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ANALYSIS

The early history of modern ecological economics

Inge Røpke*

*Department of Manufacturing Engineering and Management, Technical University of Denmark, Matematiktorvet,
Building 303 East, 2800 Kgs. Lyngby, Denmark*

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Abstract

This paper provides a historical perspective for the discussion on ecological economics as a special field of research. By studying the historical background of ecological economics, the present discussions and tensions inside the field might become easier to understand and to relate to. The study is inspired by other studies of the emergence of new research areas done by sociologists and historians of science, and includes both cognitive and social aspects, macro trends and the role of individuals. The basis for the paper is a combination of literature studies and interviews with key researchers from the field. The story opens with the emergence of the new environmental agenda in the 1960s, which was influenced by the scientific development in biology and ecology. Then it is outlined how the environmental challenge was met by economics in the 1960s. Around 1970, the basic ideas of ecological economics were given modern formulations, but it took a long gestation period from the beginning of the 1970s to the end of the 1980s, before ecological economics took shape. During this gestation period, the personal relationships between the actors were formed, and the meetings that were decisive for the formal establishment of ecological economics took place.

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1. Introduction

Ecological economics was institutionalized with the establishment of the International Society for Ecological Economics in 1988 (first conference 1990) and the journal *Ecological Economics* (first issue 1989). Since then, a wide spectrum of research topics

has been presented in the journal and at the conferences, and the large membership and the increasing number of regional societies illustrate the broad interest in this new field of research. As the contributions are very diverse, recent years have seen some discussion on the characteristics and delimitation of ecological economics: Is ecological economics a transdiscipline; a new paradigm; something different from environmental economics or, rather, a part of environmental economics, etc.; open for anything with a relation to the environment, or something more

* Tel.: +45 4525 6009; fax: +45 4593 6620.

E-mail address: ir@ipl.dtu.dk.

well defined? (Turner, 1999; Spash, 1999; Bergh, 2001; Costanza, 2002; Söderbaum, 2000; Martinez-Alier, 2002, Chapter 2). The question can also be posed in a more normative way: In which direction should ecological economics be developed in the years to come? This paper forms part of a research project dealing with these questions,¹ and the intention with this specific paper is to provide a historical perspective to the discussion. By studying the historical background of ecological economics, the present discussions and tensions inside the field might become easier to both understand and to take a position on.

This paper concerns only the period from the beginning of the 1960s to the end of the 1980s—what could be called the early history of modern ecological economics. The term *modern* ecological economics is used, because the paper refrains from covering the long history of precursors and related ideas that did not lead to an institutionalized establishment of a new field of research (these ideas are well described by Martinez-Alier, 1987; Christensen, 1987, 2001; Cleveland, 1987). The term *early history* is used to embrace the ideas and processes that led to the formal establishment of the journal and the society. With this delimitation, the paper covers only the part of the story that is necessary to discuss the questions raised above, so it can only be a step on the way to answering them, and the intention is to write a follow-up paper on the development of the research field after the establishment of the society. However, I hope that the present paper can also be useful for newcomers to ecological economics by making it easier to become familiarized with the field. As I had not taken an interest in environmental research before the end of the 1980s, I felt the need for such a survey myself, and the work with this paper has emphasized how much there is to catch up with when one has not taken part since around 1970. Finally, the story of ecological economics can be of more general interest, because the development of the field can be seen as an example of a trend towards the establishment of transdisciplinary fields, especially those crossing the border between natural and social sciences.

The story told here is a combination of cognitive and social history. The focus is on the ‘social construction’ of ecological economics: How did the social conditions influence the emergence of the field? Who took the initiative? What was their motivation and their intellectual baggage? Which areas were combined in the field, and what could the participants agree on? Since Kuhn and the ensuing development of the sociology of science, a story of scientific development cannot be told as a tale about how we are becoming ever wiser. Different perspectives can co-exist; social processes, both outside and inside the research community, and personal strategies, etc. play a part in the formation of scientific fields, so the tale must include several layers. Studies of other scientific fields have been used as inspiration to give a clue as to what to look for when telling a story about ecological economics.

Obviously, the paper is based on literature studies, but much more important are the interviews (a few by telephone) I had with key persons in the formation of ecological economies. These interviews have been necessary both to guide me through the jungle of literature and to give me information that is not available in a written form. From October 2002 until March 2003, I interviewed the following persons: Herman Daly, Mick Common, Robert Costanza, Sylvie Faucheu, Carl Folke, John Gowdy, AnnMari Jansson, Joan Martinez-Alier, Charles Perrings, John Proops, Clive Spash and Peter Söderbaum. Each interview gave me valuable new information, and I have many ideas regarding other persons whom I would like to interview (e.g. to include perspectives from more countries), but time and resources require that a line is drawn. As ecological economics springs from many different roots, it is difficult for one person (in this case with a socio-economic background) to cover the field in a reasonable way—and it turned out to be much more difficult than I had expected. So I hope that others will add to the picture by giving their accounts.

Section 2 summarizes very briefly the theoretical inspiration from studies of other scientific fields. Then the story opens in Section 3 with the emergence of the new environmental agenda in the 1960s and the different discourses related to this agenda. The environmental agenda was influenced by the scientific development in biology and ecology that is dealt with

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