Anti-Sustainability Rhetoric: Sketching Ideological Responses

James E. Sawyer

Dans Journal of Innovation Economics & Management 2009/1 (N° 3), Pages 49 à 71

Éditions De Boeck Supérieur

DOI 10.3917/jie.003.0049
Sustainability initiatives in the United States were buffeted for a generation following the 1980 election of political conservative Ronald Reagan. Commensurate with the ascendancy of the political right was the reassertion of the neoclassical economic paradigm. Linking politics and economics, also, was the ascendancy of a highly influential rhetorical industry, focused on undermining sustainability policies and initiatives. This paper considers examples of the ideological rhetoric of anti-sustainability in the U.S., links that rhetoric to the neoclassical economic paradigm, and sketches ideological responses.

J. M. Keynes (1926) called this sort of marriage of ideological fervor with the neoclassical world view, “the political economist’s religion”. Its characteristics, he observed eight decades ago, are a mixture of individualism and laissez-faire. This religion has played out particularly in the libertarian, anti-government, anti-tax rhetoric endorsed and promulgated by the U.S. Republican Party during the George W. Bush Presidency. At the core of its position is a natural law view in which the common good, defined tautologically, is equivalent with the pursuit of self-interest. Irrationality occurs in this intellectual system, then, when individual economic agents may fail to recognize and to act in accord with self-interest. An illustration of such irrationality,

1. The writer expresses appreciation for particularly helpful reviewer comments on the manuscript. Final content, of course, including any errors or omissions, is the writer’s sole responsibility.
2. Portions of this paper rely particularly upon prior writings by the author on this and related topics. See Sawyer, particularly 2005, 2007, 2008a, 2008b.
from the perspective of the U.S. political rightwing, would be for its members to pay taxes to support government-sponsored sustainability programs, including programs to combat global warming. Some rightwing rhetoricians have called this “confiscatory” taxation.

In addressing the ideological basis of anti-sustainability rhetoric in the U.S., sketches of six strategies or counterarguments are presented. These are Science vs. Sentiment, Deconstructing and Reframing, Pursuing Other Outcomes, Realism, Rhetoric of Reaction, and Academic Salons. The focus of the concluding section is the application of strategy to support sustainability, particularly in the face of anti-sustainability rhetoric. A set of clarifying questions is provided as a simple illustration of a broader strategy of “unpacking” and reframing party and counter-party rhetoric.

THE RHETORIC OF ANTI-SUSTAINABILITY

According to James Speth (2008), Dean of the School of Forestry and Environmental Studies at Yale University: The escalating process of climate disruption, biotic impoverishment, and toxification that continue despite decades of warnings and earnest effort constitute a severe indictment, but an indictment of what exactly? If we want to reverse today’s destructive trends, forestall further and greater losses, and leave a bountiful world for our children and grandchildren, we must return to fundamentals and seek to understand both the underlying forces driving such destructive trends and the economic and political system that gives these forces free rein. Speth explains the underlying “drivers” of environmental deterioration. They range from enormous growth in human population and the meteoric growth of dominant technologies, to values that shape human behaviors and determine what is considered to be important within the human community. The most threatening impacts, he observes, are connected to encroachments of the global economy.

It is a system that consumes vast quantities of resources and creates vast quantities of waste products, placing the human community upon a ruinous course, Speth says. The fundamental question, he asks, is how can the “operating instructions” for the global economy be revised to both protect and restore the natural world? Our policies [of insufficient action] represent our collective will. Our global ecological footprint exceeds earth’s biocapacities by about 25 percent. If we allow the planet to pass “tipping points”, we become accountable to future generations for our failure. We cannot claim, Speth emphasizes, that we did not know. Even so, U.S. government policy during the G. W. Bush Administration proceeded with what has been described by
some as contempt for the environment and those who serve visibly as its advocates. Critics of Bush Administration science policy charge that climate policy, particularly, was politicized.

To illustrate, quoting from Andrew Revkin (2006) of the New York Times: The top climate scientist at NASA says the Bush administration has tried to stop him from speaking out since he gave a lecture last month calling for prompt reductions in emissions of greenhouse gases linked to global warming... The scientist, James E. Hansen, longtime director of the agency’s Goddard Institute for Space Studies, said in an interview that officials at NASA headquarters had ordered the public affairs staff to review his coming lectures, papers, postings on the Goddard Web site and requests for interviews from journalists... Dr. Hansen said he would ignore the restrictions. “They feel their job is to be this censor of information going out to the public”, he said. 3

Following the 2008 election of Barak Obama, Revkin (2009) describes a more favorable shift in climate-related science policy, contrasted with Bush Administration counter-strategies, at the National Academies of Science: In 2001, President George W. Bush asked for a quick study of the remaining questions related to human-caused climate change, and he got a report very much focused on the persistent uncertainties. While the report included strong statements pointing to a growing human influence on climate, Mr. Bush’s critics asserted that the emphasis on unknowns gave the administration cover to avoid quickly pushing forward with actions to limit greenhouse-gas emissions. That June, Mr. Bush used the findings to justify new research, but pointedly noted that the scientists had not designated an unacceptable level of climate risk. As he put it, “No one can say with any certainty what constitutes a dangerous level of warming, and therefore what level must be avoided.” 4

Rightwing critics of scientific findings appear to be in retreat, at least at this writing, even as the scientific consensus around human-caused global warming becomes ever more durable. Global warming is confirmed by the so-called AR4 Synthesis Report released 17 November, 2007 by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The IPCC is a scientific intergovernmental body set up by the World Meteorological Organization

(WMO) and by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). It was established to provide decision-makers and others interested in climate change with an objective source of information about climate change. Its 2007 conclusion is definitive:

Warming of the climate system is unequivocal, as is now evident from observations of increases in global average air and ocean temperatures, widespread melting of snow and ice and rising global average sea level.\(^5\) Yale’s James Speth emphasizes the damage of anti-sustainability rhetoric, and relies upon Frederick Buell (2004), professor of English at Queens College, who reflects upon the ideology of environmental degradation. Says Buell: Something happened to strip the environmental [cause] of what seemed in the 1970’s to be its self-evident inevitability. Something happened to allow environmentalism’s antagonists to stigmatize its erstwhile stewards as at best hysterical, at worst crafted lies. Indeed, something happened to allow some even to question (without appearing ridiculous) the apparently commonsensical assumption that environmentalists were the best stewards.

The most important explanation for these events isn’t hard to find. In reaction to the decade of crisis, a strong and enormously successful anti-environmental disinformation industry sprang up. It was so successful that it helped midwife a new phase in the history of U.S. environmental politics, one in which an abundance of environmental concern was nearly blocked by an equal abundance of anti-environmental contestation. […] [T]he public drive for environmental change had been “neutralized” by the 1980s, blocked by an increasingly organized and elaborate corporate and conservative opposition.

There have been few areas in which right-wing abuse was so fecund as with anti-environmentalism. How did the right revile environmentalists? Let us count the ways. […] In its magazine, Policy Review, the Heritage Foundation, a leading conservative think tank, called the environmental movement “the greatest single threat to the American economy”.

Buell speaks of the sprouting of an anti-environmental disinformation industry. Documenting alleged manifestations here may be useful. Two are considered; one at the level of a local U.S. board of education, the other at the level of a U.S. university. Former U.S. Vice-President Al Gore plays a significant role in each. Gore became a target of the political rightwing in the United States, particularly because of his articulate, high profile statements on the critical nature of human environmental care. These include

his 1992 book *Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit* and 2006 film *An Inconvenient Truth*. In the film Gore warns that global warming “could literally end civilization”. *Guardian* writers Oliver Burkeman and Jonathan Freedland (2006) point, particularly, to a statement in which Gore publicly called George Bush a “rightwing extremist”, followed by rightwing rhetorical backlash: Mr. Gore’s environmental campaign has sparked a backlash from some on the right who accuse him of scaremongering. A series of television advertisements, launched by a thinktank called the Competitive Enterprise Institute, argue that carbon dioxide emissions are a sign of American productivity and progress. 

For illustration, of the two highly visible examples of anti-sustainability rhetoric considered here, each is linked to attempts to diminish Gore publicly. The first is drawn from a series of events in a suburban Seattle, Washington school district that became a national and international media spectacle. Under the title “Moratorium on Al Gore film sparks own controversy”, a *Seattle Times* article observed: A philosophical fist fight …[broke] out in the Federal Way School District days after the School Board put all classroom showings of the global warming movie *An Inconvenient Truth* on hold.

The most vocal of the citizens in the so-called philosophical fist fight was computer specialist and father of seven, Frosty Hardison: Board members said the controversy began after a district newsletter noted that teachers could obtain free copies of the film for classroom use. Several parents objected to this, and at least one raised a concern about an upcoming showing of the film at Lakota Middle School, questioning whether the seventh-grade science teacher there would present alternative view points.

*An Inconvenient Truth* features former Vice President Al Gore discussing the science behind the theory that global warming is caused by humans. Some parents objected to the film for political or religious reasons. At the meeting… the board suspended all classroom viewings until district Superintendent Tom Murphy could confirm that the district’s existing policies on materials that contain “bias” were being followed. Two district policies apply: The first requires that teachers get approval from their principals before they show any movie in class. The second states that, “when it is necessary to use historical or literary works, periodicals, and technical journals which show bias, staff members have responsibility to point out the biases, and present additional information and perspectives to balance those biases.”

---

Several days later a follow-on article chronicled a school board meeting in which dozens of parents expressed concern about the Board’s decision that the science undergirding the Gore film is controversial, therefore questioning why it should be subjected to district policy requiring teachers to present other points of view. As far as many parents were concerned, there is no other valid perspective that can be presented other than global warming is caused by humans. In the meeting, parents on both sides rose to speak… about the nature of fact and fiction, and the place of political views in the classroom. Frosty Hardison, a particularly outspoken parent, supports the teaching of creationism and opposes sex education, according to another Seattle newspaper account. Says Hardison: “Condoms don’t belong in school and neither does Al Gore. He’s not a schoolteacher”.

Hardison is quoted as believing the earth is 14,000 years old: “The Bible says that in the end times everything will burn up, but that perspective isn’t in the DVD”. Frosty Hardison and his wife Gayla said they would prefer the film not be shown at all in schools. “From what I’ve seen [of the film] and what my husband has expressed to me, if [it] is going to take the approach of ‘bad America, bad America’ I don’t think it should be shown at all…” Gayla Hardison said. “If you’re going to come in and just say America is creating the rotten ruin of the world, I don’t think the video should be shown”. 9

The second example of anti-sustainability rhetoric is drawn from the writings of Harvard economist Robert Barro. The work of Professor Barro is selected because he is also an outspoken, professed classical liberal (libertarian or neoliberal) who has also occupied a highly visible niche in the U.S. media. Among other posts, Barro served as a commentator for *Businessweek* magazine between 1998 and 2005. His economics Ph.D from Harvard was preceded by a B.S. degree in physics. As such, he might be described as a “quant”, a casual and descriptive term popularized in the wake of the global financial crisis. A quant may describe someone in economics or finance who is also mathematically inclined.

In 2002 Robert Barro authored a popular book, *Nothing is Sacred*. Arguably the memoir reads somewhat like a self-congratulatory paean, perhaps intended to inspire other of the ideologically “faithful”, laboring in or near the “vineyard” of neoclassical economics that typically portrays itself as “value free”. 10, 11 Barro describes his underlying philosophy as libertarian or

11. See for instance Lionel Robbins (1932).
classical liberal rather than conservative or Republican and he identifies himself with Milton Friedman, particularly the ideas expressed in Friedman’s book *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962). Friedman, says Barro: …proposed many policies that are harmonious with free markets and are receiving serious attention in the United States and other countries. This list includes school choice, the flat-rate income tax, rules for monetary stability, privatized social security, and the elimination of affirmative-action programs.

Barro continues that government has some key functions: This heading encompasses national and domestic security and the enactment and enforcement of a system of laws and contracts. (…) My belief in the appropriateness of this limited range of public functions is consistent with the view that most governments have gone much too far in their expenditures, taxation, and regulations. More recently, in the face of fiscal stimulus proposals to restart the U.S. economy shaken by the global financial crisis, Barro’s preferred stimulus strategy is the elimination of the federal corporate income tax.12

Al Gore also plays a large role in Professor Barro’s point of view, as he does in the points of view of Federal Way parents Frosty and Gayla Hardison. Indeed, one may learn a great deal about Frosty and Gayla Hardison, and about Robert Barro and others with similar ideological views, merely by asking: “What is your opinion of Al Gore?” Under the heading “Al Gore in the Balance”, Barro’s readers get a straight forward view of his opinion of the former Vice President. We learn about his “humiliating loss” in the 2000 presidential election, and Barro effuses that: “I had to suffer through a reading of his outrageous book [1992]… and that memory compels me to show no mercy.”13

Now we get a closer look at Barro’s differences with Gore. The former Vice President is criticized, among other elements, for his adamant opposition to oil exploration in Alaska, and he is also characterized by his unwillingness: …to adopt a cost-benefit approach to the environment. Although such calculations can be difficult, we have to make these assessments explicitly or implicitly to make policy choices, and we will not make reasonable decisions if we always pretend that any environmental damage entails an infinite cost. Regarding oil production in the pristine Alaskan wilderness, observes Barro, “The cost involves hypothetical damage to a vast wilderness that is not especially attractive and that most of us will never see”.

Also, Gore’s unrelenting critic, Robert Barro, then assails Gore’s 1992 book: …for the extreme positions taken on all of the favorite environmental

causes, including global warming, ozone-layer depletion, and preservation of endangered species and rain forests. The thesis is that we humans are unrestrained guzzlers of energy and dangerous enemies of the environment. Hence, enlightened policymakers ought to spare no effort (and expense!) in combating these tendencies.

Other “impalements” of Gore by Barro include: ...he believed that Americans’ love affairs with their cars stem not from the efficiency and convenience of the mode of transport but rather from some sort of mass craziness [referring to Gore’s advocacy for abolition of the internal combustion engine within 25 years]. In sum, Professor Barro concludes regarding Al Gore: “Some people regard this sort of passion as admirable, but I regard it as reckless and offensive”. 14

**SKETCHES OF SIX STRATEGIES**

This section presents sketches of six strategies responsive to the rhetoric of anti-sustainability. Some overlap with others.

**Science vs. “Sentiment”**

Philosopher Karl Popper (1962) has had a profound impact upon science, generally, but perhaps less so upon economics, specifically. His work offers a criterion for isolating propositions that are ideological, therefore unscientific. As such, it does not mean that ideological propositions are innately inferior to scientific ones. The distinction is crucial, however. According to Popper, the definitive characteristic of a scientific proposition is falsifiability. That is, the community of appropriately trained scientists must be able to determine criteria and collect empirical evidence that may render the proposition false, if in fact such evidence exists.

Daniel Hausman (2008), writing as a philosopher of economics, argues: Specific economic theories are rarely logically falsifiable... When they apparently fail tests, they are rarely repudiated. Economic theories, which have not been well tested, are taken to be well-established guides to policy, rather than merely conjectures. Some critics of neoclassical economics have made these criticisms [Eichner 1983]. Applying Popper's views on falsification lit-

14. This sentence appears in Barro’s text immediately following: “Gore went on to compare the environmental danger to the injustice of American slavery: Most [...] of the generation that wrote the Constitution were partially blind when it came to the inalienable rights of the African Americans as slaves [...] Today, most [...] are partially blind when it comes to our connection with the natural world.”
erally would be destructive. Not only neoclassical economics, but all known economic theories would be condemned as unscientific, and there would be no way to discriminate among economic theories. One major problem is that one cannot derive testable implications from theories by themselves. To derive testable implications, one also needs subsidiary assumptions concerning distributions, measurement devices, proxies for unmeasured variables, the absence of various interferences, and so forth... These problems arise generally, and Popper proposes that they be solved by a methodological decision to regard a failure of the deduced testable implication to be a failure of the theory.

Imre Lakatos [1970], who was for most of his philosophical career a follower of Popper, offers a broadly Popperian solution to this problem. Lakatos insists that testing is always comparative. When theories face empirical difficulties, as they always do, one attempts to modify them. Scientifically acceptable [in Lakatos’ terminology “theoretically progressive”] modifications must always have some additional testable implications and are thus not purely ad hoc. If some of the new predictions are confirmed, then the modification is “empirically progressive”, and one has reason to reject the unmodified theory and to employ the new theory...15 Hausman concludes it is doubtful that neoclassical theory has demonstrated progress, even in the sense of Lakatos, and surely not in the sense of Popper. Even so, as de Marchi and Blaug (1991) demonstrate, many writers in recent years have become disenchanted with Lakatos, not to mention Popper. Perhaps the most significant economic use of Popperian logic, then, may be to reveal ideology that may attempt to masquerade bluntly as science.

Deconstructing and Reframing

Eventually, if challengers are to prevail against the laissez-faire resurgence also described as classical liberalism – according to the perspective of early 20th Century political economist Antonio Gramsci (1986) 16 – either they must demonstrate the prevailing paradigm is without foundation, or alternately, they must pose philosophical syntheses of greater importance and significance. Many of neoliberalism’s challengers become exhausted in pursuit of the former, when the paradigm’s primary vulnerability is with the latter.

MIT urban planners Donald Schön and Martin Rein (1994) offer a perspective that articulates with Gramsci’s. Their work addresses policy-related

15. See Section 4.1 Popperian approaches.
conflicts in which the parties observe common empirical realities, but attach different interpretations, meanings and emphases in order to dismiss antagonists. They define a metacultural frame as pertaining to the broadly shared beliefs, values, and perspectives through which a particular culture gives meaning to its thought and action. The concept of framing, of course, has a connotation, within the applied field of mediation, of finding “space” to bring parties together, rather than to “reframe” an opponent to dismiss him, in order to gain media, political or other advantage. Brad Spangler (2003), University of Colorado at Boulder, describes the reframing process as it pertains to a search for a solution acceptable to all disputants to conflict:

Parties enter into conflict resolution processes with their own interpretation of the problem: what issues are in dispute, why the problem has arisen, and how best to resolve the conflict. [1] The way in which a party describes or defines a conflict is known as framing. One of the first things a mediator does in the mediation process is to get the parties to explain their view of the problem. This allows the sides, as well as the mediator, to see how each is framing the conflict. [2] In most cases, these initial statements will reveal very different views of the dispute. For example, opening statements tend to use adversarial language. They often place blame on the other side, attribute negative qualities to the other side’s personality or identity, and demand that the other side comply with their demands. [3] Such conflicting frames spur antagonism and prevent the parties from reaching an acceptable and effective agreement. Framing refers to the way a conflict is described or a proposal is worded; reframing is the process of changing the way a thought is presented so that it maintains its fundamental meaning but is more likely to support resolution efforts. [4] 17

Berkeley linguist George Lakoff (2002, 2004) is one who has used the reframing concept dynamically, as a way of reprising metaphor, particularly when it occurs in a political context. Of course, this is a “negative” application in the pro-mediation sense of Spangler, and fits more with uses as proposed by Gramsci, and perhaps Schön and Rein. “Deconstruction”, as it has been called, becomes an enormously important part of this nouveau method, and indeed it looks a great deal like the character of a political campaign, such as the recent one between John McCain and Barak Obama. That is, the preeminent characteristic of this kind of “sparing” between adversaries comes down to “unpacking” the arguments and evidence of one’s opponent, then recasting these in a public relations “frame” that strengthens perceptions within the media of one’s position while simultaneously weakening the frame of one’s opponent. This strategy derives practically in the U.S. from a

method of literary criticism that gained traction among liberal academics, particularly since the 1980’s, under the name “French Theory”.  

**Pursuing Other Outcomes**

Contrary to the elegance of the scientific method, an emerging methodology, in the parlance of Gramsci, and Schön and Rein, may look like this: First, one takes control of (meta) problem identification; then second, one dismisses opponents espousing perceived dysfunctional, self-interested questions and solutions; and third, one replaces or modifies opponents’ paradigms with ones that are more workable and also friendlier to one’s own “salon”. The short answer, with regard to anti-sustainability rhetoric, then, is to build an alternative case that may “fly in the face” of the dominant neoclassical paradigm. Among those who have done this credibly are Herman Daly and John Cobb in *For the Common Good* (1989). They operate somewhat in the tradition of Kenneth Boulding and Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, and the metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead in holding that human life is continuous with nature in the sense that reality as such consists of socially constituted individuals…  

This is a distinctly divergent philosophical point of view from the “homo economicus frame” of the conventional paradigm. Described by public policy specialist Bryan Norton (1991) in his review, Daly and Cobb structure their paradigm as follows: Part I is a rapier-sharp critique of the “paradigm” of mainstream microeconomics. Employing Whitehead’s conception of “the fallacy of misplaced concreteness” … Daily and Cobb convincingly show that many of the assumptions used in neoclassical economics seriously distort the real world… The problem, they argue, is that many of the assumptions that underlie neoclassical economics are no longer valid – for example, that the earth is an unlimited waste sink. As a result, reliance on the neoclassical paradigm leads society along the path of nonsustainability: “The market sees only efficiency – it has no organs for hearing, feeling, or smelling either justice or sustainability”. Therefore, a paradigm shift is required to

---

18. See, for instance, Francois Cusset’s *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed The Intellectual Life of the United States*, translated by Jeff Fort (University of Minnesota Press (2008). Cusset argues that “During the last three decades of the twentieth century, a disparate group of radical French thinkers achieved an improbable level of influence and fame in the United States.” Even outside of the academy, French Theory “… had a profound impact on the era’s emerging identity politics while also becoming… the target of right-wing propagandists”.

19. Review by Paul and Anne Ehrlich in *American Political Science Review*, vol. 84.

include constraints imposed by physical reality, such as carrying capacity, into our economic thinking. Whereas neoclassical economics emphasizes the short run, the new, sustainable paradigm must emphasize the long run.

At the heart of their new economic paradigm is the notion that people must come to view themselves not merely as individuals, but as persons-in-community. Since the 1940’s, an association of U.S. economists oriented to Catholic social teaching has met with the Allied Social Science Association (ASSA) at the annual meetings. More recently it has operated under the name of the Association of Social Economics (ASE). The ASE supports deliberative agendas such as the sustainability agenda put forth by Daly and Cobb. It also retains a certain unity with its roots in Catholic social teaching. Here Catholic social teaching is presented as an illustration of a value-oriented frame from which a particular paradigmatic structure may take shape.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (2009), in an online statement on “Justice, Peace and Human Development”, identifies seven themes of Catholic Social Teaching. Among them, compatible with the Daly and Cobb sustainability thesis, is Care for God’s Creation: We show our respect for the Creator by our stewardship of creation. Care for the earth is not just an Earth Day slogan, it is a requirement of our faith. We are called to protect people and the planet, living our faith in relationship with all of God’s creation. This environmental challenge has fundamental moral and ethical dimensions that cannot be ignored.

Realism

Closely related to “Pursuing Other Outcomes” is realism, or “common sense” about how the world is perceived to work. For instance, in the run up to the subprime lending crisis in the United States, even casual observers of lax lending standards might have predicted the pending crisis, based simply upon concern for the obvious diminishing quality of loans in bank portfolios. Donald Schön (1992) addresses the critical need for realism in applied fields, particularly his field of urban planning. Arguably, economics is similar in many respects to urban planning. Schön reflects particularly on the legacy of early 20th Century education philosopher John Dewey (1938) and comments on his perception of a growing skepticism about the practical utility of professional knowledge. In part, its diminishing practical utility stems from what Schön describes as a radical separation of the world of the academy from the world of practice. In this Schön sees what he calls a dilemma of “rigor over relevance”. Reflecting upon his experience teaching urban planning at MIT, there is a growing suspicion, he asserts, that some academic research may actually exacerbate some social problems. In this he sees an
encroaching “dualism”, for instance, of thought and action, research and practice, science and common sense, the academy and everyday life. John Dewey devoted his career to overcoming such dualisms, Schön observes, therefore he sought to unify mental reasoning with action, into a “creative tension” called praxis by some authors.

Inquiry, as Dewey conceived it, is transactional, open-ended, and inherently social. He thought that inquiry proceeds... from doubt to the resolution of doubt. But as Dewey would have it, “We are doubtful because the situation is inherently doubtful”. Inquiry begins, Dewey believed, with an indeterminate (i.e., confusing, obscure, or conflictual) situation and goes on to make that situation determinate. The inquirer does not stand outside the problematic situation like a spectator; he is in it and in transaction with it...

In science and common sense alike, Dewey thought, inquiry is inherently social. 21

Princeton economist Ewe Reinhardt (2009a) has spoken plainly and eloquently about realism, asking how the economics profession could have slept soundly right into the middle of the global financial crisis. He references Yale economist Robert Shiller’s observation of “groupthink”, a term popularized by social psychologist Irving Janis. The analytical structure of neoclassical economics, Reinhardt observes: ...depends crucially on certain unquestioned axioms and basic assumptions about the behavior of markets and the human decisions that drive them. After years of arduous study to master the paradigm, these axioms and assumptions simply become part of a professional credo. Indeed, a good part of the scholarly work of modern economics reminds one of the medieval scholastics who followed St. Anselm’s dictum “credo ut intellegam”: I believe, in order that I may understand”. An inference drawn from the profession’s credo is that private markets invariably are self-correcting and are driven by rational human beings whose careful decisions serve to allocate scarce resources efficiently – that is, these decisions maximize a nebulous thing economists call “social welfare”.

Reinhardt (2009b) also addresses how easy it may be for economists “to infuse their own ideology” into what may appear to outsiders as objective, scientific analysis. Surely he might add, also, as John Dewey might have emphasized, one’s preeminent professional responsibility is to explain limitations, with humility, to the public which relies upon the profession to make decisions, both public and private.

Stanford’s Hausman concludes that economic methodologists have thus far paid little attention to debates between realists and so-called anti-realists.

There are two important realist programs operating in contemporary economic methodology, Hausman points out. The first, associated with Uskali Maki (2007) at the University of Rotterdam is focused upon exploring the varieties of realism implicit in the methodological and theoretical structure of economic arguments. The second, under the leadership of Tony Lawson (1997) at Cambridge University argues that: …one can trace many of the inadequacies of mainstream economics [of which he is a critic] to an insufficient concern with ontology. In attempting to identify regularities on the surface of the phenomena, mainstream economists are doomed to failure. Economic phenomena are in fact influenced by a large number of different causal factors, and one can achieve scientific knowledge only of the underlying mechanisms and tendencies, whose operation can be glimpsed intermittently and obscurely.

Related to Lawson’s pursuit is an insightful observation from Paul Feyerabend (1981). He argues that the very way in which reality is perceived and grasped, depends substantially upon the nature of the way in which reality is described and interrogated. In other words, established paradigms may limit “knowing” because they act so as to structure “how we know”. Theories we hold influence our language, and maybe even our perceptions. This implies that as long as we use only one empirically adequate theory, we will be unable to imagine alternative accounts of reality. If we also accept the positivist view that our theories are summaries of experience, those theories will be void of empirical content and untestable, and hence there will be a diminution in the critical, argumentative function of our language. Just as purely transcendent metaphysical theories are unfalsifiable, so too what began as an all-embracing scientific theory offering certainty will, under these circumstances, have become an irrefutable dogma, a myth.

“Rhetoric of Reaction”

The rhetoric of reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy, by interdisciplinary social scientist Albert O. Hirschman (1991), professor emeritus at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, is the sole focus of this section. The book “is a progressive exploration of reactionary argumentative tactics”, according to reviewer Eugene Garver (1991), a rhetorician. Garver observes that Hirschman raises the quality of the “left-right” debate by shifting attention toward the historical pattern of argument, and away from attention to motives of people who are either using or opposing various arguments. Garver captures the essence of reactionary rhetoric, Hirschman’s broad target, with phrases such as: Of course I’m in favor of equality, but university curricula that explore the diversity of humanity as reflected in the student body will not promote
equal respect and good manners but bigotry and resentment, just as forced integration causes segregation. Of course I’m in favor of equality, but you can’t legislate morals. Making laws that say that men and women have to be treated equally is as futile as making a law saying that from now on cows will have five legs. Everyone knows that past discrimination against people because of race, religion or sex was a terrible thing. But trying to eliminate all the vestiges of discrimination will threaten the progress we’ve already made.

John Dilulio (1992), in his summary of Hirschman, distinguishes among the author’s three rhetorical theses: … the perversity thesis holds that “the attempt to push society in a certain direction will result in its moving all right, but in the opposite direction”. In contrast, the futility thesis holds that “the attempt at change is abortive, and that in one way or another any alleged change is, was, or will be largely surface, façade, cosmetic. […] Plus ça change plus c’est la même chose.” Finally, the jeopardy thesis holds that “the proposed change, though perhaps desirable in itself, involves unacceptable costs or consequences of one sort or another”.

Regarding the jeopardy thesis specifically, it is unlike the other two in that it acknowledges a proposed reform to be desirable, but then goes on to criticize and defeat it. It does this rhetorically by maintaining that a social advance can be achieved, but only at the expense of already hard fought, hard won rights or freedoms. For instance, economist Fredrich Hayek’s work, according to Hirschman, exemplifies the jeopardy thesis.

Academic “Salons”

Jeff Madrick (2005) of the New York Times observes the American profession has become too comfortable with powerful interests, not unlike 19th Century Parisian artist’s salons. Then, rules were promulgated to maintain standards, but also to exclude “up-and-coming artists” who chose to circumvent the salon’s style. Thus, salon-related “norming” behavior enhanced visibility and prestige, and the wealth and power of its senior members. However, it excluded the interesting work of Impressionist challengers such as Monet and Cezanne. Unless the challengers complied with what Madrick decries as an enforced “paint-by-the-numbers” scheme, they had little hope their work might reach around the hegemons, into the hands of collectors and consumers. Certainly the cartel-like structures Madrick describes do not sustain innovation.

These information cartels tend to ossify intellectual structures, particularly paradigms. What logically “comes next” in a paradigmatic sequence, therefore, may relate more to the structure of salon “thought control” and social conditioning, than to the presumed rationality of independent human
discovery. Cartelized social “norming” holds profound implications not only for the methodology by which questions are adjudicated, but even more profoundly, for the very selection of what constitutes salon-appropriate questions. It is instructive to consider aspects of the contemporary U.S. economist’s salon Madrick decries. The “drill” is well known among those who consider themselves to be heterodox. It begins, in the United States, for instance, at the college sophomore level with departmental adoption of texts written by those once described by the media as “leading economists”. Much later in the educational pipeline, graduate students learn – expediently – the set of salon-appropriate questions, and also the salon-approved methods for adjudicating those questions.

Response to the “French economist’s salon” earlier this decade is sobering. In the “Autistic Economics” case, felicity for subject and mentors dissolved into loathing by many French graduate students departing economics for berths in fields considered by them to be more “real world-oriented”, including sociology and political science. The “autistic” word choice is in no way casual. Presumably an autistic economist (struggling with Asperger’s Syndrome, for instance) would be very good at math, but very poor at crafting complex, interactive policy solutions to real-world problems. Indeed, the profession should ask itself, has economics largely become an autistic profession? That is, are economists competent at building particularistic models (only), but autistic when it comes to crafting pragmatic strategies corresponding to how the world actually works?

Certainly the way the world works changes, but the way economist’s salons thinks about how it works tends to ossify. J. M. Keynes reminded, for instance, that as mortals we tend to live uncritically, often out of the ideas of long-dead economists. And as T. S. Kuhn described, intellectual revolutions are precipitated by increasing fissures between reality, and the way reality may be perceived by the keepers of the “sacred flame”. Thus, the economist’s salon implied by Madrick may also function as an information cartel protecting the interests of its elite, even in the face of gathering doubt about the validity of its paradigm’s truth claims. A salon may continue to dispense its conventional wisdom aggressively, in the style of the failing, curmudgeonly Wizard from the 1939 American fantasy film classic. Indeed, as economists, the make-believe land of the Wizard of Oz may be closer at hand than many may care to acknowledge. One can almost visualize the Wizard, as economist, frenetically pulling levers to reconcentrate the hold on power exercised by his salon.
STRATEGY APPLICATION

Too often one encounters economists masquerading as scientists, even as the questions asked, the methods employed, and the answers forthcoming are indicative of passionately held, ideologically driven agendas. Such ideological agendas may be legitimate, but only if one distinguishes carefully, for audiences and counterparties alike, the boundaries between “doing science” and doing something else. Eight decades ago J. M. Keynes (1926) spoke definitively of similarities between religion and the passionate pursuit of religion-like, ideologically driven agendas of political economists. Nowhere did these prescriptions reach a more “extravagant and rhapsodical expression”, said Keynes – speaking of “the political economist’s religion” – than the writings of Frédéric Bastiat 22 (1801-1850) and Anglican Archbishop Richard Whately (1787-1863). These among other authors believed they were observing and describing natural laws of commerce. Violation would bring misery upon human beings analogous to willful violation of natural laws of physics such as those described by Isaac Newton.

Ultimately, Keynes remonstrated, it was economists who solidified the emergent 19th Century natural law belief in articulation of the pursuit of self interest with the wholly anticipated attainment of the common good. Thus any political philosopher, Keynes chortled, …could retire in favour of the business man – for the latter could attain the philosopher’s summum bonum by just pursuing his own private profit. All, as it were, he said: … preached practically the same thing – individualism and laissez-faire. This was the Church of England and those her apostles, whilst the company of the economists were there to prove that the least deviation into impiety involved financial ruin.

Arguably, a similar but contemporary religious-like fervor motivates Frosty and Gayla Hardison, and Professor Robert Barro, also. The Hardisons force their strongly held values into the classroom, through the deliberative processes of public education. They view sustainability initiatives as counterproductive at best. Their belief in the “end times”, spoken of by rightwing “literalist” students of the Christian Bible, assures them of the “righteousness” of their position.

Opponents, Al Gore included, press sustainability agendas that are unnecessary, even sinful, in their opinion. Within the moral framework the Hardisons advocate, sustainability is but a furtive attempt to save oneself “temporally,” rather than to trust in God’s unyielding plan for humans. Al Gore, then, becomes a visible symbol of willful disregard of God’s plan for

mortals, even as he has been the object of rightwing derision. Frosty Hardison compares the showing of Gore’s film in public schools to the distribution of condoms in schools, which surely he opposes passionately on moral grounds. Wife Gayla sees Gore as “un-American,” also, because she perceives that he portrays the United States “as causing the rotten ruin of the world”, as she says, because he promotes self-critical reflection by U.S. citizens. Her “adrenalin rush” to diminish Gore also reveals an “über-nationalism” often reflected by the American religious right.

Robert Barro, on the other hand, is similar to and different from the Hardisons. As a highly trained academic, he is different. But in light of Keynes’ admonishment about the inappropriateness of casually mixing sentiment with science, Barro and the Hardisons have at least some similarities. What makes Barro’s professional agenda “religion” depends of course upon any tendency toward dogmatizing his classical liberal ideology, which Barro appears to do with relish. We see this, for instance, in his politically driven agenda, associated with Milton Freedman, that includes the privatization of social security, for instance. It is visible, also, in the limited role Barro admits for government. He would limit government, essentially, to the role of 19th Century American frontier “sheriff,” providing security and enforcing contracts, and little else. Certainly Barro’s ideology is also visible in his criticism of Gore – which he seems to relish – in which the former Vice President is diminished, including for: extreme positions taken on all of the favorite environmental causes, including global warming, ozone-layer depletion, and preservation of endangered species and rain forests.

Ideology may be present in Barro’s advocacy for the unmitigated use of discounting in benefit-cost analysis, also, thus favoring short-lived private investment projects over potentially longer-term public investment projects (including environmental protection and restoration). Ideology is also seen in his cavalier disregard of the environmentally sensitive North Slope of Alaska, and in his apparently arrogant attack on Gore as reckless and

23. M. Weitzman (2008b, 2007a), an environmental economist and Harvard colleague of Barro, points out the possibility of bias toward private investment, in contrast with public investment, because the very reliance upon discounting to present value dictates profitability over a limited time span. For instance, at a modest discount rate of four percent, the present value of one dollar’s worth of cash flow in the 50th year is a diminishingly small 1.4 cents (.014). Profitable investments, then, when subjected to this criterion, must pay out in about one-half of a contemporary life span. Thus the very unflinching advocacy of the use of discounting as an essential component of benefit-cost analysis may implicitly convey an ideological predisposition away from long-lived, government-funded projects such as environmental protection and restoration. This is particularly true if there may be already present, analyst bias against government, allegedly as innately inefficient, in comparison with investment initiatives undertaken within the private sector.
offensive, as in: I had to suffer through a reading of his outrageous book…
and that memory compels me to show no mercy.

Within the critical framework of JM Keynes, then, what unbiased observer
would not find Professor Barro to be a candidate for one who plies “the polit-
ical economist’s religion?” How, for instance, in his selection of sources of
external financial support, or professional affiliation, or selection of research
questions and selection of method, may his ideological preferences and bias
be revealed? These are not interrogations reserved for Robert Barro alone, of
course, but for every economist, regardless of “ideological stripe.”

What follows, then, is a set of questions oriented to discerning ideological
bias. As such, these questions are presented as a vestibule exercise, designed
to offer suggestions for possible avenues of interrogation and to serve more
as a point of departure than any attempt to define a point of arrival. Surely,
since most readers will be advocates of sustainability, the intent is not only
to reveal counterparty bias, but to explore and to reveal “principal party”
bases as well. In this, one is called to reflect upon a comment attributed to
the late Joan Robinson of Cambridge University. Ideology, she pondered, is
a bit like one’s breath. When one enters a room, everyone becomes aware of
our breath, except, of course, ourselves. 24

Are assumptions presented fully and clearly, particularly when statistical
and mathematical abstractions are involved?

Are problem structure, method, and findings presented at “multi-levels”,
simultaneously serving the needs of various constituent users, organized
from the least sophisticated, toward the most sophisticated?

Is the Popperian distinction made clear, between discernment of the
propositions of science, and alternately, ideological propositions?

Is it made obvious which sets of advocates (parties, counterparties) might
have a predisposition to support or reject the analysis, and why?

Have framing and reframing techniques been utilized?

What value set does the research agenda appear to support? Oppose?

24. The writer reflects on Professor Robinson’s call to self-reflection, in this case within the con-
text in which the writer teaches deconstruction strategies at Jesuit Seattle University, emphasizing
at least the following:
- Humanistic, compassionate respect for one’s opponent.
- Revelation rather than concealment of one’s own value frame, including assumptions.
- Discovery of the value frame of one’s opponent.
- Distinction between scientific propositions and nonscientific ones, according to the criteria of
“falsifiability,” along the methodological line of Professor Popper.
- Quest for a deeper humility, defined as tolerance not only for imperfection in one’s opponent,
but for imperfection in one’s self, also.
Is problem structure both realistic and practical?

Does the possibility of professional “groupthink” appear to drive problem identification, methodology, or conclusions?

Does the paradigmatic structure of one’s research agenda unnecessarily stifle creativity, perhaps by delimiting alternately structured approaches?

Have party and counterparty arguments been analyzed, linguistically and rhetorically, as well as economically?

Does the research agenda appear to be under the control of a single salon or an oligopoly of salons, only?

BIBLIOGRAPHY


SPETH, J. (2008), The Bridge at the Edge of the World: Capitalism, the Environment, and Crossing from Crisis to Sustainability, New Haven, Yale University Press.


