

Extended abstract

A feature of the 2013 ESEE conference in Lille was a series of contributions by leading authors in the field on the nature and conduct of ecological economics (EE). In a fascinating roundtable, Richard Howarth, Inge Ropke and Clive Spash debated further the state of the art. Two disputes that stood out from this discussion concerned pluralism and realism. This paper aims to discuss both. In doing so, we also consider Spash's recent written contributions, in which he, *inter alia*, a) attempts to delineate and re-focus ecological economics, b) argues for a limited form of pluralism of method, and c) argues for critical realism as the potential base for the newly proscribed ecological economics.

Spash's arguments resonate strongly with those in debates within heterodox economics in the 1990s and 2000s, in which we participated. It is with some irony that we witness them being played out again, in ecological economics. Those debates suggested that indeed critical realism has many virtues, *inter alia*, in supporting a form pluralism but also offering clear grounds for criticising mainstream thought; in demanding a refocus on the nature of the world; and in recognising that complex reality demands interdisciplinary work. However, critical realism foundered on its failure to offer a clear positive alternative research methodology or alternative methods; and because it over-used transhistorical concepts and hence did not offer sufficient insight into the workings of actually existing capitalism. Thus, while we applaud critical realism in some respects, we are critical of it in others.

The paper will proceed in three parts: first, we examine briefly the contemporary arguments about pluralism embodied in the contributions to the ESEE conference and in Spash's recent writings. Spash argues against the methodological pluralism advocated in Norgaard (1989) and in favour of a structured pluralism of method, advocated for example by the heterodox economist Sheila Dow. Spash argues for the exclusion of some existing elements of EE on various grounds; he further argues for a more focused base of EE. Further, Spash argues for an ontological basis for EE.

That allows us to move on to the second, major part of the paper. We consider multiple ways in which a specific ontological position advocated by Spash – critical realism – might assist EE. Indeed, the potential for critical realism to illuminate and assist the progression of EE appears considerable. In particular, Spash argues that CR aids the integration of knowledge or synthesis. However, we argue that there are elements of critical realism that render it unsuitable for EE. Specifically, we argue that critical realism's treatment of 'system' – a crucial aspect of EE – is deficient. Consequently CR is unable to explain the centrality of value in contemporary capitalism. Therefore, as with heterodox economics, we argue that ecological economics ought to approach CR with caution.

We tentatively argue for an alternative approach to ontology which does not contain the flaw attributed to critical realism: systematic abstraction. We illustrate the potential for systematic abstraction by briefly considering its treatment of value, a fundamental concern in economics, and specifically in ecological economics. We argue that systematic abstraction deals better with value than CR can possibly do,

because the former has a 'cell form' from which the other elements of the system derive, whereas for CR value is merely one, albeit centrally important causal mechanism.

Overall we have partial agreement with Spash's position. We agree with him fully that on central questions of concern, it is not possible to reconcile mainstream and heterodox positions within a coherent whole. Specifically, as demonstrated in the history of economic thought, it is not plausible to combine a (subjective) marginal utility theory with an objective theory of value. However, critical realism does not bring us to this conclusion. Thus while we share Spash's conclusion, we disagree with his route to it.