



## Analysis

Beyond environmental and ecological economics: Proposal for an economic sociology of the environment<sup>☆</sup>Corinne Gendron<sup>\*</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The vast majority of approaches in environmental economics attribute the current ecological crisis to the fact that, from its inception, the industrial economic system was founded on premises that made no allowance for the limits and regulatory functions of ecosystems. According to these approaches, we must therefore remedy the historical error of dissociating the fields of economics from the natural sciences, notably by restoring the links between these two disciplines. Distinguishing themselves from the two historic approaches, environmental economics and early ecological economics, the emerging institutionalist schools evoke not only the constructed nature of the environmental crisis (generally viewed as an objective fact by both traditional environmental economists and ecological economists), but also the socially constructed nature of the economy and its institutions. An actionalist regulationist approach allows us to formalize this twofold construction and lays the groundwork for a new economic sociology of the environment in which the technical modalities of ecological modernization are studied in light of social relations, with the understanding that social relations are also affected by the materiality of the environmental crisis. This actionalist regulationist approach also lends itself to anticipating likely trajectories in the future ecological modernization of economic institutions.

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## 1. Introduction

The concept of sustainable development, brought forward to promote a new perspective of development and progress in response to increasing environmental risks and global development crisis (Zaccai, 2002), has had difficulty explaining the links between the environment, the social sphere and the economy. While its social dimension is often overlooked or poorly conceptualized (Lehtonen, 2004), it is probably the economy–environment debate which has been the most vibrant: although economic growth is often viewed as a necessary step to allow investments in environmental policy measures, social movements and academics from different schools have pointed out that flaws in our economic system itself, enhanced by growth, lead to poor environmental management and ecological disruption (Kapp, 1950; Pigou, 1920; Schnaiberg, 1975). Several theorizations have been proposed to explain and address these flaws, theorizations which

prove to be rich and diverse, and even contradictory in their understanding of the environmental problem. However, the two main schools of thought, environmental economics and ecological economics, share similar limitations when it comes to recognizing the socially constructed dimension of both the economic system and the environmental crisis (Spash, 2011). These limitations have two important consequences: first, they hinder the conception of applicable solutions to the environmental crisis, in terms of social–political feasibility (van den Bergh, 2011); and second, they greatly narrow the scope of imagination when it comes to designing ingenious public policies. New institutionalist ecological economics approaches have been proposed which take into account the social dimensions of the economy–environment interface (Spash and Villena, 1999).<sup>1</sup> Although these approaches remain fragmented and heterogeneous (Ropke, 2005), an interesting proposition has recently emerged putting forward a social ecological economics (Spash, 2011, 2012a, 2012b). However, in my view, this proposition as well as those put forward by other institutionalist ecological economists would benefit from a more comprehensive framework for understanding

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<sup>1</sup> Other scholars have sought to integrate the social dimension in ecological economic theorizing. See for example: Paavola and Adger (2005), Vatn (2005a, 2005b), Söderbaum (2000), Bromley (1991), Bürgermeier Beat (1994), Norgaard (2007), Ballet et al. (2011).

the social dynamics involved in the economy–environment debate. The aim of this article is to propose a new economic sociology of the environment, a sociological counterpart to Spash's Social Ecological Economics, in line with an emergent European trend of ecological economics (Douai and Vivien, 2009). Built on the actionalist theory and the regulationist approach, such theoretical framework provides a better understanding of the modernization path that societies are seeking to embark upon in order to address the environmental crisis (Mol and Sonnenfeld, 2000). It provides a new perspective of the economy–environment debate by devoting particular attention not only to the social dynamics but also to the self-production process of advanced societies (Touraine, 1977).

Before introducing this new approach, I will discuss the two main schools of thought, environmental economics and ecological economics, focusing on their problematization of the economy–environment dynamics and highlighting some of their limitations. I will then turn to emergent institutionalist approaches which have sought to introduce a social dimension in their analyses. While the Social Ecological Economics movement is mostly preoccupied by epistemology, interdisciplinarity and a value-based analysis of the economic system (Spash, 2012a, 2012b; Vatn, 2005a, 2005b), another trend of the emergent socio-economic school which relies on the French *régulation*<sup>2</sup> theory aims to develop a more political understanding of institutional change. The regulationist approach proposes to link the economic and social spheres in a manner that fully recognizes how economic institutions are socially constructed and embedded. It therefore provides a useful framework for understanding institutional changes driven by the environmental movement in the economic sphere. I will then show how heterodox approaches can be enriched by the French actionalist sociology, depicting the transformation processes of the economic system. Furthering this idea, a new sociological theoretical framework will be proposed, which broadens the scope of possible means to incorporate ecological parameters in the economy. I will then briefly present the results of a study we conducted among economic and political leaders based on this theoretical framework. This study brings out the limitations of the solutions put forward by both environmental economics and ecological economics from a social point of view (Spash, 2011; Spash and Villena, 1999), notably concerning their social–political feasibility (van den Bergh, 2011). To conclude, I will make some remarks on the recent “green economy” concept – which has become the basis of modernization agendas – and its view of how the economic system must be reoriented to contribute to sustainable development.

## 2. Economics and the Environment: Bridging the Founding Gap?

Modern economics were founded on the hope that industrialization would emancipate society from the constraints of nature. At its heart lies the ideal of the industrial society: the production of goods in such abundance as to overcome the distribution dilemmas and limit the necessity of political arbitration. Nature is seen as an element to be mastered in order to fulfill this overproduction goal.

This split between nature and the economy was questioned by early economists, including Smith, Mill, Ricardo and Malthus.<sup>3</sup> As the environmental crisis reached a systemic level during the seventies and ecosystems are being undermined as a life support since then, nature could no longer be reduced to a question of scarcity. Economics then began to

theorize the consequences of the dissociation by which the economic system seems disembedded from the biosphere. As Spash explains:

Environmental economics arose, along with the growth in public awareness, as a direct response to [environmental problems] (...). By the late 1960s, the promise of material wealth for all and post World War II optimism in the abilities of science and technology were faltering. Boulding (1966) characterized the economy as being run like the Wild West [in contrast] with Earth as a closed system like a spaceship. Economic growth was seen as positively misleading in terms of the consequences for human society (Mishan 1969). The challenge was for a new approach to economics (2011, p. 348).

According to economists who are preoccupied by the environmental crisis, it is the blindness and disregard of ecological cycles and thresholds on the part of economics which are at the root of today's environmental crisis (Costanza et al., 1997, p. 17; Gómez-Baggethun et al., 2010). Ignoring ecosystemic constraints, the economy broke up nature into natural resources and developed an instrumental perspective of it. It did not care about the regeneration limits and carrying capacity of ecosystems which it considered as free inputs into the production system (Schnaiberg et al., 2002). The production system was conceptualized independently from nature, with no formalization of its interactions with the environment, as is illustrated, for example, by Hotelling's (1931) classic work in which natural resources are treated like any other wealth asset. As explained by Barry:

In the history of economic thought (...), one thing stands out about the role of the natural environment: namely, its reduction to a set of resources to be exploited for human economic ends. From an economic point of view, the natural environment has instrumental value; that is, it is useful insofar as it can be exploited in fulfilling human wants.<sup>4</sup>

[Barry (2007, p. 214)]

This new generation of economists interested in the environment sees the environmental crisis as the direct consequence of this conceptualization of the economy which has been blind to ecological parameters. They therefore hold that it is essential to rebuild the necessary link between the economy and the environment, and this is precisely what these scholars are committed to doing as illustrated by the statement of Costanza and Daly: “ecology and economics must be more fully integrated if either is to deal adequately with man's use of natural resources” (1987, p. 2).

This research agenda has developed into different schools of thought, whose propositions are intimately connected to the diagnosis of the ecological misunderstanding of the economic system. Spash (2011) provided an interesting historical perspective of these schools, showing how the first environmental economics school was followed by ecological economics, and how the two have evolved as distinct schools. Building on his analysis, as well as Jacobs' work and recent European typologies (Boidin and Zuindeau, 2006; Douai and Vivien, 2009; Douai et al., 2012; Figuière and Rocca, 2011; Godard, 2004, 2005), I propose a mapping of the different schools of thought wherein

<sup>2</sup> As suggested by one of our reviewers, we distinguish in this text “*régulation*” as the regulationist concept from the regulation understood in its ordinary meaning.

<sup>3</sup> As Douai and Vivien point out, this dissociation has become so ingrained that Barde and Gerelli noted in the introduction to their book *Economics and Politics of the Environment* (1977) that the expression “environmental economics” seems a paradoxical coupling (Douai and Vivien, 2009, p. 124).

<sup>4</sup> Building on Polanyi's writings, Barry offers an interesting analysis of the disembedding process of the emerging economic science: “For the market system to work, land, labour and capital had to be ‘freed’ or ‘disembedded’ from non-economic restrictions, customs and rules. In short, the industrial–capitalist system required that land, labour and capital be ‘free’ to move where they were economically required, and where the market dictated they should go. Another way of putting this is that these ‘resources’ in order to be resources in the sense the new economic system required, had to be seen as commodities, things that could be bought, sold and exchanged” (Barry, J., 1999. *Environment and Social Theory*. Routledge, London & New York, p. 134).

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