
How to think about change? The role of dialectical logic and progressive economics in a theory of social ecological transformation

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Résumé

Intertwined social ecological conflicts and crises deepen, widen and accelerated around the globe. It seems clear that the nature of the problem is systemic and that multiple crises need to be studied together. However, it is not clear how this can be done. Why are theories of change lacking? Why can we picture societal lock-ins much easier than ways out? One reason might be that ‘normal’ scientific reasoning escapes questions of systemic change – by emphasising things over processes, independent events over systemic entanglements, and crude empiricism over deep explanation. Economics is especially important and problematic in this respect. A realistic understanding of price and profit dynamics, competition and finance is essential for understanding root causes of unsustainability and barriers to change. At the same time, the economics discipline remains rooted in outdated logical positivist foundations, which partly explains incapacities to reason in dynamic, systemic and realistic terms, which often promotes the reproduction of power relations that prevent, instead of encourage, sustainability transitions. How can we think differently about transformations that open up spaces for more effective action? What are types of reasoning fit for purpose for the subject matter of social ecological transformation? This paper identifies dialectical logic as one possible alternative. The subject of dialectics is how to capture change and interaction in thought. This paper explores the usefulness of systematic dialectics for studying social ecological transformations, with a focus on economic categories. Systematic dialectics was a methodology Marx applied to derive realistic representations of capitalism as a complex adaptive system. It starts from empirical reality in motion, thus capturing change and dynamics, without getting blinded by it; it aims to grasp the whole object of inquiry (capitalism embedded in the biophysical world); it traces relationships and interconnections (the entangled nature of social ecological relations); and it identifies structures that are more essential than others, with associated claims for progressive politics. Pioneers in social ecological thought have stressed the importance of dialectical reasoning for integrating knowledge with a view to radical change. This paper builds on their ambitions and explores dialectical logic as a practical tool for more radical praxis.

Mots-Clés: dialectics, value theory, ecological crises

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