



Analysis

Macroeconomic narratives in a world of crises: An analysis of stories about solving the system crisis



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ABSTRACT

Since the financial crisis in 2008, a series of publications on macroeconomic responses to the compound crises of the economy and the environment have emerged. Under labels such as *green new deal*, *green growth* and *the great transition*, attempts at offering coherent responses to the crises have been made. These responses have in common that they all present a large number of policy proposals for ways in which to solve the current crises and achieve a sustainable economy. This article provides a mapping of a selection of such responses and an analysis of their content. The analysis combines discourse theory and narrative analysis and investigates discourses by studying the narratives they produce. The study thus contributes to the long line of analyses on discourses on sustainable economy: empirically, by investigating and analysing a number of macroeconomic proposals for solving the system crisis, and theoretically, by elaborating on the concept of narrative dynamics in relation to persuasive strength in political decision-making.

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1. Introduction

The world is facing a multitude of environmental, economic and social crises which are threatening the wellbeing of present and future generations. Climate change, ecosystem degradation and pollution are destroying the environment (MEA, 2005; Rockström et al., 2009). Financial meltdowns, recessions and debt are affecting the economy, and unemployment, inequality and social unrest are threatening the stability of many societies, also in Western countries, which are the focus of this paper (Asici and Bünül, 2012; Lipietz, 2013). The political responses to these crises differ. Many actors tend to give priority to the economic crisis and focus on getting the economy back on the growth track before they are prepared to direct more attention towards environmental issues (Geels, 2013; Tienhaara, 2010). Others are aware that a return to business as usual is not an option, because economic, social and environmental problems are interconnected and call for coherent solutions which address the problems simultaneously (Jackson, 2009; NEF, 2010b; OECD, 2011c; UNEP, 2011b). The strategies for addressing the problems in a coherent way differ widely with regard to their radicality. Some stay close to the traditional economic framework and aim at returning to the growth path, only in a modified form of green growth (OECD, 2011c; UNEP, 2011a), whereas others consider the different crises as aspects of a deeper system crisis that calls for more radical solutions and will

involve a halt to economic growth in the affluent countries (Jackson, 2009; NEF, 2010b).

This divide points to the existence of two different discourses which provide different stories of how to solve the system crises. The main purpose of this article is to analyse and compare the persuasive power of these different stories. The study is based on the application of discourse and narrative analysis (Czarniawska, 2010b; Dryzek, 1997; Fairclough, 1992; Greimas, 1966; Hajer, 1995, 1996; Roe, 1994) and provides a mapping of a broad selection of macroeconomic proposals, adding to a couple of survey papers in this field (Asici and Bünül, 2012; Bina and La Camera, 2011) by applying a different approach for systemisation.

Economic growth is at the core of these proposals. It is a nodal term which holds the key to understanding the system crisis and the opposing views on how to solve it. Central to this understanding is *the dilemma of growth* (Jackson, 2009), which refers to the problem that economic growth is at the same time the main provider of wealth and social stability and the instigator of environmental disaster (Jackson, 2009). There seems to be two main approaches to confronting this dilemma. The first is to decouple economic growth from environmental impact by the use of technologies which secure high resource and energy efficiency (OECD, 2011c; UNEP, 2011a), and the second is to establish an economy based on a stable throughput of materials and energy within global carrying capacity (Daly, 2008; Jackson, 2009; O'Neill et al., 2010). The first approach suggests what we see as a reconfiguration of the current global economy, while the latter implies a total transformation of the global economic system. The feasibility of decoupling is strongly

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challenged by the proponents of the latter approach (Jackson, 2009), and we suggest that these two opposing conceptions have led to the emergence of two different discourses as regards the dilemma of growth; here, we characterise these as a pro-growth and a no-growth discourse, respectively.

The latter approach fits in with the basic ideas of ecological economics, but until recently, ecological economists have contributed relatively little to macroeconomic research and policy development. The field has a long tradition of research focusing on how to operationalise the concept of scale of the economy in relation to the biosphere, and discussions on the environmental impact of economic growth, relative and absolute decoupling, and Herman Daly's steady state propositions also have a long history (Røpke, 2005). But it was not until the outbreak of the economic crisis in 2008 that more detailed discussions on macroeconomic issues and policies appeared high on the agenda, and the strong criticism of mainstream positions on growth was supplemented by an increased focus on constructive policy proposals. Recent years have thus seen a growing number of contributions to the development of an ecological macroeconomics (Daly, 2008; Harris, 2009, 2013; Jackson, 2009; Kallis et al., 2012; Lawn, 2010; Røpke, 2013; Schor, 2010; Victor, 2008; Victor and Rosenbluth, 2007), but the theoretical foundations and policy proposals of an ecological macroeconomics still need to be elaborated in more detail.

In addition to this elaboration effort, there is a need to consider how the perspective of ecological macroeconomics can impact policy-making in a wider and more effective way. An important precondition for political impact is that the perspective offers a strong narrative with considerable persuasive power (Roe, 1994). Analyses and debates on political impact, narratives and discourses all play a rather modest role in ecological economics, so we have found inspiration in a number of contributions both from within and outside of the boundaries of ecological economics. Fred Luks was the first to suggest that ecological economists should include the discourse on rhetoric into the self-awareness of ecological economics, because rhetoric is important for the political impact of this field (Luks, 1998). For instance, he emphasises the importance of metaphors in communication with a wider audience. Closer to the topic of the present paper are two more recent contributions. Berg and Hukkinen (2011) provide a narrative policy analysis of the sustainable consumption and production debate taking place in Finland and make the interesting observation that growth critique may strengthen the dominant growth stories because the critique adds to the complexity and uncertainty in the policy field. The second paper was written by Lehtonen, who has conducted a critical discourse analysis of internal discourses in OECD, highlighting the organisation as a site for discursive battles (Lehtonen, 2009).

Outside of the boundaries of ecological economics, authors such as Hajer (1995, 1996) and Dryzek (1997) have made interesting contributions to the field of policy analysis regarding the issues of the environment and economy, Hajer by developing a rigorous discursive framework for analysing subjects such as acid rain and ecological modernisation (Hajer, 1995, 1996) and Dryzek by delivering a broad analysis of four different environmental discourses (Dryzek, 1997). By drawing on this literature, we connect the tradition of discursive policy analysis of environment and economy to similar contributions within ecological economics.

Previous studies on the environment and economy using a discourse approach have focused on environmental discourses (Dryzek, 1997), on single subjects such as acid rain (Hajer, 1995), concepts such as ecological modernisation¹ (Hajer, 1996), and studies on a national (Berg and Hukkinen, 2011), organisational (Lehtonen, 2009) or

local level (Åkerman and Peltola, 2012). In this study we expand the domain of analysis by investigating a series of macroeconomic responses addressing economic, social and environmental problems.

In Section 2, we describe our empirical material and provide an introduction to the theoretical understandings applied in the article. Section 3 presents and structures the content of the research material and identifies nuances and incoherences in the discourses. This is followed by a narrative analysis of the content in Section 4. Section 5 elaborates on the finding of shared narratives, while the conclusion in Section 6 puts the study into perspective.

2. Materials and Methods

The basic ontology of this study is that issues are discursively constituted, implying that the investigation of issues benefits from focussing on the discursive practices through which they materialise. These practices include storytelling, which connects a myriad of entities from different social domains (Hajer, 1995). The methodology of this article is thus to investigate the issue of the system crisis and its possible solutions by delving into the rich world of narratives in a series of publications containing macroeconomic solutions to this crisis. By using visual mapping, we sketch some outlines of the order of discourse which constitutes the issue of the system crisis and its possible solutions. Furthermore, an analysis of the narratives through which this order of discourse materialises provides an idea of how the dynamics of narratives adds to the concept of narrative persuasive strength.

When focusing on the scientific impact on policymaking, we find it relevant to analyse narratives from a realm between the scientific and the political domains. Thus, the primary focus of this study is official reports from organisations that are neither political parties nor universities but still closely connected to both the scientific and the political domains. Another reason for focussing on such reports is that this type of communication is well suited for the narrative analysis of our study, since it tends to gather a large number of concrete policy proposals in a more clear-cut fashion than is often the case in scientific articles.

We have analysed reports from the following organisations: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development: OECD (OECD, 2009, 2011b,c,d,e), United Nations Environment Programme: UNEP (UNEP, 2009a,b, 2011a,b,c), United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs: UN DESA (UN DESA, 2009), New Economics Foundation: NEF (NEF, 2008, 2009, 2010a,b, 2011), Sustainable Development Commission: SDC (Jackson, 2009), Centre for the Advancement of the Steady State Economy: CASSE (O'Neill et al., 2010) and The Worldwatch Institute: WI (Assadourian, 2012). Altogether, we have analysed 19 reports spanning the period between 2008 and 2013. Eleven of these reports we label pro-growth and 8 of them no-growth. Since the more radical positions are less institutionalised than the mainstream strategies, we have supplemented this selection with a number of scientific articles covering these perspectives (Bonaiuti, 2012; Kallis, 2011; Kallis et al., 2012; Kerschner, 2010; Lorek and Fuchs, 2013; Martinez-Alier, 2009; Martinez-Alier et al., 2010; Schneider et al., 2010; Smith, 2010a,b).

We are aware that the data material of this study does not fully cover the issue at hand and that there is a bias in favour of Anglo-American perspectives. This bias presents a challenge as regards the inclusion of alternative and less institutionalised perspectives such as degrowth, sometimes published in languages other than English. We have tried to overcome this challenge by supplementing the data material with a number of scientific articles that present these perspectives and draw on a wider base of non Anglo-American literature. With this addition, we find our data material sufficient to provide a basis for our methodological approach and conclusions.

The theoretical starting point of this article is that our writing and way of talking about issues form the perception of and lead the actions

¹ Ecological modernisation is a concept rather similar to the concept of green growth studied in this article. Green growth can be understood as a further development of ecological modernisation.

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