



BOOK REVIEW

## In search of common ground to actualise the power of social ecological economics

*A review of Foundations of Social Ecological Economics: The Fight for Revolutionary Change in Economic Thought*

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### Abstract

This book review discusses Clive Spash's *Foundations of Social Ecological Economics: The Fight for Revolutionary Change in Economic Thought*. It summarises each chapter and highlights the book's significance for degrowth scholarship. Additionally, it critiques Spash's overly scholastic interpretation of judgmental rationality, which underestimates the significance of pragmatism in strategically important policy contexts. However, the review acknowledges the book as an unparalleled effort in outlining a consistent framework for social ecological economics grounded in an understanding of economies as social provisioning systems.

**Spash, C. L. (2024). *Foundations of Social Ecological Economics: The Fight for Revolutionary Change in Economic Thought*. Manchester University Press. ISBN 9781526171481**

*Foundations of social ecological economics*, by Clive Spash, examines the ontological (reasoning about being), epistemological (reasoning about knowing), methodological (reasoning about methods), axiological (reasoning about value), and ideological (reasoning about ideas) substrate for a revolutionary social ecological economic paradigm. In the face of escalating social, ecological, and economic crises and an economic discipline that is practically inadequate to address these crises (Ketcham, 2023), the book offers a comprehensive and rigorous investigation of an alternative in economic thought and practice based in political economy.

The book is divided into nine chapters, organised in three parts: *Radical Foundations* (chapters 1–2), *Philosophical Foundations* (chapters 3–5), and *Social Ecological Economic Foundations* (chapters 6–9). Chapter 1 narrates the paradigm–shifting potential of the emergence of ecological economics from late–20<sup>th</sup>–century environmentalism. Spash shows how this potential ultimately failed to actualise, reflecting the institutionalised power of mainstream economic theory. Subsequently, chapter 2 explores how a heterodox, i.e. non–mainstream, approach might advance in the face of the hegemony of neoclassical economics. Spash reviews Marxist, institutionalist, feminist, and post–Keynesian theories to identify both commonalities across these traditions and links with social ecological economics.

After a brief history of modern Western philosophy of science in chapter 3, chapter 4 argues that the potential for unity across heterodox schools requires the rejection of eclectic pluralism (“anything goes”). Instead, critical realism, a specific philosophy of science, can inform scientific practice. Critical realism insists that a mind–independent reality exists (ontological realism) while accepting that our knowledge about this reality is always socially constructed and fallible (epistemological relativism). At the same time, critical realism maintains that we have the ability to judge rationally between better or worse theories and explanations (judgmental rationality). Chapter 5 places science in its sociological and ideological context to reject fact–value dichotomies and mainstream distinctions between positive (value–free) and normative (value–laden) economics to argue that there is no value neutrality in economics. Based on this, Spash emphasises that revolutionary change in economic thought requires a shared pre–analytic vision, i.e., shared understandings that *precede* any analysis.

Chapter 6 presents a pre–analytic vision for social ecological economics in terms of social provisioning within biophysical limits. To (pre–)define economics as the study of social provisioning requires a perspective that goes beyond price–making markets and includes the “non–monetary, non–market, unpriced, and unpaid” (p. 201). It also acknowledges that the aim of an economy is not to grow but to meet needs (rather than wants and preferences). After reviewing possibilities to integrate social, ecological, and economic knowledge in chapter 7, chapter 8 seeks to clarify division and unity in ecological economics. In doing so, Spash outlines three main positions to argue against the possibility of unity between *social*

*ecological economics* (“getting the science and ethics right”) and neoclassical *new resource economics* (“getting the prices right”), while allowing for some overlap with *new environmental pragmatism* (“getting the ‘language’ right”). Finally, chapter 9 outlines a broad research agenda for social ecological economics that focuses on the structures and mechanisms of currently actualised economies, their transformation, as well as visions of alternative economies.

*Foundations of social ecological economics* is a dense journey through the last thirty years of Clive Spash’s work. Spash develops a consistent conceptual composition to make sense of real-world problems. He highlights how the language of “market failures” and “externalities” obscures deliberate “cost”-shifting<sup>1</sup> strategies onto marginalised communities in (racialised) capitalism. He also emphasises how concepts such as “ecosystem services” and “natural capital” ignore the characteristics of what is supposedly being studied, instrumentalising nature for the very process of capital accumulation that undermines it.

This book is a valuable contribution to degrowth scholarship. In a broad sense, degrowth is considered a key component of social ecological economics (p. 168) and, conversely, social ecological economics is meant to inform the development of degrowth ideas: “social ecological economics can be understood as in opposition to two paradigmatic positions, one constituted by economic growth and the other price-making markets” (p. 115). In this context, the focus on diverse modes of provisioning in alternative economies (chapter 9) seems particularly relevant for degrowth scholarship. At the same time, the book provides selective criticisms, e.g., of narratives that assume that “while the North needs to degrow, the South needs ‘development’” (p. 124).<sup>2</sup> Those readers well acquainted with Spash’s work will find much in this treatise to stimulate further reflection, from dialectical thinking to understand *qualitative* aspects of change in economic systems to the development of common-denominator concepts, which offer a shared expression for “what might otherwise appear to be incommensurable concepts of different disciplines, objects of study and

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<sup>1</sup> The signifier “cost” must not distract from what it signifies: loss of livelihoods, chronic diseases, death, ...

<sup>2</sup> This critique, however, fails to address that literature on degrowth has defined convergence not in modernisation-theoretical terms but “as bringing energy and material use to levels that are (a) compatible with sufficiently rapid decarbonization and ecological stability, and (b) sufficient for high levels of human well-being” (Hickel 2023).

cultures” (p. 158). Here, Spash also points to evolving degrowth ‘vocabularies’ and ‘dictionaries’ to unify communication (p. 152).

Given the book’s emphasis on greater unity between heterodox schools, it would have benefited from a more pronounced discussion on synergies between different approaches. Chapter 2 is indeed an important step in this direction, pointing—among others—to eudemonic conceptions of wellbeing (needs and need satisfier) and economics as the study of social provisioning. However, the suggested overlap between social ecological economics and new environmental pragmatism in chapter 7 remains partially unclear. Apart from mentioning “ecological footprint” as a shared concept, the reader is left wondering what the potential synergies are. This impression is reinforced by the almost exclusively negative description of pragmatic approaches as “totally relativist” (p. 183), “rejecting theory” (p. 167), and “purely based on political impact” (p. 183). This overgeneralisation forgoes the opportunity to discuss how pragmatic and strategic deliberation can be an essential (critical realist) element in our ability to evaluate different positions as better or worse in the here and now (judgmental rationality). Economics as practice and action takes place in *pre-structured* institutional contexts (e.g., where policy decisions are taken). These contexts are always “strategically selective” (Jessop, 2005), i.e., they favour some ‘languages’ and ‘forms’ of doing economics over others. Revolutionary economics seeks to transform—rather than reproduce—these contexts. However, being successful in this endeavour requires the ability to pragmatically reflect on which next steps are more likely to be selected and retained—or conversely, dismissed and discarded—in strategically important contexts. To be sure, not everything that is possible is desirable, but neither is everything that is desirable possible. As Marx (1843) remarked: “We do not confront the world in a doctrinaire way with a new principle: Here is the truth, kneel down before it! We develop new principles for the world out of the world’s own principles.”

Spash’s rather dismissive stance towards improved ecological macroeconomic modelling (see chapter 2) seems misplaced in today’s pre-structured policy context, as it underestimates the (critical) realist dimension in calls for updated and new (formal) models to broaden the range

of policy options (Hickel et al., 2021).<sup>3</sup> While Spash acknowledges that some modelling work from ecological economics, such as that by Peter Victor and Tim Jackson, “appears more radical” (p. 50) as it explores and promotes transitions to economies that enable flourishing within ecological limits, he then asks: “why does any of this justify or even require formalist mathematical modelling, let alone macroeconomic modelling of capitalist economies?” (p. 50). Spash does outline Victor and Jackson’s modelling approach, quoting an interview in which they explained that it “is to dialogue with those not necessarily in agreement and use their terms, language” (p. 50). However, he dismisses this justification as merely “squeezing concepts into an orthodox mainstream box” (p. 50). Spash therefore fails to reflect on the given selectivities in strategically important policy contexts, leading to an overly scholastic understanding of judgmental rationality—and thus also of practical adequacy as the criterion to make rational judgements.

Overall, the book constitutes an unparalleled effort in outlining a consistent framework for social ecological economics, where “sufficiency replaces hedonic excess and promotion of unlimited wants” (p. 213). Spash’s firm commitment to a scientific approach, without lapsing into fact–value or science–ideology dichotomies, is welcome. He exposes the unrealism of those who claim to be “real economists” (to distinguish themselves from social ecological economists) and challenges the science–sceptical pluriversalist positions of incommensurable ontologies. Antirealism and antiscientific rhetoric are “both misplaced and unnecessary” because “the bottom line is that survival depends on getting things approximately right as to how Nature works, which is what science seeks to understand” (p. 209). *Foundations of social ecological economics* is a major contribution to this endeavour, providing the rallying cry in the fight for revolutionary change in economic thought: “There are only alternatives” (p. 219).

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The author has no conflict of interest to disclose.

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<sup>3</sup> See also the recent open letter [“The European Green Deal requires a renewed economic modelling toolbox”](#)

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