



Structured pluralism in ecological economics – A reply to Peter Söderbaum's commentary

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 29 February 2016
Received in revised form 15 August 2016
Accepted 19 August 2016
Available online 29 August 2016

JEL classification:

Q56
Q57

Keywords:

Sustainability economics
Ecological economics
Efficiency
Pluralism

ABSTRACT

Peter Söderbaum argues in his commentary, concerning my article on sustainability economics (Remig 2015), for more open and radical ecological economics. I agree with that statement. However, I reject Söderbaum's interpretation that my arguments foster mainstreamed ecological economics or dictatorship. In my critique of sustainability economics, I raised several issues that have remained unspecified and that potentially lead to unsustainable development patterns, once put into practice. Söderbaum does not reply to these conceptual challenges of sustainability economics. In this commentary, I argue that “structured pluralism” (Dow, 2004) is a constituent element of ecological economics. I welcome Peter Söderbaum's proposal for a discussion about the definition of economics and suggest to rely on Ronald Coase's proposal to define economics as a science that studies the working of the economic system. I conclude that sustainability economics in its current form is closer to neoclassical than ecological economics.

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1. Introduction

Ecological economics is, up to now, the relevant school of an economic analysis of sustainable development and socio-ecological systems. It has established a community, journals, societies, conferences, and chairs at universities. During the existence of the field for more than a quarter of a century – with roots that reach back far further (Martinez-Alier, 1990) – there have always been discussions where the academic discipline should evolve to. One of the most recent discussions is the one about sustainability economics proposed by Baumgärtner and Quaas (2010a,b). Söderbaum (2015) replied to my survey article on sustainability economics (Remig, 2015). I welcome the opportunity to continue the discussion about sustainability and ecological economics. I agree with many points Peter Söderbaum raises in his article. Nevertheless, I disagree with some of his core ideas.

I strongly reject his claim that my argument leads to unified, “mainstreamed” ecological economics and dictatorship (Söderbaum, 2015, p. 423). In my critique of sustainability economics, I raised several conceptual issues that have remained unspecified and that potentially result in unsustainable development patterns, once put into practice. Therefore, we need to develop a strong and sound theoretical founding

for ecological economics and for sustainability economics. Söderbaum (2015) does not contribute to unravel the veil of fuzziness around the concept of sustainability and unfortunately misreads my argument: “In this community [of ecological economists] we should, according to Remig, reduce all versions of ecological economics to one paradigm which is clearly specified and presented.” (p.420) On the contrary, my image of the “big tent” of ecological economics (Howarth, 2008; Spash and Ryan, 2012) illustrates the co-existence of varieties of ecological economics that have developed in contrast to the monolithic version of neoclassical economics. I fully agree with Söderbaum's (2015, p. 420) main argument “that it is natural and more constructive to expect ‘varieties of economics’ and also ‘varieties of ecological economics’.” Thus, I here argue for a “structured pluralism” (Dow, 2004) in ecological economics.

As I highlighted in my review paper (Remig, 2015), the relationship between sustainability economics and ecological economics is conceived differently by different authors in the debate. Diverse methodological and ontological foundations of sustainability economics thus co-exist. Söderbaum (2015) sees in the new concept a promising term: “I somehow felt that ‘sustainability economics’ was an appropriate term for more radical versions of ecological economics. I certainly accept that other ecological economists may use the term differently or may prefer to abandon it altogether.” (p.423) Even though Baumgärtner and Quaas (2010a) also see in sustainability economics an alternative to ecological economics, I doubt that they share Söderbaum's understanding about sustainability economics. Their idea is less critical and less radical

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than current ecological economics because they borrow much more from neoclassical resource and environmental economics (see [Section 4](#)).

In the following, I respond to several other points, Peter Söderbaum raised. I agree that a discussion about the definition of economics is necessary and propose to refer to Ronald Coase's systemic understanding of economics ([Section 2](#)). I also argue that structured pluralism is a core feature of ecological economics ([Section 3](#)). By comparing neoclassical, sustainability, and ecological economics, I conclude that Baumgärtner and Quaas' understanding of sustainability economics is closer to neoclassical than to ecological economics ([Section 4](#)).

2. Defining Economics

I agree with Peter Söderbaum that a discussion about the definition of economics is required. Baumgärtner and Quaas (2010a, pp. 446–447) build their idea of sustainability economics on Robbins' definition of economics, i.e. the economics' mainstream definition: economics “studies human behaviour as a relationship between [given] ends and scarce means which have alternative uses” (Robbins, 2007 [1932]).

Yet, this definition is not without caveats: “The methodology of neoclassical economics ignores how our culture and history affect how we know and how what we have known affects the systems we are studying.” (Norgaard, 1989, p. 53) For Backhouse and Medema (2009) the Robbins definition of economics fostered a specific kind of economics – the one that we ecological economists seek to avoid: “This laid a foundation that could be seen as justifying not only the narrowing of economic theory to the theory of constrained maximization or rational choice but also the ‘imperialism’ of economists’ ventures into the other social sciences” (p.805) Colander (2009) highlights that not only an academic definition of economics is necessary, but also one defining the policy advice character of economics. Here, Söderbaum (2015) marks an important point because he includes the management of resources in his proposal for a definition of economics: “Economics is multidimensional management of (limited) resources in a democratic society” (p.421).

We should discuss what the mainstream definition of economic entails and which alternatives can serve best our cause for more sustainable lifestyles, harmony with nature, justice, and fairness. I propose yet another definition of economics based on Ronald Coase that is much closer to the idea of ecological economics because it shares a systemic understanding of the economy. Coase (1998, p. 73) defined economics as a discipline that studies “the working of the economic system.” Such a systemic understanding of economics is congruent with the ideas of ecological economics and Coase's proposition can thus build an alternative to Robbins' definition. Of course, Coase's definition is very general – but so is Robbins'. Contrary to Robbins, Coase does not entail the neoclassical economics framework but rather builds bridges towards understanding the economy as a complex adaptive system (see [Holling, 2001](#)). Coase has been associated with the neoliberal program of economics but he has been “dissenting” from mainstream at various occasions ([Medema, 2008](#)). His article on the problem of social cost (Coase, 1960) is a classic in our field. Even though, he is often referred to, “most economists are unfamiliar with Coase's critiques and with the alternative approach that he is advocating, and are content, instead, to conveniently lump him into the Chicago mold” ([Medema, 1995, p. 16](#)).

Coase (1995) rejected to view economics as a positive science. Friedman (1953) argues for economics as a positive science free from any normative content: “In short, positive economics is, or can be, an “objective” science, in precisely the same sense as any of the physical sciences.” (p.4) The goal of economics, according to Friedman, is to make accurate predictions: “The ultimate goal of a positive science is the development of a “theory” or, “hypothesis” that yields valid and meaningful (i.e., not truistic) predictions about phenomena not yet observed.” (p.7) Coase (1981) on the contrary states: “Testable predictions are not all that matters. And realism in our assumptions is needed if our theories are ever to help us understand why the [economic] systems

works in the way it does. Realism in assumptions forces us to analyse the world that exists, not some imaginary world that does not.” (p.18).

Both the importance of empirical foundations as well as the dynamics of complex adaptive systems are not sufficiently taken up in neoclassical economics. Spangenberg (2015, p. 101) thus states: “The standard models in neoclassic economics and its derivatives like environmental and resource economics have been developed based on assumptions which are not compatible with the observable real world, including the complexity of evolving systems.” This is the kind of economics that Ronald Coase has called “blackboard economics” (Coase, 1988, p. 19). While different definitions of economics co-exist, we should be careful to choose the most relevant one for ecological economics. To understand the working of the economic system, plurality in theory and methodology is important.

3. Structured Pluralism in Ecological Economics

I very much welcome pluralism in ecological economics. We know to value diversity not least because of our interest in resilient social-ecological systems. Norgaard (1989) provides a very convincing argument why pluralism is required: “ecological economics will more likely evolve into a useful discipline if it maintains the breadth of the methodological base of economics and ecology and reaches out to the methodologies of other disciplines as well.” (p.53) To Peter Söderbaum's question whether we need a more methodologically open and theoretically radical version of ecological economics, I clearly answer: “Yes, indeed.”

Unfortunately, my message has not come through, because Peter Söderbaum apparently mistook my argument and suggests in his reply that I foster monopoly and dictatorship: “mainstreaming by aiming at a single idea about economics or ecological economics is [...] more compatible with monopoly and dictatorship than with democracy.” (p.423) I have not claimed to mainstream ecological economics and strongly reject dictatorship, which to me, as an ecological economist, is incompatible with the values and normative foundation of sustainable development. Instead of claiming new labels, my point rather was that we should focus on developing ecological economics further. I have thus argued for pluralism in ecological economics and also in the theories of sustainable development (Enders and Remig, 2015). Yet, pluralism should not be confused with anything goes. Sheila Dow (2004) has coined the term “structured pluralism”, which provides helpful insights to our discussion: “Structured pluralism, then, is the advocacy of a range of methodological approaches to economics which, like the range of social structures, is not infinite.” (p. 287–288).

Ecological economics is an academic field that is deliberately diverse in contrast to the monolithic version of neoclassical economics. It has started out from a cooperation of economists and ecologists (Costanza, 1989; Røpke, 2004, 2005) and is open to different methodological approaches (Norgaard, 1989; Spash, 2012). The field's focus and its diversity of approaches require nonetheless some structures: “We cannot function as economists by adopting a pure pluralist perspective, allowing anything to go; we must make our own choices as how to proceed.” (Dow, 2008, p. 90) Ecological economics has seen many discussions about its future and the idea of sustainability economics is yet another label that has been developed. It adds up to the following schools that sketch the various forms of ecological economics gathered under the “big tent”:

- Ecological Economics (Costanza, 1989)
- Political ecology and ecological economics (M'Gonigle, 1999)
- Evolutionary ecological economics (van den Bergh and Gowdy, 2000)
- Post-normal ecological economics (Müller, 2003)
- Institutional ecological economics (Paavola and Adger, 2005)
- Feminist ecological economics (Perkins, 2007)
- Political ecological economics (Berger, 2008)
- Ecological economics and post-Keynesian economics (Kronenberg, 2010)

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