
The Ontology of Social Ecological Economics

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Résumé

Ecological Economics has established a basic critique of mainstream and heterodox economics that highlights the failure to include biophysical reality. However, ecological economics, like the mainstream, fails to address social theory or to take into account the substantive aspects of its critique that undermine neoclassical economics, which it has then adopted. In order to establish a coherent theoretical basis a new social ecological economic perspective is necessary that moves beyond these problems. How to do so is the subject of the paper.

The bullseye graphical representation of structural dependency between biophysical and social reality is employed to highlight problems in the current literature in terms of its ontology. Key presentations of this figure across 50 years are presented. The aim is to use the critical reflections on these presentations to highlight issues and then to offer ways forward. The approach makes clear the failure to distinguish structure and mechanisms from actualised events and empirical data. Much confusion exists in presentations of ecological, social and economic systems, their interactions and dependencies due to failing to make these distinctions.

In doing so the potential for uniting with different schools of thought is raised. Specifically rejection of neoclassical economics is clarified. Adoption of elements of some Marxist theory is revealed as possible while noting the complex internal disputations that are unhelpful and need to be avoided. Critical institutionalism appears highly constructive. Keynesian, or rather post-Keynesian, economics remains in part problematic due to its commitment to capital accumulation and in part helpful due to its ontology and engagement with the current structure of the economic system.

Beyond specific schools of thought in economics a basis in philosophy of science is required. In this respect a depth ontology is argued to be necessary based upon a critical realist understanding. This will form a background aspect on which the analysis of the paper is conducted.

Mots-Clés: social ecological economics, ontology, pluralism, knowledge integration, philosophy of science, critical realism

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