

# **POLITICAL ECONOMY, SOCIALIST ECOLOGY AND ECOFEMINISM**

**Stuart Rosewarne**

The mounting global concern with the degrading state of the environment found its way into the academy somewhat belatedly, but Political Economy stands out as a place for theorising the capital's contradictory encounter with nature. Indeed, political economists have been at the forefront of radically rethinking how to theorise the environmental problematic as a systemically confronting challenge engendered by the contradictions of capital accumulation.

## **Contesting conventional economic theory**

How mainstream economists have conceptualised the environmental-economic problematic has been too limited in its scope. When pressed about the failure of the discipline to take seriously and critically engage with the environmental problems, those mainstream economists who had an interest in the subject – and these were few and far between – made the excuse that the problem was the failure to fully cost environmental damage or resource depletion, rather than the economy compromising environmental sustainability. Seen in this way, environmental problems arise from the 'externalities' that cause distortions in an otherwise efficiently functioning market economy. Rectifying market failure was the simple solution: fully cost the damage done and incorporate this into the market price. The two standard methods for pricing environmental damages were the introduction of a tax (as posited by Arthur Pigou) or privatising the right to pollute (Ronald Coase), so that the decision on the cost of the externalities is managed in the market. Perhaps reflecting their

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limited interest, there were few concrete studies to test the utility of their thinking

During the last two decades of the Twentieth Century, several global initiatives reinforced a scepticism about leaving governance of economic interactions with the environment to be resolved in the market. These were the Brundtland Commission's 1987 *Report* (the World Commission on the Environment and Development), the 1992 Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro, and the *United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change* culminating in the 1997 *Kyoto Protocol* prioritising the idea of putting a price on pollution, rather than regulating the issue of emissions. These processes exposed industry's preference for limiting state regulation and privileging the least-cost solution – a steady-as-she goes approach that ensured there would be no impositions on capital accumulation.

Here in Australia, the Labor government led by Bob Hawke responded to the political momentum for action on climate change by setting up the Ecological Sustainable Development Working Party in 1990-91. This was an extraordinarily innovative initiative that brought together representatives of government bureaucrats, industry, environmental groups and community organisations, with a view to developing sustainable development strategies. However, its recommendations were effectively abandoned by the following Keating Labor government and, after the election in 1996 of the Liberal-National Coalition government led by John Howard, there was a decade of inaction. The policy emphasis returned to debating the merits, or not, of the 'environmental externalities' approach to abating carbon emissions, culminating in 2011 with the Labor government led by Julia Gillard putting a price on emissions – a decision that was to undermine Labor's political future.

The neoclassical economic proposition that unfettered trading in emissions would provide an efficient, equitable and optimal means for abating emissions gave the greenhouse gas emitters *carte blanche* to carry on with business as usual. The endorsement of this position by most economists reflected the lack of critical focus on the environment-economic problematic in the academy, as well as a lazy deference to theory. At best, the debate around climate change did prompt some university departments of economics to dust off their welfare economics texts and resuscitate some conventional theorising, leading to a rediscovery of a discourse within the economics discipline that could inform policy design. Its dominant effect, however, was to give more traction to the neoclassical

economic thesis that the most effective way of mitigating emissions was through the adoption of market-based mechanisms unhampered by state intervention. This had to be challenged since it was so blatantly misleading.

## **Towards a political economy alternative**

The political economists at The University of Sydney did not shy away from introducing the environment as an object of concern and study. From 1975 onwards, in the opening lectures for the first-year undergraduate unit of study in political economy, Ted Wheelwright broke with the economists' convention of leaving acknowledgement of the deteriorating and unsustainable pattern of economic growth to the last couple of lectures. He drew on his published research on capital accumulation and environmental degradation to highlight the environmentally destructive nature of capital's imperative to accumulate. A more radical approach to understanding the destructive character of the environment also provided a receptive home for developing a distinct unit of study focusing on capitalism's environmentally destructive force. This was a one-semester unit of study called *The Political Economy of the Environment*; and as a young Greenie, I was invited to step up to the plate to design and teach it in 1993.

I had already been exploring a developing radical literature in the maelstrom of the international debates on the state of the environment in the late 1980s. The initial challenge in developing the new unit of study was a lack of critical thinking published on the subject, though this was changing, particularly because of the ecofeminist research that had re-theorised nature as possessing its own dynamic. Exciting contributions had been made by Australian feminists such as Val Plumwood, Ariel Salleh (who was a Research Associate in Political Economy at the University of Sydney), and political scientist Robyn Eckersley on the state. In the wake of such attempts to theorise the destructive nature of patriarchal capitalism, there had been a concerted effort to integrate the feminist interventions and the critique of conventional environmental economic theory in the formulation of Ecological Economics. This drew on the discipline of Ecology to posit the idea of ecology as a biophysical system that can be synthesised with the economy, not just as a collection of discrete phenomena as in the more mainstream Environmental Economics. The

Ecological Economics approach to the ecology-production nexus generally reduces the dynamics of an ecological system to terms that commensurate biophysical processes with the economy. Further, its endeavor to operationalise policy design generally falls back to the conventional economic preoccupation with price as the medium for achieving that commensuration.

As a unit of study assessing these competing perspectives, The Political Economy of the Environment at the University of Sydney was probably the first of its kind to be offered at either the undergraduate or postgraduate levels in the world. Its excitingly innovative character reflected the attention being given at that time to the re-theorising of ecofeminism, together with the re-examination of Marx's analysis of capitalist exploitation to draw out the different insights into labour's connection to and capital's exploitative relations with nature. Its subject matter also included re-visiting some classical Marxist concerns: capital's ostensible control over the planning and organisation of the dynamic interactions with nature, including the mix of natural inputs and labour in production processes; the impact of the centralisation and concentration of capital on the scale, intensity and pace at which the natural elements are extracted and transformed; and on how the transnationalisation of capital, the ascendancy of global supply chains and the more globally extensive reach of capital's extraction imposed on ecological systems.

The unit of study also drew out the implications for labour's incorporation in the labour process, the extent to which labour is alienated from nature, given capital's monopoly over planning the mix of natural inputs and labour in production processes. The unit also reflected on the transformative effects of the biophysical constraints presented by ecological systems and the labour process; and on how these necessarily impose limits on labour and the production of commodities, manifest in labour becoming *naturalised*, the biophysical world being transformed and nature subjected to humanisation. Each of these problematics opens the potential for contesting capital's destructive force. The unit of study also considered the refashioning of Marx being undertaken with the rereading of Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation*. This synthesis of Marx and Polanyi had been one of the methodological inspirations behind the structure of the introductory first-year political economy unit of study.

My personal impetus for exploring these issues was enhanced by spending a period of study leave at the University of California Santa Cruz, working

with James O'Connor and the *Capitalism Nature Socialism* project on Marx and Polanyi. O'Connor had based his reconceptualisation of the environmental crisis of capitalism as capitalism's 'second contradiction', the 'underproduction of nature'. Interpretating environmental crisis in this way highlighted another dimension of capitalism's contradictory dynamism and how this invites challenges to capital's exploitative character and creates pressures for planning, making more social capital's interactions with nature. This framing provides a critical method for unravelling the multiple forces that define ecological systems in crisis and has invigorated a fresh research agenda.

## Further developments

A postgraduate unit of study was subsequently introduced into the Political Economy program, also based on the analysis of the 'second contradiction' and the biophysical world socialisation of capital's interaction with nature, introducing the import of capital's extraction, processing of resources and the destructive impositions on the environment. Since then, the undergraduate and postgraduate units of study on these ecological-economic issues have been further developed by Gareth Bryant, Anna Sturman and Claire Parfitt. Significantly, many postgraduate research students chose to do their projects and theses in this subject area. As a result of these initiatives, Political Economy at the University of Sydney has become one of the premier sites of teaching and research in the field of socialist ecology.

*Stuart Rosewarne is Research Associate in Political Economy at the University of Sydney, having previously been an Associate Professor in that department.*

*stuart.rosewarne@sydney.edu.au*

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