

Commentary on Peter Söderbaum's paper:

"How can the language of economics be made politically more relevant in relation with sustainable development" (1)

Özge Yaka - "Beyond Ostrom" Workshop, November 8-10, Berlin

My commentary takes Peter's written contribution on the blog as a basis. I will also try to reflect on the main question of the workshop: how to go beyond Ostrom?

I see some similarities between Polanyi and Ostrom in terms of the effects of their work. Elinor Ostrom shakes the central idea of early rational choice theory – the self-centred, narrowly interest maximizing individual. She falsifies this assumption through empirical and contextual analysis' of common pool resources management, just as Polanyi dismisses the idea that markets are natural orders of exchange through historical analysis. Both dissolved the abstract notions of neoclassical economics by historicizing and contextualizing them.

Ostrom challenges the unquestionable assumptions of neoclassical economics, with its own methodological tools and language by showing through her case studies empirically that there are indeed different patterns of human behaviour than neoclassical economics wants us to believe. The attractiveness of Ostrom's work obviously lies in the possibility of expanding and transferring this knowledge onto a broader space of human interactions.

Peter's contribution discusses the limits of her approach. He maintains that Ostrom shares the basic methodological stance of the neoclassical economics and does not question its fundamental assumptions, such as the distinction between public and private goods. He also argues that there is a need to go beyond Ostrom's limited framework to target the current unsustainable trends, which characterize the economic system of our age. For him Ostrom's contribution is important as it focuses on the human capabilities of cooperation and protecting

common interests, but does not lead us to discuss or design the transformation from the “present unsustainable development to more sustainable path” as he puts it. It is certain that Ostrom focused on relatively small samples of community organisation of common-pool resources and didn’t expand her interest to the organisation of complex and territorially dispersed economic relations. This problem of scale, as we have been discussing since Friday, is an important issue for us, if we want to go beyond Ostrom.

To go beyond Ostrom, as most of us would agree, we also need to break the borders neoclassical economic language and go through and beyond, if not against as Patrick says, her theoretical references: such as cooperative game theory and contemporary behavioural economics. Barbara and Michael claimed that Ostrom abandoned methodological individualism but I have my doubts about it as the individual is still very abstract in her work as long as s/he is not understood though and within the broader framework of social relations: relations of power and domination and relations of production and reproduction in particular.

I think Peter stresses a similar point by emphasizing the importance of ideological orientation, referring to ethical ideas, values, and principles such as solidarity, in the very development of human behaviour. I might add that to go beyond Ostrom, we need to expand her insights and critique by taking her point of interdisciplinarity even further, combining not only economics and political science but also sociological and anthropological perspectives with the political economy. Their emphasis on social relationships and social norms, moral frames, values, affects, solidaristic networks, etc. in the production of social subjectivity and individual behaviour are helpful to concretize the abstract individual. Sociological perspective is also helpful to think further on how relations of power, domination and inequality are constructive elements of the social frames on which human actors interact.

Peter claims, the separation line between public and private has to be questioned, this leads in my view to the fundamental problem of

interdependence that society itself poses. One could say that methodological individualism systematically cuts off the social ties that make up society such that the individual's relations to each other appear like external relations.

One think I might ask for clarification is Peter's use of public sphere in his paper. I assume he is not using it in the way Habermas did, as a sphere of civic debate and deliberation. Is it something that has more to do with the republican idea of the public as the infrastructure of the social?

As a concluding remark, I might add that another way to go beyond Ostrom is to relate her insights such as the capability of humans to design complex systems and to craft their own institutions to govern their own resources, her stress on the institutional arrangements and the idea of design principles with the wider literature on commons, the work of Hardt and Negri on immaterial commons, of Silvia Federici on reproductive commons, and of various social movements around the world who produce knowledge on commons through praxis epistemology as Patrick put it, on the first day. Here what is crucial in my point of view, is to understand commons not only as natural or immaterial resources that we share, but also as ways of organizing, designing, shaping the social life. The practice of commoning, in this sense, could be built as the organizing principle of social life – as a model, which truly acknowledges social existence of human beings and their interdependence.