

Notes toward an experimental political ecology/nomy

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Abstract

The ongoing global economic crisis provides an opportunity and rationale for experimentation with novel economic logics and social practices for the dynamic allocation of resources, including ‘material,’ ‘labor,’ ‘attention,’ and ‘time’. In particular, we are interested in logics and practices which respond to another, more long-running but related crisis: the ‘global environmental crisis’, a phrase used as shorthand to denote a plethora of interrelated and often inter-reinforcing shortages, pollutions, threats, habitat and biodiversity losses, and ecosystem destabilizations and collapses generally, and sometimes used interchangeably with other phrases like “the challenges of sustainability.” In this paper we explore the rationales and conditions of possibility for such novel logics and practices; present brief studies of two sociotechnical assemblages in which such logics and practices appear to be emerging; and develop a theoretical and practical framework for describing and studying such assemblages and their relation and potential for responding to ‘the global environmental crisis’ in the context of ‘the global economic crisis’—or, put another way, for facilitating the study and construction of systems and practices which will serve uncertain and emergent human needs in the context of these global crises.

Beginning with transdisciplinary analysts Lietaer, Ulanowicz, and Goerner, who suggest that “the on-going financial crisis results not from a cyclical or managerial failure, but from a structural one,” [8] we might observe that the same ‘structures’—that is, the same material-semiotic assemblages of ‘logics’ and ‘contexts’—serve as conditions of possibility for both ‘crises’. Lietaer, Ulanowicz, and Goerner argue that “all complex systems”—including both ecosystems and financial systems—“become structurally unstable whenever efficiency is overemphasized at the expense of diversity, interconnectivity, and the crucial resilience they provide” [8]. We follow the implications of this argument and ask: what logics and practices *at small scales* lead to conditions under which we can characterize a larger-scale system as privileging efficiency at the expense of diversity and interconnectivity (and therefore, indirectly, resilience)? Reading together economic analysts Stigler [1], [3], Akerlof [2], and Greenwald and Stiglitz

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[5], we suggest that both crises are consistent with widespread ‘micro’-scale (i.e., ‘individual’, ‘community’, or ‘firm’-level) practices responding to incentives for the exploitation and perpetuation of the ignorance, disorganization, and disempowerment of others within the political-economic system. On this reading, neither market-centric nor policy-centric approaches to the environmental crisis should be expected to work. This reading provides a rationale for ‘micro’-level experimentation with alternative economic logics.

We offer brief studies of two such experiments—the CouchSurfing Project and CharityFocus—institutionalized as nonprofit organizations and constituted in practice as complex material-semiotic assemblages of people, ideas, narratives, homes, couches, food, allocation logics, reflective and discursive practices, computational systems, norms, and so on. Animated by the question ‘what do these experiments have to do with sustainability?’, we develop a theoretical framework which connects ecological ‘consequences’ to economic practices and logics, social objectives, and the norms that render them legible and logical in specific cultural contexts.¹ The framework is mathematical, but in the spirit of systems analyst and environmental activist Donella Meadows,² who suggests that “computer models of social systems should not be expected to produce precise predictions” but that “inexact, qualitative understanding can be derived from computer models and can be useful.” [4] (p. xxii) That is, the intent is to explore behavior modes of complex systems, not produce predictions or plans. We examine the ‘experiments’ under study in the language of the framework, and compare them to stylized representations of market- and policy-centric approaches to a small handful of economic and ecological issues.

We relate these experiments and the formal framework presented to “verbal models” and heuristics presented in recent design discourse. John Thackara, for example, avers that “there are many things wrong with design in our world, but designers, as a group of people, are not the problem”; rather, “our dilemma is that small design actions can have big effects—often unexpectedly—and designers have only recently been told, with the rest of us, how incredibly sensitive we need to be to the possible consequences of any design steps we take” [7] (p. 7). Thackara offers a notion of “design mindfulness” which we find appealing—even if Thackara’s discussion lacks a critical examination of ‘power’ and its implications for prospects of *operationalizing* design mindfulness—and which we understand as itself an ‘alternative economic logic’ with the potential to contribute meaningfully to approaches to the economic and ecological crises.

Finally, we explore the nontrivial shortcomings of the formal framework, and reflect on opportunities for further practical action and theoretical development. We follow Agre’s suggestion that “the intellectual utility of technical exercises”—a category to which formal models certainly, we submit, belong—“aside from the practical utility that they might actually have in the world, lies precisely in their limitations and failures” [6], and submit that the framework as articulated is only a small part of (and a small step

¹The importance of cultural narratives in economic decision making has been recently foregrounded in the economic literature by prominent economists Akerlof and Shiller, in their 2009 book *Animal Spirits* [9]; see especially Chapter 5, “Stories,” pp. 51-58.

²Lead author of the 1972 study *The Limits to Growth*, which examined the interaction between population, capital, human well-being, and environmental degradation.

toward developing) a broader, transdisciplinary way-of-acting-and-seeing-in-the-world, which we refer to as ‘experimental political ecology/nomy’. This way-of-acting-and-seeing is nourished by and draws links between literatures in ecological economics, systems dynamics, ‘design’, social ecology, political theory, feminist epistemology, and science and technology studies. We conclude by offering a set of trajectories relevant to a practice-oriented research program in experimental political ecology/nomy.

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