

A note on Earth based Jurisprudence and Ecological Economics¹

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Context

Formal disciplines evolve in the context of power and established knowledge practices. Neo-classical economics is presently taught in most mainstream institutions across the world. Ecological economics (EE) is largely a sub-discipline tagged to the broader curriculum. Increasingly, "environmental economics" is offered as an elective at the undergraduate level but conceptually the syllabus is an extension of the neo-classical paradigm - quite divorced from an earth-centered jurisprudence. Perhaps this is necessary to maintain methodological rigor which unwittingly constrains the boundaries of the subject. This technical facade gives a certain legitimacy to EE. The challenge is how to bring ecological economics to the center of political economy rather than remain an appendix to it.

At many universities, a major in economics is a popular choice. In order to draw students, the core of the major is largely shaped by the job market instead of a need to be literate in the full range of economic offerings. As a result, the discipline has become sanitized - devoid of contextual offerings such as history of economic thought, comparative economic history, Marxian economics, development theory, and environmental ethics. The focus (and in some ways for good reason) is on tool oriented courses - statistics, econometrics, mathematical economics/ modeling, game theory, aimed for a more marketable degree in the public and private sector marketplace. It is possible at many universities, to take courses in the latter (technical) and virtually none in the context courses leading to a distorted world view - what economics is and how one views the world.

Over time, economics as a discipline has become hyphenated with public policy/ finance majors, but the economic content in this hybrid incarnation of the subject is minimal, usually limited to macro and micro economics with limited offerings in trade and finance. In an ironic twist - particularly in many developing countries, the distinction between finance (read corporate finance) and economics is thin. And for better or worse, it is management/ business, public policy, and finance majors who come consciously or unconsciously to shape or nudge thinking and decisions on wealth and power, as advisers, consultants, managers or entrepreneurs within the state or firms.

These decisions impact human beings and nature in multiple ways, while most ecological economists labor in a parallel universe that may have less relevance to immediate problems of ecology. The situation in other disciplines is not much different - law, history or international relations and political science. As a consequence, those who are concerned with issues of ecology are essentially speaking to an audience that might have a sentimental interest in earth related jurisprudence but intellectually, professionally and operationally live in a different domain.

A major question to be addressed is - where and how does one locate "ecological economics" or to use an alternative term - "international political ecology" (the relationship between state, society and nature) in the sociology of knowledge? Does the subject evolve over time from traditional economics or does it discover a distinct space and approach in the academic, policy, public and private arenas? The design of university/ school curricula and training of social science pedagogy is critical in shaping alternative paradigms of discourse to facilitate an agenda for a transformative earth jurisprudence. Here, the ideological dimension cannot be ignored - whose ecology and which ecology? A feminist, social, deep, spiritual or technological ecology? Responses to such interrogation would yield a path that engages productive, distributive and conservationist dilemmas and choices, and shapes the technical evolution of EE.

Another aspect pertains to the unit of analysis - micro economics makes certain assumptions of the "individual" and the "firm"; macro-economics of "nation-state" behavior. Are these assumptions relevant to ecological economics? At present, nation-

¹ *Inputs flagged below from a non-specialist perspective - a generalist's sense of things on ecology and its relationship to economics as popularly taught. Earlier version shared in presentation with United Nation's General Assembly initiative on Harmony with Nature.*

states are central in shaping economic behavior, but with paced globalization, the impact of national decisions on the geographies of other countries and the commons is likely to become more intense. How does one accommodate and internalize, or at the very least, sensitize ecological economics to cultural factors, different stages of development, social and economic inequality, elite competition and other psychological dimensions, which are not fully understood or known that influence private/ public production and consumption decisions? An earth centered jurisprudence would require that ecological economics is linked to a constellation disciplines - economic anthropology, political economy, cultural sociology, economic history, law and economy, and the history of science (possibly others too). The recent debate at Rio between environmental and poverty eradication perspectives would have been better understood to a wider audience if global elites were schooled in a deeper and wider inter/ multidisciplinary narrative.

The dual levels of ecological crisis - global (e.g: climate change) and local (e.g: firewood, deforestation) aspects, and everything in between, requires looking at the regional and sub-regional and at the relationship between the general and the particular. Links between communal, national and international social and economic acts/ actions of individuals and entities are not always obvious. There is a need to recognize a macro and micro-political ecology. Other associated concepts such as what constitutes environmental infrastructure, ecologies of scale or ecological externalities, the eco-ethics of inter-generational equity - need to be brought into the mainstream of teaching and research on the natural economy. A core question that requires some discussion is whether technology and the market are inherently contrary to an earth based jurisprudence or related to it. This may not always be so – some work needs to be done on the mistaken view that EE is for Luddites only.

A discipline that attempts to integrate parts into a whole is likely to lose precision. On the other hand, a defined/ Cartesian approach faces the challenge of diminishing the inter-connectedness of things. Today, public actions related to environmental issues are mostly problem driven - a combination of science, doctrine and governance pertaining to conventional public goods/ common approaches. Is there a real choice in defining and developing an earth jurisprudence based ecological economics? Or, should there be a careful search for convergence with over-lapping and fundamental neo-classical economic concepts and practice, which have withstood the test of time? A mixed group of eminent traditional and ecological economists/ related discipline experts and practitioners, might be useful in developing a research and policy program geared to these questions.

Alternative Approaches

To realize a paradigm shift in economics toward ecological economics means to confront the pretension (and notion) that social science at this point of understanding human attitudes and behavior, and natural world, is a science. Those who disseminate ideas, theorems and prescriptions related to economics and ecology as a whole, need to be immersed in complementary fields - disciplinary and experiential. Therefore, training of teachers, diplomats, artisans, architects, journalists, corporate and small business enterprises should be engaged in a mind shift that explores the intersection of short and long term interests, and the interface of normative and instrumental aspects of individuals and communities. This does take place today in many institutions across the world; the pace needs to be quickened and the engagement deepened. The recognition that much social science is a work in progress, and some of it is alchemy, needs to be recognized. In a world of sound bites and power point presentations, there is a false sense that the academy is the repository of fundamental universal truths.

Here, the United Nations University and other public oriented institutions should consider, together with like-minded foundations, to develop a research, internship and outreach program. Affiliated UN training institutions should be encouraged to increasingly ensure a more comprehensive curriculum design in which ecological economics is taught in tandem with neo-classical economics. Care needs to be taken that the distortions of neo-classical economics are not substituted by the distortions of ecological economics in an effort to zealously address issues of policy and practice. A framework of political ecology - the relationship of the power of institutions (private and public) to human production and consumption processes, and their impact on the psyche and terrain of individuals and communities should be the context within which theory and technical analysis require to be cultivated.

It may be useful for UNEP/ DESA/ UNDP or a reputable outsourced entity to consider developing a HEDI (Human Ecology Development Index) - an extension of the Human Development Index and produce an annual world HED report. This can encompass elements of the MDGs and SDGs, progress by countries and willing corporations on environmental issues.

Perhaps institution of UNESCO/ UNEP awards for excellence in urban planning, ecological neighborhoods and rural communities, could popularize the objectives of EE.

A place to begin is to encourage every UN agency, fund and program (not only UNEP) to be the "greenest ever" institution. Ecology, like charity, begins at home. Principles of green auditing, costing and green budgets should be mainstreamed. All NGOs and enterprises with whom the UN does business, and the UN in all countries where it is substantially engaged should be asked to recognize and adhere to a Green Code of Conduct (similar to the code developed for human rights and corporate behavior under the erstwhile Center for Transnational Corporations).

Challenges to the transition

Most people appreciate a clean, beautiful and sustainable environment accessible to all, and most communities do not discriminate on the basis of class, race, caste or creed, and respect human rights and animals. Yet, each is trapped in a cycle of consumption and production which despite positive attitudes, lead to contradictory behavior of states and individuals. This contradiction is the principal challenge facing ecological economics. Can ecological economics as a thought system (rather than a discipline) account for this aspect of human life in the current global-historical cycle? Changes are likely to come from two directions - the structure of incentives and sanctions (monetary, fiscal, trade, investment, aid regimes) and shifts in power based on transforming polyarchy and representative democracy into deeper democratic structures. Hence, the imperative for political ecology in a manner similar to that of political economy, which can explain market and environmental failures that neo-liberal economics is unable to.

The growing trend to socialize risk and privatize profit is another vector which limits the direction of human ecology toward a more bio-centric world. What kind of institutional arrangements and countervailing policies could cope with and reverse such trends is a challenge which academic and political approaches would have to grapple with. What will be the role for civil society and private foundations in larger international ecological governance? The place of conservation and preservation of heritage as an intrinsic subject of ecological economics may also require some consideration.

A third cluster of challenges is the location of the discipline (EE) in the broader dynamic of growth. Earlier growth models and studies (Harrod-Domar, Kuznets, Perkins, etc) generally ignored the impact of economic acts on nature and the environment. Is it possible to (re)construct approaches and methodologies without an understanding of a comparative ecology over time (environmental history)? Historical patterns and directions toward urbanization and mega-cities have both desirable and undesirable social and economic consequences. An international society steadily moving away from manufacturing based on human labor to that primed by technology, and to a larger service based social economy, poses difficult questions of underlying assumptions of economics in general and a succeeding EE in particular. What would a Development Ecology look like compared to traditional Development Economics rooted in the dynamics of the first industrial revolution and colonial/ imperial expansion, transformation, regression and the emergence of contemporary globalization?

Thinking Ahead

Ecological economics needs to move from the margins to the center of the political economy curriculum at universities from its present status as an adjunct to "environmental studies". It needs to go to the grass root schools - the New Alchemy Institute (Cape Cod) many years ago had come up with an interesting cross-disciplinary approach which mainstreamed ecology into all subjects. The socialization and internalization of ecological concepts in a new economic geography early in life is likely to breed respect for nature. This has begun to happen over the last couple of decades, but in a somewhat mechanical way, more as propaganda and fashionable narrative building than through a deeper understanding of the physical economy which underlies the natural and human economy.

In many developing countries, the approach to ecology is polemical, a caricature and nostalgia for older ways in reaction to westernization/ modernization. In the developed world, the link between consumerism and ecology is missing. Ironical is that despite rhetoric, most elites and (non-elites) in the east want to become western in form and substance. The "demonstration effect" on social norms and aesthetics through social media and advertising is powerful. This raises the question, whether the planet would have to wait for several generations to level the playing field of consumption and move away from Maslow's world of subsistence and security towards the actualization of ecological choice. Little can be done about this state of affairs, but social media presents an opportunity to creatively project the economics of ecology to a wider audience.

Ecological economics can be an important tool for policy, but only to some extent. Power and leadership matter. Most of all, critical thinking matters. If it is possible to build the discipline in such a way that it teaches both nature's economy - explaining and understanding - and enables vertical and horizontal approaches to issues and problems, then sensible and sensitive personal and institutional decisions are likely to follow.

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