



METHODS

Visions and scenarios: Heilbroner's worldly philosophy, Lowe's political economics, and the methodology of ecological economics

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Abstract

Ecological economics is a transdisciplinary alternative to mainstream environmental economics. Attempts have been made to outline a methodology for ecological economics and it is probably fair to say that, at this point, ecological economics takes a “pluralistic” approach. There are, however, some common methodological themes that run through the ecological economics literature. This paper argues that the works of Adolph Lowe and Robert Heilbroner can inform the development of some of those themes. Both authors were aware of the environmental challenges facing humanity from quite early on in their work and quite ahead of its time. In addition, both Lowe's *Economics and Sociology* (and related writings) and Heilbroner's “Worldly Philosophy” (itself influenced by this work of Lowe) recognized the endogeneity of the natural environment, the impact of human activity on the environment, and the implications of this for questions of method. Lowe and Heilbroner also became increasingly concerned with issues related to the environment over time, such that these issues became of prime importance in their frameworks. This work deals directly with ecological and environmental issues; both authors also dealt with other issues that relate to the environmental challenge, such as technological change. But it is not only their work that explicitly addresses the environment or relates to environmental challenges that is relevant to the concerns of ecological economists. Heilbroner's Worldly Philosophy and Lowe's Political Economics offer insights that may prove useful in developing a methodology of ecological economics. Ecological economists have taken a pluralistic approach to methodology, but the common themes in this work regarding the importance and nature of vision; analysis (including structural analysis); scenarios; implementation; the necessity of working backwards; the role for imagination; rejecting the positive/normative dichotomy; and so on, all are issues that have been elaborated in Lowe's work, and in ways that are relevant to ecological economics. The goal of the paper is actually quite modest: to make ecological economists aware of the work of the two authors, and get them interested enough to explore the possible contribution of these ideas to their methodological approach.

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Attempts have been made to outline a methodology for ecological economics and it is probably fair to say that, at this point, ecological economics takes a “pluralistic” approach (see Norgaard, 1989). There are, however, some common methodological themes that run through the ecological economics literature. This paper argues that the works of Adolph Lowe and Robert Heilbroner can inform the development of some of those themes.

1. Environmental awareness in the works of Lowe and Heilbroner

Adolph Lowe and Robert Heilbroner both were aware of environmental-economic challenges from remarkably early on, and these issues gained an increasingly important place in their thought over the years. In his 1935 *Economics and Sociology*, Lowe wrote that:

In every epoch of human civilization, economic forces and institutions have deeply influenced the structure and evolution of society as a whole. But in modern history the economic process is, as we have seen, the dominant factor. . . . The technique of the industrial age has broken through the traditional borders between the social and the natural world and has subjected more and more sections of organic and inorganic nature to human influence. This expansion, however, has reacted on the psychological and institutional constituents of modern society in a strange way. The more nature has become socialized, the more society has become naturalized. (Lowe, 1935, p. 153)

This idea that the economic system and economic process transforms not only the social, technical, and institutional, but also the natural environment, and that the latter therefore cannot be taken as “given” in economic analysis, remained an important theme in Lowe’s work for the remainder of his life and influenced Heilbroner’s own thinking. This position—already articulated in Lowe’s early work—was crucial for both authors’ thinking about the relation of the economy and the natural environment, and the impact of economic processes on the natural environment.

Heilbroner also expressed awareness of environmental challenges from an early date. In 1950, 3

years before the publication of his first book and 13 years before he received his PhD, he wrote an article for *Harper’s Magazine* called “What Goes Up the Chimney,” inspired by the famous Donora incident (Heilbroner, 1950). In the article, Heilbroner outlines the problems of pollution, its causes, and recommends some possible policies. Among his suggestions, he writes that “we must force large industry to add to its smoke-control equipment,” “we need better smoke prevention,” and “we need smoke control enforcement.” This, 20 years before the first Earth Day.

While Lowe and Heilbroner both expressed awareness of environmental-economic challenges from very early on, in the late 1960s it moved to an even more prominent place in their thinking, with concern increasing over the next decades. In a widely reprinted 1970 article, “Ecological Armageddon,” Heilbroner writes that “[t]he ecological issue. . . may indeed constitute the most dangerous and difficult challenge that humanity has ever faced” (Heilbroner, 1970, p. 270) and calls “the ecological crisis, unquestionably the gravest long-run threat of our times” (p. 285). He speaks of “[t]he necessity to bring our economic activities into a sustainable relationship with the resource capabilities and waste-absorption properties of the world,” and insists that “[t]he cult of disposability must be replaced by that of reusability,” writing that “[m]any of these problems will tax our ingenuity, technical and socio-political, but the main problem they pose is not whether, but *how soon*, they can be solved” (1970, pp. 281–282). Throughout this period, Heilbroner devoted considerable thought to the environmental challenge, including his frank testimony before the U.S. Congress on the National Energy Conservation Policy Act of 1974 (Heilbroner, 1974b; see also, e.g., Heilbroner, 1972, 1973).

Lowe’s increasing concern in the same period was inspired by his reading Geoffrey Vickers’ book, *Freedom in a Rocking Boat*. In a 1968 letter to Vickers, Lowe writes:

[T]he significance of the book for my own work lies in. . . your emphasis on ecology in the widest sense, and on the limits this sets to ‘progress’. As several times before, your work is a most important corrective for my own thinking, and after having digested your warnings I shall have to modify a good deal of what I

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