

A CHANGE IN ECONOMIC THINKING



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On ecological economics and its diagnosis of environmental and social challenges and threats.

Your academic interests include the philosophy of science and “ecological economics.” Could you explain the juxtaposition of two apparently antagonistic words in the name of the latter discipline?

EWA BIŃCZYK: Ecological economics – which is not to be confused with environmental economics – creates interdisciplinary models of economic activity that take into account the dependence of the economy on the biosphere. It is a promising field, because such ongoing processes as progressive climate change, the mass extinction of species, growing ocean acidification, and the loss of fertile soils necessitate above all a decisive, pro-environmental change in economic thinking. The history of economics has taken an unfortunate turn. The field is virtually blind to the environmental costs of economic activity. Decision makers and their advisers continue to focus too much on the

narrow aspect of what can be monetized. Big corporations care mainly about profits for their shareholders.

Some prominent economists, such as Nicholas Stern and Andrew Oswald, apologize for the fact that, by paying no attention to environmental costs, mainstream economics has simply let the world down. Responsibility for this situation is attributable to the commonsensical pro-market and pro-growth approach, referred to as “business as usual.” In ecological economics, in turn, there’s discussion about how to sensibly temper growth, with the GDP being replaced with the prosperity index and with environmental costs (such as greenhouse gas emissions) being included in economic governance models. Calls are being made for the creation of “resilient” economies that use redistribution to protect not only what is left of the natural environment but also the most vulnerable individuals.



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What is the role of politics and politicians in all this?

The environmental crisis facing our planet is a profoundly political problem, not just an environmental one. The climate catastrophe has political sources (such as fossil fuel subsidies, the power and influence wielded by oil giants, and the promotion of emission-intensive solutions) and requires decisive reforms. But we keep pretending that we cannot see this. The current epoch of man, referred to as the Anthropocene, is a time of irreversible losses in the stability of the natural environment, yet the most important government ministries are still considered to be those dealing with finance and the economy, rather than the environment. Decision makers are slow to understand the warnings of experts. Citizens and activists have to force them to do so. It seems naïve to think that these priorities can be reversed before it's too late. But we have no other choice if we want to sustain civilization as we know it until the end of this century.

What is the alternative? What do we stand to lose if we remain in this state of lethargy that you so often talk about?

The field of Earth system science and data on the crossing of “planetary boundaries” suggest that we risk disrupting the relative equilibrium of planetary-scale systems that characterized the Holocene. This will entail huge losses for agriculture and the insurance sector, climate migrations, extreme weather events such as heat waves and droughts, struggles for access to water, and political tensions. In Poland, this has been described vividly in the interviews conducted by Dr. Marcin Popkiewicz and Prof. Szymon Malinowski on the website “Nauka o Klimacie” (Climate Science).

We risk losing the future. Trapped in this convenient lethargy, every day we are stealing the future away from our children and grandchildren, from other species, from coral reefs, from tropical rainforests, and from the Arctic.

How much time do we have left?

Unfortunately, we should already have taken up the challenge of decarbonizing already some time ago. After all, we understand perfectly well that a transition away from fossil fuels requires a well-thought-out transformation of most sectors of the economy, not merely the energy sector or housing. We must impose taxes on fossil fuels, but at the same time decarbonization cannot be done in a way that devastates the most vulnerable members of human societies. We need to shift away from long-distance transport, emission-intensive industrial agriculture, emission-intensive forms of entertainment, and so on. We need to build our cities differently, stop fostering hyper-consumerism in developed societies, and put a damper on the advertising sector, which stimulates hyper-consumerism. In the 21st century, the world's countries, especially members of the OECD, should undertake the ambitious mission of transitioning to low-emission economies (we are the biggest emitters and we have the highest consumption of resources). Mankind has altered about 75% of the biosphere, used up 90% of fish stocks. We are consuming 50% of available water and degrading 50% of fertile soils.

What are the economic and social costs of the energy transition that Poland must undergo?

It's a mistake to think of this transition in terms of cost. In fact, investments in renewable energy sources

Strike for the Climate,
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have the highest rates of return! Polish medium-sized companies have competences that are perfectly suited to the renewable energy sector. It is a shame that the renewable energy revolution didn't happen much earlier, because our politicians were too short-sighted. Reports that take into account the costs of soil, air, and biodiversity degradation show that most sectors of the economy are in fact unprofitable. But we don't see this, because polluters don't pay. We live in an era of monstrous neglect, and its costs will be borne by future generations. We are functionally dependent on the biosphere, and no financial markets can hide this. Planetary-scale systems will become destabilized regardless of how many more campaigns of denialism and disinformation are funded by the oil and automotive sectors.

Moreover, a pro-environmental shift towards resilient economies doesn't necessarily imply sacrifices or social costs. This has been described by such prominent researchers as Tim Jackson, Peter Victor, Kate Raworth, Jason Hickel and Jonathan Symons. Unless we worry so much about the losses of the oil sector and the fact that the richest individuals will have to share their fortunes to a small extent. Ecological economics and degrowth economics talk about systemic and gradual redistribution as well as the continued "development" of societies, but towards more free time, better social welfare systems, a world of emission-free types of entertainment, and a dense fabric of social trust. This also takes into account the fact that some sectors will still have to grow, and so will

developing economies, in which living standards still don't guarantee security.

Are the catastrophic visions that get sketched out by scientists not counter-effective? Do they not prompt people to deny facts and think that "everything will sort itself out in the end, because things can't possibly be that bad"?

Indeed, we are caught up in a trap. The warnings raised by scientists and their reports are already so depressing that they paralyze us. But I don't think that censoring scientists is the answer, and neither is the suppression of the Youth Strike for Climate and the attempt to drag its participants through the courts, as is unfortunately the case in Poland (appeals in this case have been made by the Climate Coalition, among other institutions). Passivity and lethargy have such strong and well-institutionalized foundations that we think that it's not worthwhile for humans to survive and to preserve the way of life we know from the Holocene. This makes us realize how pathological the so-called "common sense" really is. It needs to be reshaped. Also, as soon as possible the public debate must incorporate positive and constructive visions of a resilient, low-emission world that is safe for the remnants of the natural environment that we have managed to preserve for us. A world in which not only the most privileged individuals can live comfortably.

Aerial photo of the Turów coal mine

INTERVIEW BY MARCIN PIETRAS, PHD