

# **Ecological Economics and the Critical Theory of Modern Society**

**Frieder Otto Wolf**

Freie Universität Berlin

Institut für Philosophie

Contribution to the RLS Conference

**„Sustainability in Economics“**,

Oct. 28th – 30th

Berlin

# Introductory Remarks

- Neither strict separation, nor unity of politics, ideology, philosophy and science
- The battlefield of modern theory
- Taking a longer view: Scientific discovery concerning history / society and social struggles since the 14th century
- Spoilsport and dogmatist?
- Reconstructing a common cognitive map – for regaining the capacity to deliberate (on action and research)!

# The Sorry State of the Critical Theory of Modern Society

- Modernity as a constellation of relations of domination: From personal to impersonal domination
- Doubly repressed: Marx's Critique of Political Economy
- The lack of equally „systematic“ critical theories in Feminism, Political Ecology, and Anticolonial Studies
- General theories of domination and the analysis of their articulation within particular formations of society

# The Need for Radical Theory

- Ideology / Philosophy / Science: Politicization and Scientificity
- Radical Theory
- Marx's Paradigm: How this content has taken this form – production and reproduction of the domination of the capitalist mode of production
- Contradictions, their Forms of movement, and the „limits of dialectical presentation“
- Why Critique of Political Economy and not just Political Economy?
- Classical Political Economy? Marxist Political Economy? New Political Economy?
- Constructing compatibilities between critical theories of structures of domination present in contemporary societies

# The Need for Pragmatic Alliances

- Urgencies: Rio+20, climate tipping points, ,peak everything', world hunger
- Going beyond crisis management: Buying time and starting to change
- Creating the conditions for transitions and transformations
- Minimal Requirements: compatibility and argumentative toleration of difference

# **Sustainability Economics as an integrative (interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary) science for the transition and transformation period**

- Ecological Economics + Economics of Caring + Economics of Sustainable Development = Sustainability Economics
- Transition and transformation: towards specific liberation
- The present complex crisis as challenge for Sustainability Economics
- Theorizing and ‚measurement‘ in Sustainability Economics

# The contribution of ecological economics

- Limits to growth
- Qualitative aims and material processes
- A political ecology of transition
- Measuring the conditions for transformation
- Processes, organization, and institutions
- Production and reproduction of political ecologies

# The contribution of Peter Söderbaum, 1

Five contributions from Peter Söderbaum are an important contribution to sustainability economics in general – as a transformation science:

- his focus on a non-mechanistic understanding of institutional change privileges the dynamics of transition/transformation processes,
- his multidimensional approach to economics as an institution is an essential condition of overcoming neo-classical hegemony in this field
- his ideas on monetary valuation coupled with multicriteria decision aid techniques have advanced economic policy deliberation by opening it to interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary inputs,
- the categories of PEP and PEO can be read as categories of intermediate steps in the required transition/transformation processes,
- his reinterpretation of the category of „efficiency“ in „ethical-ideologically open terms“ which allows replacing CBA (Cost-Benefit-Analysis) by PA (Positional Analysis) makes it possible to meaningfully discuss economic policy alternatives (by introducing the methodology of „position trees“).



# The contribution of Peter Söderbaum, 2

More specifically, he has contributed to ecological economics as a materially specific branch of sustainability economics in three important points:

- his critical analysis of Ecological Management System (EMS) provides a pertinent example of criticizing, i.e. using and going beyond, technocratic approaches like in ISO 14001;
- his critical analysis of NEM has clearly brought out the incommensurability of environmental values, which is a first step towards overcoming the capitalist illusion of „seeing the value of all things, people and social relations in terms of money“;
- his stressing the role of ecosystems and biodiversity in the real functioning of given economic ‚systems‘ have advanced ecological awareness within the field.

# How to combine pragmatism with radical theory

- Opening the theoretical debate: long-term perspectives and first steps
- Looking for the key relations and their structures of production and reproduction: Capital relation, colonial relation, male dominating gender relation
- Studying history in a discontinuous key; break-ins, break-throughs, and ‚revenants‘ (Walter Benjamin)
- Studying the particular dynamics of past approaches to transition and transformation
- Listening to the complaints of the „multitude“
- Actively participating in struggle today

# A long-term perspective

- Relegating neoclassical economics to derision and then to oblivion (cf. ‚Phlogiston‘ chemistry, cf. Aristotelian theory of ‚movement‘)
- Creating elaborate critical theories of the main structures of domination
- Building an alliance against all forms of domination
- Organizing in a new key: non-representational, and yet effective

# The contribution of radical philosophy

- Criticizing philosophical illusions
- Making epistemological distinctions
- Looking for specific coherence
- Articulating interdisciplinary co-operation
- Facilitating trans-disciplinary deliberation
- Looking for the links between theory and practice
- Taking a longer view