



COMMENTARY

A Reply to Levrel and Martinet

Clive L. Spash

Institute for the Multi-Level Governance & Development, Department of Socioeconomics, WU Vienna University of Economics and Business, Gebäude D4, Welthandelsplatz 1, 1020 Vienna, Austria

1. Introduction

Levrel and Martinet (2020; hereafter LM) confuse two separate issues: classification relating to actual groups (their beliefs, motives and ideology) and the implications of a groups' (often paradigmatic) commitments including the implications for ontology, epistemology and methodology. The first concerns the existence of specific identifiable groups, which LM seem to accept even in terms of the validity of the classifications NRE/NEP/SEE. The second concerns how those groups' ideas fit with ideas relating to ecological, as opposed to any other, economics, and including incommensurability and incompatibility between theories, ideas and paradigms.

2. Categorisation of Ecological Economics

LM start by misrepresenting my work as being 'normative' and needing to meet the requirements of 'positivism'. They state that any classification should provide "a positive diagnosis about the different ways of thinking within a field"; "this classification is more a normative view of what Spash thinks ecological economics should be rather than a positive description of the field"; "the positive and normative dimensions of the classification are not completely distinguished (or recognized) and the classification ends up defining who are the 'true/genuine' ecological economists". This misrepresents the work of categorisation as being motivated by a hidden normative and prescriptive agenda while claiming the only approach to such work *should be* a descriptive and positivist (empiricist?) one.

First, I have rejected the normative-positive dichotomy and LM fail to take this into account, ignoring the approach of critical realism that I have advocated, and instead misleadingly represent my work as if purely 'normative' (a term left undefined). Second, the categorisation is no less scientific for this rejection and I contest does provide an accurate description of the field. Indeed, LM state the classification is: "stimulating", "based on an historical view", has "many common-sense criteria", is "easily understandable", "is a good way to distinguish different categories of ecological economists", offers "an intuitive perspective", and has initiated "an important debate in the community".

LM are mistaken in the role and requirement that they attribute to classifications. They state: "original contributions in ecological

economics, which participate to the consolidation of the field, cannot be classified within one of these categories unambiguously". That the categories are not and need not be positivist, absolute and unambiguous is unproblematic when understanding such concepts as dialectical and qualitative. These characteristics are recognised as central to conceptualisation in critical realism and also noted as such by Georgescu-Roegen. "Indeed, most of our fundamental concepts are dialectical: justice, democracy, good, evil, abstraction, workable competition, entrepreneur, farmer, occupation, belief, and so forth." (Georgescu-Roegen, 2009 [1979]: 110).

LM misrepresent my definitions of NEP, NRE and SEE in several ways:

- As accusations. They state that NEP and NRE are "accused" (by me) of certain associations (e.g., business, mathematics). The question I address in my work is the extent to which such positions are actualised as understood by the definitions offered; hypothesised definitions are not accusations.
- As biased. The use of 'New' for NRE and NEP is criticised, which simply designates a change and is explained as such. In contrast, the category SEE is not qualified with 'New' simply because it is recognised as defining "a return to the core principles of ecological economics" (Farley and Washington, 2018: 448).
- As controlling mechanisms. Categorisation "forces scholars involved in ecological economics to choose their side". This implies that 'scholars' lack substantive content based grounds for their theoretical beliefs and is misleading because my work describes and analyses the real paradigmatic struggles in which ecological economists are engaged (Spash, 2020).

3. Factual Inaccuracies

LM claim I put forward a dichotomous classification. There are in fact three primary groupings and seven hypothesised categories, not two. My empirical work in the *Cambridge Journal of Economics* addresses all seven categories (Spash and Ryan, 2012); the study is cited but the content is absent from the discussion by LM.

LM state that "NEP do not have the 'chance' to be considered as economists". In fact categories of NEP combined with economics (NRE

E-mail address: clive.spash@wu.ac.at.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2020.106695>

Received 21 April 2020; Accepted 22 April 2020

Available online 22 May 2020

0921-8009/ © 2020 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

or SEE or both) are explicitly hypothesised, investigated and presented in my work. These possibilities are made explicit in the diagrammatic presentations of works LM cite (Figs. 1 and 2 Spash, 2012a: 31 and 32; Spash, 2013: 354 and 360) and a book chapter they do not cite (Spash, 2012b: 40 and 43). They also form part of the empirical study which presents evidence for both heterodox and orthodox *economists* populating these and other categories, with results reported in tables and a figure (Spash and Ryan, 2012: 1114). However, categories do not choose people, but rather people (e.g., ecological, heterodox and resource/environmental economists) associate their positions with categories.

LM state that: “ecology looks like a simple ‘social object’ in a pure constructivist view. In short, Spash’s classification simply overlooks one of the foundation [sic] of the field, the scientific ecology [sic].” This misrepresents my work over thirty years which has explicitly included and emphasised the role and importance of biophysical reality and Nature. It specifically fails to recognise the category ‘ecology’ included in the published diagrams (cited above). LM also incorrectly state that NRE are deprived of any ecological qualities, because first the category can combine with others, and second, the disciplinary fields of ecology, conservation biology and biophysical modelling are explicitly designated as relevant for a subset of NRE.

LM present SEE as imposing a specific ontology dogmatically and state that “followers *have to* endorse the ontological position of Spash” (their emphasis). In *New Foundations* I explicitly state that the proposed ontology is read from the history of ecological economics, but is put forward tentatively for discussion (Spash, 2012c: 45).

LM state that SEE is not an open approach in terms of methods and that I argue that ecological economists must “reject any tool or concept that has a link with mainstream economics”. I have never stated this in any of my work. In accord with critical realism, I argue any methods can be employed but they must be appropriate to investigating their objects of study (Spash, 2020). Similarly, conceptualisation is (in)validated on the basis of its practical adequacy in relating to real structures and objects (Sayer, 1992).

LM state “Spash considers all the transdisciplinary concepts/theories as suspicious”, although they then reference my definition of strong vs. weak transdisciplinarity that actually and specifically distinguishes grounds for valid transdisciplinary approaches (Spash, 2013: 358).

4. Misrepresenting Arguments on Pluralism

LM claim the three categories (NRE/NEP/SEE) “delegitimize methodological pluralism” and specifically reference the journal *Ecological Economics* in this respect. LM state my criticism of the journal is that it: “contains mainly contributions from the *Bad* neoclassical economists (Spash, 2012b).” (LM’s emphasis). I have never used such a phrase as “Bad neoclassical economists”. They misleadingly attribute to me the argument that “the journal should not be a broad forum of discussion”. My argument is that the journal has been and is failing to represent ecological economics and that publishing diverse contradictory articles does not constitute creating “a broad forum for discussion”. This is a position supported by some prominent ecological economists, such as Herman Daly and Joshua Farley (see references in Spash, 2020).

LM use distorted and recombined quotations from *New Foundations* (Spash, 2012c) as follows: “neoclassical approaches are [...] detrimental to developing an alternative economic vision,’ and a fruitful

alternative – a ‘free ecological economics’ (our emphasize) [sic] – should find some roots and tools elsewhere”. This takes words out of context, misleadingly refers to “tools” not in the original passage referenced, and merges different sentences, misrepresenting and changing the original meaning. In the sentence preceding these remarks (Ibid pp.45–46) I state that “grounds for making pluralism meaningful are required and that implies finding common ground for interaction and communication using common concepts”, and relate the field to heterodox economics.

LM do not address or counter the problems with methodological pluralism raised in *New Foundations*, e.g. eclecticism (Spash, 2012c: 40–41). In not distinguishing different forms of pluralism they misrepresent my argument as denying political freedom, pluralism in pedagogics and use of diverse methods. I have not made any such arguments against these forms of pluralism and the lack of clarity in distinguishing different forms of pluralism here is highly misleading.

5. Closing Remarks

The prominent use of a 1960s Spaghetti Western, *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, to frame the commentary misrepresents my arguments. My categorisation is established on the basis of explaining the object of study, not a simplistic ethical dichotomy of good vs bad. Ugliness is an aesthetic judgment that is irrelevant here. LM misrepresent the motivation for my work (as established purely to “target” some “free rider ecological economists”, their terms not mine) through this personification of the categories.

My research has aimed to: (i) identify actualised categories, and (ii) critically analyse their consistency in terms of achieving progress in ecological economics. While the theoretical foundations for this work are not ‘neutral’ neither are they ‘normative’, in the derogatory sense implied by LM, nor are they unscientific. I certainly do argue that SEE is the way forward. However, contrary to LM’s caricature of my position, I have explained this through decades of sustained scientific argumentation. There are then numerous missing references to the larger body of my scientific work—cost-benefit analysis, contingent valuation, climate change, biodiversity loss, environmental ethics, social psychology, policy evaluation, philosophy of science—that lies behind the categories, and conclusions drawn about the implications of holding specific categorised positions.

References

- Farley, J., Washington, H., 2018. Circular firing squads: a response to ‘The neoclassical Trojan horse of steady-state economics’ by Pirgmaier. *Ecol. Econ.* 147, 442–449.
- Georgescu-Roegen, N., 2009. Methods in economic science. In: Spash, C.L. (Ed.), *Ecological Economics: Critical Concepts in the Environment*, 4 Volumes. Routledge, London, pp. 105–115 (1979).
- Levell, H., Martinet, V., 2020. Ecological economists: the good, the bad, and the ugly? *Ecol. Econ.* (in this issue).
- Sayer, A., 1992. Theory, observation and practical adequacy. In: Sayer, A. (Ed.), *Method in Social Science: A Realist Approach*. Routledge, London, pp. 45–84.
- Spash, C.L., 2012a. Towards the Integration of Social, Economic and Ecological Knowledge. Institute for Multi-level Governance and Development, Vienna, pp. 35.
- Spash, C.L., 2012b. Towards the integration of social, economic and ecological knowledge. In: Gerber, J.-F., Steppacher, R. (Eds.), *Towards an Integrated Paradigm in Heterodox Economics*. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, pp. 26–46.
- Spash, C.L., 2012c. New foundations for ecological economics. *Ecol. Econ.* 77, 36–47.
- Spash, C.L., 2013. The shallow or the deep ecological economics movement? *Ecol. Econ.* 93, 351–362.
- Spash, C.L., 2020. A tale of three paradigms. *Ecol. Econ.* 169, 1–14.
- Spash, C.L., Ryan, A., 2012. Economic schools of thought on the environment: investigating unity and division. *Camb. J. Econ.* 36, 1091–1121.