
Foreword

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1 Introduction

While science can never be 100% certain about anything, the following statement from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is close enough, and should be a clarion call to action,

“Anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions have increased since the pre-industrial era, driven largely by economic and population growth, and are now higher than ever. This has led to atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide that are unprecedented in at least the last 800,000 years. Their effects, together with those of other anthropogenic drivers, have been detected throughout the climate system and are *extremely likely* to have been the dominant cause of the observed warming since the mid-20th century.” [IPCC, (2014), p.20; emphasis in original]

While the causes of climate change are clear, we must become more sustainable if we are to at least attenuate its more severe effects. Sustainability, however, is a complex and multi-faceted concept, requiring the active cooperation of many perspectives and many academic disciplines.

It is in this spirit that the *IJPEE* publishes our special issue on ‘Teaching sustainability’. Our goal is not to provide all the answers, nor ask all the questions (no single publication, no matter how large, can do so), but to fruitfully explore the intersection of complexity, pluralism and sustainability, while offering practical lessons for educators and policy makers. How can we better conceptualise our teaching in order to live sustainability? How can we design an economic system that comports with sustainability? How can we reconceptualise a new sustainable economics? We hope this special issue stimulates debate and contributes to a global dialogue.

2 Contents of the special issue

The paper ‘Sustainability and pluralist pedagogy: creating an effective political economic fusion?’ by Gareth Bryant and Frank Stilwell appropriately leads off our special issue. The authors raise a number of important questions: Does introducing sustainability into pluralist economic discourse generate new problems? Does a political economy approach, critical of mainstream economics, comport with the study of sustainability?

Can teaching and scholarship of this sort contribute to environmental awareness and action? After discussing each question (and several more) Bryant and Stilwell document their experience in teaching the sustainability-focused Political Economy of the Environment, at the University of Sydney, providing useful recipes and helpful lessons for teachers.

As an undergraduate student, I took a year-long long course in introduction to accounting. I was fascinated by its logic, predictability, and neatness, and how its language constricted the subject matter to flow logically and smoothly, without ruffling any feathers. Only a little reflection, however, revealed that the lens of traditional accounting is the isolated investor, keen to maximise returns, happily ensconced in capitalism, blithely unaware of any socio-economic problems.

In their paper ‘Accounting education, democracy and sustainability: taking divergent perspectives seriously’, Judy Brown and Jesse Dillard note that,

“accounting academics, practitioners and educators have focused on developing theory and practice that prioritizes the information demands of investors and maximization of shareholder wealth at the expense of other stakeholders. In the process, they have downplayed or ignored many problems confronting contemporary society, including questions about corporate accountability, ecological sustainability and social justice.”

If economics is to be reconceptualised to comport with sustainability, then so must traditional accounting, which, like economics, has been heavily (and negatively) influenced by neoclassical economics.¹ Brown and Dillard present concrete suggestions towards a dialogical accounting, i.e., making traditional accounting more compatible with sustainability by infusing it with pluralism, and democracy, thereby respecting,

“the views of environmentalists, labour unions, ethical investors, indigenous peoples and social movements, which needless to say, use a different lens and [have] different concerns about climate change, poverty, social injustice, economic power and globalization.”

More specifically, dialogical accounting involves the following eight principles: the need to recognise divergent socio-political perspectives; the importance of avoiding monetary reductionism; being open about the inherent contestability of accounting calculations; enabling access for non-experts; ensuring effective participatory processes; addressing power relations; recognising the transformative potential of dialogic accounting; and resisting new forms of monologism (i.e., the antithesis of dialogical accounting). The aim of dialogical accounting is thus to provide a better and more realistic sustainability framework, opening ‘accounting to critical public scrutiny (while including) democratic participation across a range of divergent socio-political perspectives’.

In their paper, ‘Sustainable development viewed from the lens of Islam’, Junaid Qadir and Asad Zaman write,

“in the literature, the Islamic community has made numerous contributions to the SD movement. A number of authors have written about the environmental crisis from an Islamic perspective and have documented the various Islamic guidelines and instruments regarding environmental protection.”

Indeed, in my foreword to our special issue on ‘Islamic economics’², I noted that western economics has a lot to learn from Islamic economics, a statement doubly true regarding sustainability, in which neoclassical economics is intellectually bankrupt.

In 2002, the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO) proposed the *Islamic Declaration of Sustainable Development* calling for: justice, active participation, a just world trade system, enhancement of the international community's development practices/policies, and the education of youth on environmental, religious, and moral responsibilities. Various Islamic sustainable development models have also been proposed, emphasising balance, harmony, public interest, excellence, social capital, integrity, and respect for the earth. Qadir and Zaman also note the high compatibility between the UN 17 SDGs and Islam.

There is much to learn about sustainability from Islam and the authors present an interesting and informative primer.³

In the foreword to the *IJPEE* inaugural issue, I promised to

“publish papers on any aspect of pluralism or economics education from the vantage of a specific region or country [in order] to raise pressing and provocative issues [and] to foster a continuing global dialogue on reforming economics education.” [Reardon, (2009), p.3]

In this special issue, I am pleased to publish two such papers on sustainability and education: one on India and one on China. Taken together these two nations account for 36% of the global population, with its cities perennially among the world's most polluted. Citizens in China and in India do not have the luxury of postponing climate change discussion for another generation: it is here and now; and its effects are palpably visible, forcing a visceral debate about growth, sustainability, renewable energy, and climate change.

In his paper, ‘Sustainable development: an Indian perspective’, B. Karunakar discusses several initiatives including Clean India, Digital India, and Smart Cities Mission. He then turns to education, discussing India's University Grants Commission (UGC) requiring six months of compulsory environmental coursework in all universities and colleges. And of special note is the 2013 launch of LEADearthSHIP, by India's Energy and Resource Institute (TERI) University, a unique youth program on leadership and business sustainability in New Delhi and Pune, encouraging university students to work on renewable and sustainable energy. Hopefully this program (and its ensuing regional partnerships) can be utilised by students across the world.

Karunakar writes that pertaining to the relationship between Hinduism and sustainability, the 65th session of the UN General Assembly devoted to ‘Sustainable development: harmony with nature’, noted that in the Hindu Tradition, India's Vedic philosophy has always emphasised the symbiotic connection between humans and nature. Indeed, “The Hindu scriptures contain some of the earliest messages on ecological balance and the need for the ethical treatment of nature, emphasizing harmony with nature, and that all natural elements hold divinity.”

Like Islam, Hinduism provides many lessons for sustainable living and for meeting the requirements of the UN 17 Sustainable Development Goals. And not surprisingly, Karunakar notes that for many Hindus, sustainability has long been a way of life: low meat consumption, less reliance on bottled water, locally grown produce, and a greater affinity for public transportation. Indeed, National Geographic's Greendex Sustainability Survey, has consistently ranked India amongst the world's most sustainable nations (with the USA, not surprisingly, among the lowest).

China is the world's largest importer of crude oil; the second largest consumer of oil; the third largest consumer of natural gas; and the largest consumer of coal, relying on coal for 67% of its electricity, higher than that of any developed nation.⁴ Not surprisingly China is the world's largest emitter of CO₂, a major global warming gas, accounting for 28% of total global emissions, (although ranking distant per capita). China is painfully aware of the ecological costs of fossil fuels, perhaps explaining why it leads the world in renewable energy production, with 22% of the global total (as measured in million tonnes of oil equivalent), and in the production of renewable energy technology. While China's conundrum sometimes stifles forward progress, it also has precipitated significant change, especially in public policy and education.⁵

In their paper, 'Sustainable development and green education in mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong', Professors Fu-Lai Tony Yu, Thomas Wai-Kee Yuen and Edward C.H. Tang detail numerous sustainable policies and developments, of which this foreword can only give a smattering. The authors adeptly infuse current developments with recent history, allowing a richer understanding of the intersection of past, present and future. Notable is the active cooperation of the affected stakeholders, necessary to accomplish any sustainability goals; and in mainland China, more than 50% of Chinese universities have incorporated environmental education at different levels and in different subject areas.

Peter Söderbaum, who has long influenced my thinking on environmental issues,⁶ emphasises in his paper 'Economics and democracy for sustainability politics', the interconnection between politics, democracy, and pluralist economics, all necessary ingredients in the implementation of sustainability. Economics cannot implement sustainability on its own, and needs the active cooperation of a democratic politics.

While neoclassical economics may be useful for some purposes, any claims for its value-neutrality should be rejected. Neoclassical theory is specific not only in scientific terms but also in value/ideological terms. Thus, assuming that ecological damage is due to market failure easily corrected by markets is a strained and superficial simplification, since,

"market failure is only one, potential failure. Individuals may fail with their life-styles generally or in specific roles... And, in addition, there may be paradigm failure; ideology failure; or democracy failure. Present unsustainable trends suggest that political economic systems globally have failed, which is not easily corrected."

The near monopoly of neoclassical economics is part of the problem, and in order to become sustainable, we need a pluralist democracy of ideas.

In his paper, 'Key competencies, complex systems thinking, and economics education for sustainability', Dennis Badeen discusses the three main themes of sustainability research: key competencies; challenging traditional paradigms; and participatory research/learning. Badeen provides a helpful recipe for constructing/implementing case studies. He writes that a successful sustainability education will,

"develop students into change agents – individuals who, having been properly trained, possess the skills and capacities in the form of key competencies, go into the world and help affect transformation processes towards sustainability. Curriculum in sustainability programs ought to reflect this purpose."

Badeen's paper underscores that neoclassical economics, with its outdated and overly simplified assumptions (and stripped of all social complexity) leaves students unprepared, ill-equipped and misinformed to tackle sustainability. Thankfully, as Badeen amply documents, there are alternatives.

3 Conclusions

As Qadir and Zaman write in their paper for this special issue, 'Concepts of development and progress ultimately depend on the value systems accepted by people, which is what shapes human ideals'. In order to attenuate the worst effects of climate change, it is imperative that we adopt and assimilate the ideals of sustainability. I remain optimistic about our ability to do so,⁷ although our window of opportunity is dwindling. I hope this special issue contributes to reconceptualising economics and to teaching sustainability.

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Notes

- 1 This should be no surprise, given neoclassical economics' hegemonic extension into many social sciences (Fine and Milonakis, 2009). In the context of accounting, Brown and Dillard document its major effects (none positive): failure to address the inter-connected nature of contemporary crises; focus on instrumental rationality (enabling) corporate decision-makers to distance themselves from the negative impacts of corporate practices; and a lack of critical reflection and debate on many issues of societal concern.
- 2 See *IJPEE*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (2015) and *IJPEE* Vol. 6, No. 4.
- 3 Unfortunately, space precludes an adequate discussion of the world's religions and their view towards sustainability; however, this important topic will be the subject of a future *IJPEE* special issue.
- 4 The statistics in this paragraph were obtained from BP (2018).

- 5 See the *IJPEE* symposium on economics education in China (Vol. 1, No. 4). In the foreword to the symposium I wrote: “Chinese economics education is at a crossroads: no longer content with imitating Western mainstream economics, with its arrogant insistence on universal applicability, Chinese students and educators are developing their own models. It is quite likely that the most significant developments in economic theory in the next generation will come from China” [Reardon, (2010), p.286]. Since then, I would like to add India as an equally plausible candidate.
- 6 See Söderbaum (2008).
- 7 For a new economics that is pluralist, sustainable and progressive see (Reardon et al., 2018).