

Economic Theory for the Anthropocene: Towards Heterodox Understandings of Sustainable Economies

3-4th July 2018

Workshop Report

Economic Theory for the Anthropocene was a one and a half day workshop held at the University of Surrey from 3-4th July 2018. The event was co-organised by Simon Mair (Centre for Environment and Sustainability), Angela Druckman, Tim Jackson, Craig Rye (Columbia University), and Tim Foxon (University of Sussex). The event was attended by 37 participants from eight countries and 21 institutions. Participants were principally academics, though 3 were policymakers and 1 was from the private sector. The workshop consisted of plenary talks, small group presentations and discussions, and interactive planning sessions.

Workshop Aims

The aim of the workshop was to help strengthen the community of researchers developing theories of sustainable economies. We were particularly interested in bringing together researchers working outside of mainstream economics. The workshop aimed to provide a friendly but critical space for researchers to share ideas across disciplines.

Feedback from participants suggests we were successful in meeting these aims:

"In comparison to other workshops I have attended, you have managed to embed wellbeing (breaks, time to talk and rest) into an academically inclined event. And this is not to diminish the academic nature of the workshop, it was brilliant, a huge amount of ideas, very thought-provoking, refreshing and challenging. I think you've managed to create a community."

"The organisation was perfect, and the discussions were fruitful"

"it was really a nice, interesting and enjoyable experience. Well articulated and organised. We definitely had an interesting discussion group."

Summary of Proceedings

Tim Jackson opened proceedings, outlining the aim to strengthen the community of heterodox economists working in sustainability and introducing the first keynote speaker, **Ioana Negru** from SOAS. Ioana provided an encyclopaedic overview of the way different schools of economic thought had engaged with the concept of sustainability. This covered the neoclassical school, feminism, institutionalism, post-Keynesianism, and ecological economics. Ioana concluded by arguing that a synthesis of these approaches would be beneficial for influencing policy, and set out 10 principles under which such a synthesis could happen.

The workshop then split into three smaller groups for presentations and discussions. Groups were organised to balance specialist knowledge with interdisciplinary. There were too many presentations to detail here, but the full book of abstracts is online.

On the afternoon of the first day, Group 1 (chaired by **Henry Leveson-Gower** and **Roberto Pasqualino**) focused on the role of money in sustainable economies and the potential of different approaches to developing economic theories for sustainability. Group 2 (chaired by **Angela Druckman**) focused on the role of macroeconomic structural change for a post-growth economy and

looked at the microeconomics of the role for small businesses in a degrowth transition. Group 3 (chaired by **Roland Clift**) focused on the role of energy and capital in economic growth with presenters approaching the issue from evolutionary, biophysical, classical, and Marxian perspectives.

The three groups then came back into plenary for the second keynote delivered by **Gael Giraud**, of the French Development Agency. Gael presented a modelling framework integrating the financial and real sides of the economy this a climate backloop. Results from the model showed the interplay between private debt dynamics and climate change as a coupled source of Minskyan instability, and potential policy responses. After Gael's talk the group walked over to Manor Park to check in to accommodation and conference dinner.

The second day of the workshop began with two more small group sessions. Group 1 discussed specific policy proposals for more sustainable economies, and finished with two presentations on ways to expand theoretical frameworks that we use in thinking about sustainable economies. Group 2 looked at alternative visions for economic progress then considered the practice of building models for sustainability. Finally group 3 began the morning with presentations on how to craft alternative visions of sustainable economies, and finished with a presentation on a framework for modelling the implications of different sets of values. All three groups spent the last half an hour of their session drawing out the common themes and action points from the discussions had in their small groups.

After lunch, **Simon Mair** led two plenary sessions that aimed to generate discussion and ideas for how the community could continue to strengthen itself. At the start of the session the chairs of the 3 small groups presented a summary of the key themes and areas of discussion from their group. Participants then took part in a brainwriting exercise. Divided into small tables of about 6 people each, participants worked as individuals to generate 3 ideas for how to take the community forwards. They then shared these ideas with the group before generating three more ideas, and so on. After 30 minutes, all the ideas generated within a table were discussed by that table, who sorted and prioritised them. In the second session a representative of each table presented 3 or 4 ideas to the whole room. These ideas for future action and research were discussed by the whole workshop. Simon closed the workshop.

Key Themes from presentations and discussions

- 1) Many of the dynamics of capitalism prevent sustainability. Achieving sustainable economies will require a transformation of capitalism.
 - a) We need a better theoretical understanding of capitalism, this will include exploring the tensions and complements of social and physical theories of capitalism.
 - b) Useful research questions are to identify the different dynamics within capitalism and look for dynamics that can be used to leverage change.
 - c) The history of economic thought is a useful way to approach this, providing a wide range of perspectives on the evolution of capitalism.
- 2) A key question is an old one: what do we value?
 - a) This is in part descriptive: what is value in the economy? How do we define and measure it?
 - b) But it is also normative, what should we value?

- 3) The question of how to develop sustainable economies is fundamentally a study of change in the economy. So, we need to study structural change.
 - a) This should happen from micro to macro - various aspects
 - b) Agent based modelling approach is a possible methodology for matching these.
- 4) The economy, and sustainability are both complex and large and will require methodological and theoretical pluralism.
 - a) Need for dialog between top-down and bottom up methodologies to find and support their synergies
 - b) Synthesis could be politically useful, so we should look for complementarities between approaches/theories.
 - c) But we also need to look for differences, which are the foundation of pluralism. No perspective has a monopoly on the truth!

Next Steps

The first output from the workshop was an article on the themes of the event published in The Mint magazine. Further outputs based on the workshop are planned. We are liaising with presenters to produce a series of blogposts communicating key themes from the workshop to a wider audience. To strengthen the community, a database of people working on heterodox economics and sustainability is being compiled, and a twitter list is being put together. Work being presented was in its early stages, but several participants expressed an interest in contributing to a special issue or edited collection. We are in contact with publishers to explore this possibility. Workshop participants will remain in contact with a view to future collaborations.

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