

A Social Ecological Economic Perspective on Transformation

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This paper is part of the special session called: “Exploring Transformation to a Radical Alternative Gesellschaft: Economy, Ethics, Ecology” (RAGE). All papers in this session will be 10 minutes and presented in the first hour of the session. They are split between introductory and topic based presentations. Presentations are meant to guide the discussion of the following five questions in breakout groups that will take place in the second hour of the special session.

1. Drivers: What is driving the current system?
2. Objectives: What needs to change?
3. Barriers: What are the barriers to transforming the current system to a more social ecological economy?
4. Means: How can change be achieved?
5. Actors Role: Who needs to take action and what action should they take?

The overall aim is to explore whether the degrowth community can form a synthesis for a radical alternative world view and how to achieve this.

Abstract

This paper is a first attempt to map the contributions of Social Ecological Economics (SEE) to research on transformation of society and economy to a radical alternative from the present capitalist systems. The paper reviews the literature on SEE in terms of approaches to and research perspectives on the concept of social transformation. We use the term transformation as indicating a major and substantive re-formation of structure and conduct in society, rather than a transit to an slightly different order (i.e. transition).

The paper is based on part of a report for a project called "TRAFORVIEW" funded under the 2011 Joint Programming Initiative in the area of climate change research (JPI Climate 2011). The TRAFORVIEW had pre-defined subject areas: ontology, epistemology, drivers, objects, means and actors. In the current context we focus on the objects, subjects and means for transformation as discussed implicitly or explicitly by the field of SEE.

SEE is the more progressive aspect of ecological economics that most closely corresponds to degrowth. A series of recent articles have discussed the problems, internal fights and divisions in ecological economics (Spash 2011; 2013a; Spash and Ryan 2012). These divisions have categories that can be seen more generally in the environmental movement. They consist of three main camps: new resource economists (orthodox neoclassical), new environmental pragmatists (atheoretical), and social ecological economists (vanguard). There is then a broad split between a deep and shallow approach to ecological economics (Spash 2013b).

A fundamental position in SEE is that environmental problems can only satisfactorily be addressed through a combined understanding of the natural and social sciences and that policy implementation requires engagement with non-scientists and lay knowledge. Both interdisciplinary and strong transdisciplinary means to inclusion and integration of knowledge have been deemed important in SEE. However, claims of transdisciplinarity have often been superficial rather than substantive.

What comes out of this approach is a need to accept the reality of biophysical limits but also to look at these within the context of societal and economic structures. Why we confront

limits is not answered by simply pointing at them and claiming absolute sanctions must be imposed. The SEE critique then employs both knowledge of biophysical reality (e.g., entropy laws) and calls upon awareness of the structural socio-economic causes of our current predicament.

SEE describes a multitude of systemic drivers that make change inevitable and directing that change desirable. As set out in the 1972 limits to growth scenario analysis, a combination of factors drive exponential growth leading to a critical failure and collapse of the current system (Meadows et al. 1972). Today the main drivers typically cited are: population growth, resource peaks, resource extraction beyond renewal rates and pollution. SEE has focussed largely on material and energy use as drivers of change and related these to intensive consumerism, the spread of hedonism as the ultimate lifestyle and the role of market institutions in spreading and maintaining such values (Spash 2009).

The biophysical ontology of SEE explains why the current system cannot persist and sustained economic growth, as encapsulated in economic theory, is an unattainable utopian vision. Addressing the divorce between economic systems and the reality of biophysical constraints requires a radical transformation of the present social and economic system. The basic critique from SEE is at the systems level. Thus what needs to change is the structure of interactions between the economy and the environment. However, there is not an exclusive focus on structure as opposed to agency (Vatn 2005).

Individual actors, as part of the system, also need to change their behaviour. Thus the mass consumption lifestyle that has been advocated in Western style democracies, and has now spread to other countries, is regarded as highly problematic. This lifestyle needs to change in order to address the energy and material throughput of the system as well as the obsession with hedonism as opposed to other human goals. The critique here has been developing strongly within the degrowth community which is closely associated with SEE in Europe. For example, this has raised ideas of sufficiency and frugality (not austerity) (Alexander 2013; Latouche 2009), which could be linked to SEE concerns over needs (Max-Neef 1992; Rauschmayer et al. 2011).

This short introduction and overview will briefly sketch out several of the key points about how SEE views the challenges of transformation.

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