



Ecological economics and human development

Alberto Quadrio Curzio¹

Published online: 29 August 2023
© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2023

- I) As Editor-in-Chief of this Journal it is a true pleasure to write a short introduction to the essay of Joan Martinez-Alier for many reasons. One is that Martinez-Alier is a ground-breaking scholar in Ecological Economics and Political Ecology. The second as he is a winner of one of the most prestigious international Prizes, that of the International Balzan Prize Foundation. The third because his essay confirms the growing attention of this Journal (EPOL) to the problems of sustainable and human development as I will explain in the paragraph (III) mentioning other previous essays of other economists.
- II) The essay of Martinez-Alier on “Environmental conflicts and the making of world movements for environmental justice” published in this Issue is a revised version of the official Balzan Lecture delivered in Milan in September 2022 which follows the awarding to Martinez-Alier the International Balzan Prize 2020. The Prize was in that year devoted to “Environmental Challenges: Responses from the Social Sciences and the Humanities”. Martinez-Alier received it “for the exceptional quality of his contributions to the foundation of ecological economics, his pathbreaking analysis of the relationships between economies and the environment, his interdisciplinary as well as comparative approach, and his active role in the promotion of environmental justice”. Therefore, with the congratulation of EPOL to the Prize winner, I thank him very much and the International Balzan Prize Foundation having given the permission to publish here this essay.

It is impossible for me to do a summing up of an essay which is a path breaking of the “standard economics” along three innovative and crucial issues: Environmental justice as degrowth in practice; The protagonists and the material causes of environmental conflict; Is there a global environmental justice movement? Therefore I chose two sentences, one from the beginning and the other from the end of the essay.

✉ Alberto Quadrio Curzio
alberto.quadriocurzio@unicatt.it

¹ Università Cattolica, Milan, Italy, and Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Rome, Italy

In the first Martinez-Alier explains his “approach to the study of environmental conflicts from two angles, that of ecological economics and that of political ecology. I started by remembering that the industrial economy is not circular, it is entropic, therefore requiring new supplies of energy and materials extracted from the ‘commodity frontiers’ and producing polluting waste. Therefore, ecological distribution conflicts arise. The Global Atlas of Environmental Justice is an online inventory of such conflicts based on scholarly and activist knowledge”.

In the last sentence Martinez-Alier states “Early warnings from scientists on the increased greenhouse effect since the 1890s were disregarded. With delay, nowadays the new environmental social sciences (including ecological economics, industrial ecology, political ecology, environmental history, agroecology) emphasize instead that the ecological distribution conflicts in our own generation, the needs of future generations, and other species’ right to life should become the centre of politics. This means not only policy changes at state and international levels, not only changes in technology and a (welcome) slight decline in the human population, but also greater strength of (and less criminalization against) the environmental justice movements”.

In addition to this very short selection, it is important to point out the statement with which Martinez-Alier concluded his acceptance speech of the Balzan Prize (at Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Rome, on 18 November 2021): “Environmental conflicts display ecological values, livelihood values, economic values, sacredness, indigenous territorial rights. These plural values are not commensurate, they cannot be reduced to one another. Ecological economists use multi-criteria evaluation but even then: who has the power to exclude some criteria, to choose the participant stakeholders, to choose the time horizons. In a nutshell, who has the power to simplify complexity and (try to) escape uncertainty? Political science studies power. This is why political ecology studying such ‘ecological distribution conflicts’ is political ecology. The Atlas of Environmental Justice is then a tool for comparative, statistical political ecology (Scheidel et al, 2020). In this line, I hope to finish another book: *Land, Water, Air and Freedom – World Movements for Environmental Justice* that will remember many environmental victims but also register many successes contributing to environmental sustainability. The Balzan Prize will be ‘recycled’ to this purpose”.

Concluding, I suggest to read the recent and important book edited by Sergio Villamayor-Tomas and Roldan Muradian “The Barcelona School of Ecological Economics and Political Ecology. A Companion in Honour of Joan Martinez-Alier” (Springer 2023). In it the ground breaking role of this innovative thinker is widely demonstrated.

III) At the beginning of this Editorial I said that the problems of human development with a focus on “Global South” have had a growing attention by this Journal. It is important to remember here just some previous “focuses” which show that the essay of Martinez-Alier adds a new but complementary dimension to EPOL.

The first focus is the Editorial by Bina Agarwal published in EPOL (1/2018) on “The challenge of gender inequality”. This essay was the Lecture that the author delivered in 2017 when she received the International Balzan Prize on “Gender Studies” with

this motivation: “For challenging established premises in economics and the social sciences by using an innovative gender perspective; for enhancing the visibility and empowerment of rural women in the Global South; for opening new intellectual and political pathways in key areas of gender and development”.

The second focus is the Organization for Women in Science for the Developing World. In an Editorial of EPOL (1/2020) on “Women, science and development: The leading role of OWSD”, written by myself with Tonya Blowers and Jennifer Thomson, we presented this programme of Unesco which in 30 years has given a very important contribution to the scientific and human progress in the Global South led by women. In OWSD, Thomson is the President, Blowers is the programme coordinator and I am ambassador and also a link with the Italian institutions, being OWSD settled in Trieste.

The third focus is the Special issue of EPOL (1/ 2022) on “Women, Pandemics and the Global South”. This initiative has been a remarkable success and the Guest Editors (Amartya Sen, Bina Agarwal, Alberto Quadrio Curzio, Floriana Cerniglia, Ragupathy Venkatachalam, Jennifer Thomson) were able to collect and select essays from many authors of the Global South on this crucial topics for human development. In this Special Issue of EPOL I wrote an Editorial “Women and science: a political economy preface” where I explained the reasons behind the initiative. Among the many essays in the Special Issue, I mention here that of Bina Agarwal, Ragupathy Venkatachalam, Floriana Cerniglia on “Women, pandemics and the Global South: an introductory overview”. And finally the essay of Bina Agarwal “Imperatives of recognising the complexities: gendered impacts and responses to COVID-19 in India”. Without these Co-editors of EPOL, it would have been impossible to develop the Special Issue.

The relevance of the 2022 Special Issue is stressed by the Editorial by Amartya Sen on “Women scientists and pandemics” from which I select this sentence: “Gender economics is a relatively new area of study, but its relevance is particularly strong when the lives of women are especially disrupted through the loss of household income, lack of medical facilities, the need for physical separation (as a part of prevention strategy for the epidemic), and particularly the deprivation of resources and opportunities for child care. I must point to the special need for concentration on gender economics in the context of pandemics. Even though there is not enough opportunity in this paper to go into the subject in detail—the special issue that is being planned by Alberto Quadrio Curzio for which this paper is being written, will happily have substantial expertise in this field, including the presence of very distinguished economists (such as Prof. Bina Agarwal) with appropriate specialist knowledge. It is important to remember that the needed women scientists may have to be economists and sociologists too—not just biologists and doctors”.

I take this occasion to express my deep gratitude and admiration to Amartya Sen (member for many years of the Advisory Board of EPOL), for having been for decades a Political Economist who kept this crucial social science as one of the most important for human and sustainable development.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.