting across the message that there are a range of real alternatives to address complex environmental problems. The mainstream economic approach emphasises quantitative models, cost-benefit analysis, capitalist market instruments and static single optimal solutions to decisions. This is seen as in conflict with qualitative models, discursive analysis, offering new institutions and seeing decisions as process based. Certainly Ecological Economics was not established to merely replicate the work being done by environmental and resource economists. However, Ecological Economics has better things to do than enter an argument about choosing one extreme or the other. Instead we should offer understanding as to how choosing specific options leads to specific framings of the world and how all framings limit understanding. We need to show

how the social and natural sciences can be improved through a greater awareness of the political economy in which we live.

However as Ecological Economists we cannot be naive about the role of institutions in restricting and closing down debate and protecting their own interest. We require institutions which can combine different framings to view the world from a different (more holistic) pluralistic perspective. This does place Ecological Economics in opposition to approaches which are monistic, narrow and inward looking.

I believe the most progressive elements of Ecological Economics have moved beyond a preoccupation with mainstream economics and avoid being cornered into debates which try and paint a black and white picture of us and them. This is not to deny the divisions, which are substantive and real, but rather to emphasise the need for developing positive alternatives rather than negative attacks. The future is one where government agencies require a range of options to address environmental problems as scientific and social issues. Positive ways forward are to research and explain the range of policy appraisal techniques and approaches to modelling and understanding the world and to set them within the context of their own assumptions.

The strength of Ecological Economics is in making clear that complexity and strong uncertainty are normal and can be address by better alternatives than we have seen so far. The problems facing the Society, as a microcosm of the world, are that there are no simple answers and open democratic debate requires engaging people who are preoccupied with their own little worlds, careers, problems and egos, and often, despite their own best intentions, fail to protect the social and environmental structures which support them. Ecological economics has a substantial future in aiding better understanding of why humans continue to destroy, often by neglect and apathy, what they say they value.

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