

The New Environmental Pragmatists, Pluralism and Sustainability

The role and meaning of environmental valuation has become increasingly messy and confused. At one time environmental economists advocated cost-benefit analysis as a branch of new welfare economics with a theoretical basis in neoclassical theory. Ecologists maintained a concern for systems change in physical terms and advocated environmental impact assessment. Environmentalists were against industry and encroachment of the market in to areas where other values dominated. This latter position was distinct from the other two. Thus a grove was sacred, not so many board feet of timber to be sold on the open market, or so many species and nutrient flows functionally serving humanity. The three distinct positions became characterised as economic, environmental and social sustainability.

The divisions between these categories and the distinctiveness of their disciplinary positions are no longer so easy to draw. Economics' appeal to the individual and the power of their preferences led to an expansion of value categories, supposedly captured by new methods. This meant a move away from theoretical foundations as claims were made of being able to appraise policy and include such unclear concepts as bequest and existence values. Ecologists adopted the language of economics referring to ecosystems as goods and services and started to produce money numbers supposed to represent instrumental values ranging from the functional to the spiritual. Environmentalists turned to green marketing and created their own corporate identities. Selling the environment to preserve it became the accepted credo.

These changes reveal the complex interconnections which, although existing before, have now become more self-evident. In some respect this might be taken as acceptance of the plural values evident across all aspects of human-environment interactions. Economics cannot be divorced from social and political values. Sciences, such as ecology, cannot be divorced from the society in which they are couched. Environmentalism is engaged with a struggle over the appropriate institutions of governance within society. Boundaries are necessarily blurred and the science policy interface one of power politics. Some conclude this means communicating environmental concerns by adopting the dominant form of power discourse in society, which is commonly perceived to be money.

However, the exact form in which the discourse of environmental values is conducted by different groups does actually matter. Choice of value

constructs is not merely some pragmatic decision, and yet that is a position now being commonly expressed not just by economists but also ecologists, conservation biologists and environmental campaigners. Recent examples of this new environmental pragmatism include approaches to climate change, biodiversity and more generally sustainability.

Human-induced climate change has been characterised as involving many aspects but, the line goes, 'in the end all we really need is a way to assess the costs and benefits and reorientate traditional growth'. Elsewhere, I have criticised this line of reasoning in the context of the Stern report (Spash, 2007a; b), but one response has been that Stern type studies must be supported as a means of engagement with the power structure. The pragmatic reasoning can also be summarised as: 'A climate policy that works if people are selfish would also work if people are altruistic' (Tol, 2008: 439). This argument is used explicitly by Tol to justify ignoring a range of 'ethical issues', or rather treating them in a very specific and narrow orthodox economic framing (which he refers to as utilitarian/welfarist). The outcome is meant to justify the means, even if that involves qualitatively changing the nature of the society in which we live, what constitutes human values and how we conduct our discourse on environmental change.

Another current example is the on-going initiative to create 'The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity'.¹ This process was put forward by the German Federal Government and adopted by the G8+5 in Potsdam, May 2007. The interim report on the subject now clarifies what this means (European Communities, 2008). The study is being led by Pavan Sukhdev, a Managing Director in the Global Markets division at Deutsche Bank, with the philosophy of 'you cannot manage what you cannot measure' (p. 6). The study proposes such things as ethical issues being addressed by varying the discount rate (p. 33), economic valuation of everything except possibly 'spiritual values' (p. 35), and 'benefit transfer' (p. 36) for those other difficult to find numbers. Again this line of reasoning is open to a range of criticisms (Spash, 2008; Spash and Vatn, 2006), but is justified as engaging with the power elite and the mythical 'decision-makers'. Apparently, those in whose hands lies our destiny need everything reduced to some simple money numbers before they can help. Ecologists and conservation biologists are ready to join with orthodox economists in this endeavour – as evidenced by the list of contributors to the report. Interestingly Sukhdev has also advocated Green Accounting. Thus there is little surprise in seeing the statement that the solution to our problems lies in placing ecosystems and biodiversity

¹ <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/biodiversity/economics/>

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within a set of “sustainability” metrics to complement the familiar metrics of GDP growth and corporate profitability’ (p. 59).

This sustainability accountancy is another area in which we see the new environmental pragmatism on the march. Here traditional GDP accounts are adjusted to create supposedly better indicators of our unsustainable ways by expanding the concept of capital. The international committee on sustainability indicators places great emphasis on the capital approach and repeatedly discusses the need to be ‘practical’ (Joint UNECE/OECD/Eurostat Working Group on Statistics for Sustainable Development, 2008). What underlies the capital approach is the basic assumption that everything can be measured on a comparable basis and aggregated. Implicit in the approach is then trading-off one thing for another. Social capital might reflect the number of clubs you join, natural capital species loss, cultural capital some great buildings and so on; all can be measured and summed, and loss in one area traded for gains in another. Thus, gains in social and human capital can compensate for losses in natural capital; so we may arrive at a world totally degraded environmentally but be compensated by a highly educated population who all know each other through their numerous social clubs.

Once the idea that some things might not be traded-off arises then a secondary value system is required, e.g. to decide what is critical capital. Slipping into pluralism in this way is generally ignored because monetary numbers must apparently predominate in the political and economic discourse. This rather begs the question why the debate needs such a narrow discourse?

As has been noted a common justification is that these approaches are necessary to be ‘realistic’ and ‘engage’ with power elites in the sustainability debate and decision process. What exactly is this decision process? Mainstream economists do not discuss politics as otherwise they would have to admit their subject is actually political economy and their positions heavily ideological. Ecologists and other natural scientists fear being identified as non-scientists making value judgments and shy away from being seen as advocating policy positions. Both attempt to hide behind the epistemological shield of a fact-value dichotomy. Yet both groups advocate being ‘pragmatic’ and recommend very specific forms of political engagement, as if they knew what was best in terms of political economy. A strange phenomenon is then the broadening of their subject areas, to address our expanding list of environmental problems, and a narrowing of their explanations of reality.

What has become clear, especially in the science-policy literature, is the need to recognise the role of human agency in determining outcomes. This creates strong uncertainty (e.g., partial ignorance, social indeterminacy) which means a lack of simple causal mechanisms and universal laws. Instead of

some simple reductionism, to a single universal truth, understanding requires a plurality of explanations and modes of explanation. As environmentalism becomes more aware of its essential interdisciplinarity it requires clearer conceptual foundations for a discourse based upon methodological pluralism.

Pluralism does not mean accepting everything, that is eclecticism. Building knowledge requires structure and selection criteria and there are limits to explanations of environmental change. Yet, the emphasis being placed upon single metrics, primarily money, for expressing environmental values, reduces significantly the level of pluralism in methods and understanding. The kinds of approaches described above advocate a methodology of exclusion rather than one of plurality. They preclude arguments which cannot be expressed in terms of their techniques. Much is often made by their advocates of the fact that there are other values besides those being included, but money measures are given priority in resolving conflicts and become the dominant discourse to the exclusion of all else.

The language of the new environmental pragmatists is one of the market place, accountants, financiers and bankers. The discourse recommends institutions for trading, profits and individual gain. Recent experience should offer a cautionary tale as to where that road leads.

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