

Feedback by Dr Julien-François Gerber for my 3rd and 4th PhD progress reports

My PhD: Why does mainstream economics ignore ecology?

Official PhD topic: The place of ecology in undergraduate economics education; the case in three European countries (La place de l'écologie dans l'enseignement de premier cycle en Science Economique: le cas de trois pays européens) - Ecole Doctorale, Università di Corsica

My 3rd and 4th PhD progress reports can be downloaded here (see comments):

<https://www.tuncalik.com/2019/08/why-does-mainstream-economics-ignore-ecology-my-3-phd-progress-report-august-2019/>

Who is Julien-François Gerber?

"Julien-François Gerber is an Assistant Professor at the International Institute of Social Studies in The Hague. Before that, he was a faculty in Bhutan, in India, and a visiting fellow at Harvard University. He holds a PhD from the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. He works on the relationships between economic systems, ecological (un)sustainability, and the conditions for flourishing, alienation and resistance. He has published on the expansion of capitalism in the rural sphere, the property-credit nexus, popular environmentalism, (de)commodification, and post-growth/degrowth." Reference:

<https://www.isrf.org/fellows-projects/julien-francois-gerber/>

Together with Rolf Steppacher, Julien-François Gerber is also editor of the book "Towards an Integrated Paradigm in Heterodox Economics"

Gerbers's feedback for my 3rd and 4th PhD progress reports (as emails)

My response to Gerber's comments is in red letters.

Email on 11. August 2020

Thank you for your kind words about my work and for sharing your story and writings. I went through your PhD proposal and it makes a lot of sense to me (see my comments below). I am sorry to hear that you are in troubles with one of your supervisors, something that was to be expected if he was working within a (more or less) neoclassical paradigm. If you didn't experience any opposition from neoclassicals, it would mean that your work is not very interesting :-). But I was delighted to see that Peter Söderbaum already replied to you - this is a powerful piece of support you already have.

Personally, I think your first research question ("Why does the mainstream theory of economics ignore ecology?") needs to be targeted at something a little more manageable and less studied. This question is indeed the very starting point of an entire current of economics: (heterodox) ecological economics, as opposed to (neoclassical) environmental economics. So you want to make sure you don't reinvent the wheel. Ecological economists did a huge amount of work trying to clarify this question politically, ideologically, epistemologically, philosophically. A key reference here is Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, the father of (heterodox) ecological economics. His socio-metabolic and thermodynamic

approach offered the foundation to ecological economics as well as a demolition of neoclassical economics. See especially his 1971 magnum opus *The Entropy Law and the Economic Process*. I would also recommend (if you read Spanish) *La Economía en Evolución* by José Manuel Naredo, which is a brilliant and detailed answer to your first question, by Spain's most important economist of the 20th century!

I already read "The Entropy Law and the Economic Process" by Roegen several years ago. But I admit, not completely; only the parts that interested me...

José Manuel Naredo: Thank you for the hint. Unfortunately, my Spanish is not advanced enough to understand him, but I will try anyway. I found his speech in youtube:

José Manuel Naredo: Cambio de paradigma en economía: inercias y resistencias
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t0IISMwks18>

Unfortunately, ecological economics is becoming more and more neoclassical and many so-called ecological economists are today forgetting Georgescu-Roegen's or Kapp's pioneering works - but Clive Spash is a great reference and I was happy to see that you mention him several times. Spash is a leading voice in contemporary heterodox ecological economics. I've also attached an introduction we wrote with Rolf Steppacher (who was Kapp's last assistant) that seeks to define what kind of economics is today needed (please have a look at Table I.1 which summarizes the whole argument). We argue that mixing the traditions of critical institutional economics (= Marx, Veblen, anthropology) and critical ecological economics (= Georgescu-Roegen, Kapp, ecology) seem like a good way forward!

I agree that this is a very good combination: critical institutional economics + critical ecological economics

In Veblen's words, an evolutionary human science

I think, all real economists must have a strong (holistic & generalist) background in disciplines like anthropology, agriculture, healthcare, sociology, psychology... But not in their industrial (specialist, fragmented) versions; ecological (holistic) versions

Anyway, all this to say that even someone of the calibre of Georgescu-Roegen ended his life relatively isolated and ignored, so please do take care of yourself. Unless you enjoy engaging in intellectual battles, you may want to consider working with like-minded people instead. You will be nourished in a much deeper way if you work with ecological economists or ecological/economic anthropologist who would understand what you are doing and who could actually guide you towards the less-travelled roads. It's a pity you didn't pick supervisors who were ecological economists!! Let me add in passing that there is a brilliant group of Turkish ecological economists who precisely work on the questions you are interested in. I am thinking of Fikret Adaman or Bengi Akbulut, among others. Bengi is a dear friend of mine and we regularly work together.

My personal experience also showed me that there is deep a problem of willful ignorance and neglect. Luckily, I don't have strong ambitions in the academic world. Popular science and public communication interest me much more than academy. And my primary interests

are ecological gardening/farming, natural aquariums and garden ponds, music (piano). But still, I want to find a way to finish my PhD despite all obstacles, because I feel, I can be a good public communicator. Owning a PhD may bring some advantages in public communication.

My recent note about willful ignorance and Wendell Berry

<https://www.tuncalik.com/2020/08/5-essential-questions-for-economics-departments/#comment-2530>

Email on 18. August 2020

I also like Wendell Berry - although I don't know his work very well, but I liked his short text on agrarian values. I completely understand that you have other primary interests. That is the healthy way to go. Georgescu-Roegen was fond of gardening too. We cannot spend a life debating with the neoclassicals. A good friend of mine, Sebastian Berger at Bristol, has always been harassed wherever he was employed as an economics professor. Now he works on poetic economics and phenomenology. He is very creative and the world's prime expert on K.W. Kapp, but no one realizes this at his department...

I don't know Michael Pollan, but I know of course V. Shiva and met her several times in Delhi. She also participated in the book I coedited "Post-growth thinking in India" (2018).

I agree with your dichotomies between reductionist vs. holistic sciences/practices. (I think these differences are also based on levels of consciousness, but that's another story.) Of course you will always find people who will tell you that you are too binary and simplifying reality, but your point is overall correct and that is what matters. With my colleague Arnim Scheidel, we recently expressed the cleavage you're talking about through the old substantivist vs. formalist distinction that we still find very relevant.

My department at the ISS deals with agrarian and environmental questions from Marxist, Chayanovian, political-ecological and feminist perspectives --> more grounded. I visit farms with my students and talk about degrowth and food regime analysis. But I am delighted to hear that you are ready to continue the struggle as a communicator of science - this is truly wonderful and hugely important.

These days, I work on the psychological blindness of economists, including of so-called radical ones. Once again, it seems that you are following a similar path when you mention Lasch. Lasch does exactly that, in the best tradition of critical social psychoanalysis. Among similar critics of Western ideology of progress, one could also mention Lewis Mumford (the "Marx" of the ecological movement according to some) or Theodore Roszak (who pioneered ecopsychology). I just wrote a piece trying to integrate Marx and Jung, two authors that couldn't more different different, and for that reasons, profoundly complementary for truly radical emancipation...

Lewis Mumford, Theodore Roszak and Jung... Interesting and valuable hints, thank you, I'll check them all.

Apropos "psychological blindness of economists":

Did you read "The Culture of Narcissism" by C. Lasch? In its last chapter (Afterword) on page 288 there's a section titled "A Faustian View of Technology" that explains the psychology behind "technological optimism", or "technological fundamentalism" as Vandana Shiva says; the blind belief in technological progress that new advanced technologies can solve every kind of social and ecological problem in the world.

You might find this section interesting. Technological fundamentalism, which is closely related with mechanistic-reductionist worldview, is in my opinion one of the prime diseases of mainstream economics; I mentioned it several times in my 4th progress report.

Michael Pollan is one of my favorite authors (plants, gardening, food, ecological vs industrial farming). His book "Omnivor's Dilemma" is a masterpiece for me. He is also a brilliant speaker. I could recommend following speech for a Pollan beginner:

Edible Education 101: Michael Pollan (2015)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kwa3ppwvn-k>

And this is another speech of Pollan about Omnivore's Dilemma:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AEUxk12U9ZQ>