

Bringing heterodox recipes to policymakers: the case of "Innovative economic policies for climate change mitigation"

Table of contents

1. Why heterodox policies should be put in practice
2. The difficulties in reaching policymakers to enhance the ecological transition
3. The experience of “Innovative Economic Policies for Climate Change Mitigation”
 - 3.1. The EWI Symposium and the process leading to the book
 - 3.2. Presentations to policymakers and other agents of change
4. Lessons learned
5. The next steps

1. Why heterodox policies should be put in practice

The unequal, poverty-plagued and unsustainable current world system, left alone by neoclassical *laissez-faire*, is leading towards an ecological and human catastrophe. If the states had to renounce to their regulatory, policy, and tax power, as neo-liberal policies have advocated for decades, the level of atmospheric pollution would reach tipping points leading to an intolerable Earth system, putting an end to human and non-human ecosystems. Much earlier than this, local and global disasters, shortages and disruptions would provoke massive economic and social damages, whose cost and pain would lead to political unrest and violence. Even the weak document produced at the end of the CO15 admits that “climate change is one of the greatest challenges of our time. We emphasise our strong political will to urgently combat climate change in accordance with the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities... recognizing the scientific view that the increase in global temperature should be below 2 degrees Celsius.” (art. 1, Copenhagen Accord)

Implicitly recognizing this fact, in the environmental fields, the neoclassical mainstream has expressed a relatively progressive advice in the form of Pigouvian carbon taxes and cap-and-trade systems, having to recognize the role of the states and of the international cooperation as necessary pillars. MRV (monitoring, reporting and verification) systems of emissions, mitigation actions, funding have been requested by the international community, also in recognition of the high level of interference that the states have to produce on markets to lead them towards sustainability.

However, the unrealistic assumptions about *homo oeconomicus* upon which even these more progressive neoclassical approaches rely, make their advice too narrow and ineffective. By assuming perfect foresight, inter-generational bonds, and automatic translation of private to common interests, the neoclassical cannot explain the sources of pollution nor put in place effective systems avoiding it.

Prices alone cannot signal and guide the kind of deep transformation of the production modes and consumption patterns that are necessary for the transition towards an ecological and sustainable society¹. For instance, the quality and the technological properties of green and brown

¹ Values, status symbols, emotions have all a role in both common and extraordinary decisions as those that are linked to the issue. Experimental economics and prospect theory are just two of the streams of empirical and theoretical challenges to neoclassical assumptions.

products, advertising, and stereotypes need to be addressed since the very beginning of the transition.

In short, alternative and more realistic views of how the economy works are necessary to devise, outline and detail policies that effectively and timely save the Earth. The need for such views will rise with the more flagrant evidence about climate change and other environmental and social failures, objectively opening a field for heterodox recipes.

Heterodox approaches, theories, judgements and technical wedge issues have been addressing a wide variety of interrelated social, economic and environmental fields (e.g. without any claim of completeness: Andersen, 1999; Andersen 2002; Andersen 2006; Andersen 2008a; Andersen 2008b; Geels, 2001; Kemp et al., 2001; Maréchal and Lazaric, 2009; Oltra, 2008; Smith, 2009; De Laurentis and Cook, 2008; Barker, 2008; Markowitz and Doppelt, 2009; Taylor and Allen, 2008; Cohen and Vandenberg, 2008; DeCanio, 2003; Carrillo-Hermosilla et al. 2009; Waltz and Schleich, 2009). Building on their sharp criticism of mainstream neoclassical school, they have introduced and articulated visions and alternatives to the current world system. On this background, a number of key messages have been embedded in broad and specific policies to change the world.

It is not only a matter of environmental effectiveness but also political feasibility. Neoclassical policies face formidable political constraints, as the low level of acceptance of carbon tax and cap-and-trade all too often appear in the countries that more convincingly have tried to adopt them².

As a recent recommendation to policymakers states “Mitigation policies should not be narrowly interpreted as aimed at raising the price of energy but be oriented into transformational goals, by fostering technology switches. Technology switches can help to transform society towards a more sustainable model, however, many people do not have the financial means to make this transition, and are consequently ‘trapped’ in expensive, old, carbon-intensive technologies”³.

By framing mitigation as a cost, instead as a transformational opportunity, the neoclassical analysis fostered US resistance to international negotiation on climate.

But next ecological and climate-related catastrophes will remind politicians and skeptical voters that the time to act was now, opening an objective demand for out-of-the-box solutions. We shall come back to the kind of situation in which President Franklin D. Roosevelt could state: “It is common sense to take a method and try it. If it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something. The millions who are in want will not stand by silently forever while the things to satisfy their needs are within easy reach. We need enthusiasm, imagination and the ability to face facts, even unpleasant ones, bravely. We need to correct, by drastic means if necessary, the faults in our economic system from which we now suffer. We need the courage of the young. Yours is not the task of making your way in the world, but the task of remaking the world which you will find before you”⁴.

2. The difficulties in reaching policymakers to enhance the ecological transition

Institutional changes and social transformations for a ecological and sustainable economy will require both a bottom-up emerging dynamics in consumption and behavioural patterns as well as wise policymaking at local, national, and international levels. The latter can speed up considerably

² See for instance the difficulties of carbon tax in France and of cap-and-trade label in US Senate.

³ King Baudouin Foundation, “Climate change mitigation and social justice in Europe: striking the right balance”, May 2010.

⁴ Oglethorpe University Commencement Address (22 May 1932).

the former, but remains unlikely and difficult, in particular because neo-classical economics is framing the issue of mitigation in an internationally, politically and socially unsustainable way.

The demand for new policy advice will rise over time and policy-oriented heterodox alliances will be offered the chance of implementing some of their proposals. But this will not happen without a strong commitment and a lot of experimentation by the heterodox community. The fossil-fuel economic system is in fact rich in rents and profitable markets, which in turn offer the reasons and the means to engage in extended lobbying, often influencing the resources of politicians that can thus strengthen their stance in the media and in the broad population, ultimately influencing general elections, specific lawmakers, and pieces of legislation.

The political system is sensitive to the electorate, the stakeholders, and to the balance of power across social and economic groups, even more than to long-term sustainability goals and ethical values. With respect to climate change, the reaction of politicians has been dismissive, marginalizing or rhetorical for a long time⁵, with climate change not being a major issue in elections until very recently and in quite a few countries.

Even when a strong leadership has indicated a bold path for the country, there is always the risk of brakes, watering down, and reversal, if the specific actions and policies taken in that framework do not adjust to the specificities of the territorial and sectoral constituencies of lawmakers⁶.

As Compston and Bailey (2009) puts it, politically effective policies should be carefully designed and produce co-benefits on a range of already existing hot political topics, stress the moral dimension, while attracting historically powerful subjects.

This calls for heterodox economists to explore the political system looking for possible alliances which in turn requires a long road to be done from abstract theories and general concepts to much more detailed policy prescriptions, what is coherent with a more intrinsic goal for heterodox strands to become “politically relevant”, as recommended by Stockhammer and Ramskogler (2008)⁷. By pushing heterodox recipes embedded in decisions, the success of the latter will be an argument for the soundness of the theory they built upon. And “demonstration by praxis” is a key process in the history of heterodox thought.

3. The experience of “Innovative Economic Policies for Climate Change Mitigation”

In this context, a recent book outlining and containing heterodox recipes for climate change mitigation can be seen as an interesting experience both for its contents and for the process it is generating in terms of outreach to policymakers and other agents of change (Author et al., 2009).

⁵ “The short history of climate policy in Britain and elsewhere is already littered with good ideas that, due to lack of support from the public, industry and special interests – as well as obstacles within governments, legislatures, departments and political parties – had to be abandoned or diluted to the point where they lost most of their impact” (Compston and Bailey, 2009).

⁶ For a reflection on climate change and urban policymaking, see for instance Doucet (2007)

⁷ “Post Keynesian Economics should look at the real world (to identify pressing problems), look at themselves (to identify shortcomings in their analysis) and at other heterodox streams (to find specific areas of complementarities). Our first recommendation is rather basic: be politically relevant. It is hard to overstate the importance of this. In particular it is crucial to develop an analysis for new social and economic problems. This is crucial to attract new students as well as the attention of media and the economic policy institutions. While we have little hope of displacing the mainstream in the short run, we doubt that this hegemony will go unchallenged in the future. But change is unlikely to come from within the profession. Economics will be changed by forces from the outside. It’s the economy rather than economics that will call for change” (Stockhammer and Ramskogler, 2008, p. 20-21). More specifically, they include climate change in the “issues that will decide the future of Post-Keynesian Economics” (ibidem, p. 3).

The transition to a low carbon sustainable economy is seen as the overlapping movement in industry structure, firm behaviour, consumption patterns and policymaking. The more-than-20 economic policies aimed at mitigation of climate change set forth by the book have thus been designed to be:

1. realistic, i.e. based on appropriate understanding of conditions, constraints, motivation, and behaviors;
2. dynamic, i.e. providing guidance for a number of steps over time, leveraging on pre-existing conditions and pioneers to give them a quantum leap, then follow up and reach quantifiable targets;
3. self-propelling, i.e. building on their own success to put in motion a positive self-feedback that allows them, even when started at low scale, to quickly ramp up;
4. non-linear, i.e. serving as a leverage or a buffer in the complex relationships between economic activities and emissions, on the one side, and climate change and its impact, on another side;
5. adequate to the context of XXI century, with its mix of globalization and local identities;
6. environmentally effective in reaching wide, deep, lasting, and irreversible results, both in terms of GHG emissions and of environmental quality at large;
7. socially sustainable, defending the interests and generating gains for all (or most) social groups;
8. politically sustainable, boosting consensus for politicians who adopt them;
9. independent from each other, in the sense that they can stand up on their own feet and merits,
10. capable of generating synergies when and if adopted together or in a sequence;
11. integrable in wider mitigation policy packages, which will also comprehend more directly scientific, technological, social, and political measures.

Indeed, these policies are based on a richer set of behavioral assumptions about firms, markets, consumers, and government, which include deep heterogeneity across them, the use of bounded rational rules, inputs from psychology and sociology. Policies address issues in innovation dynamics, eco-innovation, long-term investment fund, consumption preferences and dynamics, corporate social responsibility, with application envisaged at international, national, sub-national, and city governance level.

Policies include multi-sectoral de-growth, the sectoral euthanasia in highly polluting regions, free advertising for green products, green microfinance and many others – a sort of menu from which policymakers and agents of change throughout the world can choose to generate packages of reforms in specific sectors and horizontally.

They are evolutionary policies, which the authors define as policies a) acting on a articulated present and b) capable of (appropriately) nurturing and strengthening (or weakening, suffocating, reversing) the dynamics in act and of launching, sustaining, and leading to success new ones.

In evolutionary terms, there exist a past, which has to be described and interpreted, upon which a number of dynamics have exerted pressure, moulding the present and preparing it to further inertial evolutions. Policies interact with these forces at work; they mix and add to them. More than a “final stage”, evolutionary policies reach over time mid-term and long term goals, as they were buoys on a sailing route.

Here the key concept of “dynamics” should be highlighted. As life itself, “dynamics” comprehend birth, infancy, development, maturity, seniority and death, or any similar pattern sequence. It starts, takes off, culminates, falls down and disappears. Many processes are present at the same time, whereas each can be at a different stage of development. So policymakers introduce elements that reinforce or weaken the existing dynamics, while also, in certain circumstances, launching entirely new dynamics.

3.1. The EWI Symposium and the process leading to the book

The Economics Web Institute is a major heterodox site, established in 2001, reaching out to more than 2 100 000 visitors, including 500 000 only in the last 12 months. The site provides a radical re-thinking of key economic concepts, articulates analysis and provides simulation software as well as vast spectrum of real-world economic data for absolute beginners, students, researchers, professors, managers, and policy-makers. It covers the area of climate change, international trade, business cycles, industrial dynamics, labour market, consumer behaviour and several others. Its impact factor can be seen in the more than 250 quotations that public institutions, universities, scholars and practitioners have made of the published materials.

In June 2009, the Economics Web Institute has organised the International Symposium on “Innovative Economic Policies for Climate Change Mitigation” at the guest quarters of the historical Benedictine Monastery of Subiaco (Italy). By directly inviting leading scholars and through the launch of an Internet-based call for chapters, including an announcements at the Heterodox Economics Newsletter (HEN), the Institute received and selected contributions from 16 countries and 30 economists and practitioners, mainly but not only in the tradition of evolutionary economics.

Scholars from such a wide range of countries as Australia, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Denmark, France, Kenya, Hungary, India, Italy, Iran, Mauritius, The Netherlands, Poland, Singapore, Slovakia, United Kingdom have accepted this challenge, providing a unique international and multi-polar perspective, in stark contrast with the US-Euro-centric neoclassical mainstream.

New insights from evolutionary economics, environmental economics, sociology, law, marketing and managerial disciplines have been linked with the experience on the terrain of real policy-making in ministries and environmental agencies.

Instead of framing climate change mitigation as a cost, their approach is to provide opportunity for innovation, profits, business growth, employment, wages and improvement of real quality of life.

During the Symposium and in the months following, the different contributions have been amalgamated and given a common reference, while leveraging the diversity of backgrounds and competencies. Accordingly, the book is not the result of an ideological purity but of the mixed experiences and innovative approaches rising from many contexts in a pluralistic perspective, far from the neoclassical mainstream.

3.2. Presentations to policymakers and other agents of change

The book was always meant as a tool to talk with policymakers, scholars and other agents of change to build broad alliances and to experiment innovative approaches in the real world. The first occasion for such an exchange of views and networking was the invitation to the Balaton Group one-week meeting in Hungary, where this long-standing group on limits to growth and sustainability has been gathering each year since 1982, linking scholars from hard and social sciences, policymakers and social activists. Their comments on early draft of the book were very encouraging and the book reported a couple of quotes on the outside back cover. The president of UNFCCC COP9 stated: “The international community of policymakers should take note of the proposals of this book – fruit of the experience of authors from developing and developed countries – to reach win-win compromises and to move forward”⁸.

⁸ To this seminar, Tim Jackson presented in advance his new book on “Prosperity without Growth” (2009).

In November 2009, the book was commented by a paper (Author, 2009) exploring the political and economic drivers for implementation of mitigation policies, peer-reviewed and accepted for the Climate Change 2009 Conference organized by Walter Leal Filho – Hamburg University of Applied Sciences. Exposed to internet access, the paper was disseminated to a broad audience and received the Emerald Group Publishing Ltd. 2009 Climate Change Best Paper Award.

In the same month, the Club of Rome – EU Chapter in Brussels hosted a Peccei Lecture devoted to the book and its application at European level, offering an informal setting for conversation with people from several institutions, including the EU Commission and OECD.

In parallel, a seminar for policymakers in Ankara, organized by “Regional Environmental Centre - Turkey”, brought to their attention the book and some further coherent insights in terms of adaptation to climate change, leading to informal meeting in public institutions and at COP15 with members of the Turkish delegation. This was renewed by a further seminar to the business community in Istanbul in February 2010. Their optimistic stance towards the green economy and the huge potential for emerging countries to leapfrog the fossil fuel economy were investigated. A couple of policies raised the direct interest of some participants, possibly leading to an experimentation at local or national level. As for the wider South-East Europe region, the book has been presented to representatives of 17 countries in a meeting in Budapest commenting on Copenhagen results, organized by the “Regional Environmental Centre” at its headquarters.

Indeed, the direct participation of some of the authors to the COP15 within the Bella Center was a relevant venue for spreading the book and its policies, including through a side-events organized with IESP and the Club of Rome – EU Chapter at the Danish Environmental Protection Agency. In total, several dozens of policymakers from all around the world were contacted and briefed. In particular, a key ambassador from Ethiopia expressed its interest, what led to a wider brainstorming and a special informal session, in March 2010, at the Food and Agriculture Organization in Rome.

In other continents, the book and its perspective have been presented in Mauritius, with a special paper underlining lessons specific to the small island states, in Montevideo and in Singapore. A paper developing a financial proposal hinging on a chapter of the book (and aimed to provide tools strengthening Socially Responsible Investments) has been elaborated under the aegis and vision of the Climate Change Organization – Asia.

Given the overlaps with social issues, one of the authors of the book was invited to the stakeholders dialogue on Climate change and Social Justice, organized by the King Baudouin Foundation, which lasted several week and was concluded with a two-days meeting and with the handover of the recommendations to Jo Leinen (EU Parliament) and to László Andor, the European Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. This open and transparent process allowed for a fruitful interaction among the two communities (the social justice side and the climate side), in which the book was an interesting offer by the climate community to come across the aisle.

A further on-line call for papers on “Where to implement innovative economic policies for climate change mitigation” is attracting professors and practitioners from several countries, some of which will contribute to the new edition of the book, aimed at updating its contents and broaden its scope.

This kind of interaction with scholars and policymakers, which goes beyond the short synthesis provided here, is providing precious new insights on the needs for framing, language, arguments, and creative developments. It is fully confirmed the on-going search for new approaches by policymakers and their determination to take new roads, while emphasising the constraints they face in their direct span of power and the need to involve further stakeholders.

4. Lessons learned

Several preliminary lessons can be taken to the discussion, raising from the experience of the last few months. For the sake of simplicity and directness, they can be expressed as exhortations, albeit it is needless to say that every scholar will approach, react and contrast those inputs in the ways most suitable for her or his own heterodox research:

1. Be confident with your criticism of neoclassical theory and economic realities

Heterodox economists and social scientists have elaborated a wide range of critics both of the theory and of the current economic system. They can feel reassured that in this moment a large number of policymakers is critical and would like to have alternatives. Further elaboration of criticism continue to be useful while at the same time it's important to propose, outline and detail counter-proposals.

2. Be constructive with policies

A system-wide change will not happen overnight. It's important to propose realistic steps that can be taken, given the power span in terms of institutional legal competencies, time to next elections and other constraints. A good intermediate level between global changes and specific projects is offered by "policies" that can be implemented in a wide range of situations, leading to sizeable positive results in relatively short time.

3. Be open for alliances (e.g. researchers, other disciplines, politicians of different background)

To implement any change, it is necessary to mobilise a broad coalition across many stakeholders, starting from the academy, both within and outside economics, up to trade unions, NGOs, cooperatives, foundations, political parties, bureaucracy, parliamentarians and every kind of politicians. Ideology purity will not be able to build such a diversified alliance, because people have different mentalities and the message (its language, arguments, interests raised,...) need to be adjusted accordingly, while solutions need to be compatible with the different positions.

4. Be flexible depending on national circumstances

Neoclassical optimization tends to emphasise "one best solution" in every kind of countries. This is in stark contrast with the proper "medical attitude" emphasising that every "patient" is different, has a different history, diagnosis and prognosis, might be allergic to specific "medicines" and need to be cared with full understanding of its objective and subjective circumstances. Anthropological symbols will be powerful elements through the implementation period, irrespective of temporary setbacks.

5. Closely follows the domestic and international negotiations as well as the electoral processes

Windows of opportunities open and close frequently, with politicians' power raising and fading all the time. Possible texts under negotiation can give impetus to specific policies. Government and opposition dynamics, across the rhythm of election or other power-assessing agreements, are extremely important and certain policies can be quickly become winning tools for the politicians that ask for our advice.

6. Issue policy briefs and make speeches

Books are important for accreditation, but the typical policy documents are much shorter and timely. Many key decisions are elaborated and taken orally, so speeches and informal conversations are essentials for the dialogue.

7. Include policies that are already on the ground

The Keynes' General Theory was published in 1936, whereas New Deal policies were in place some years before. It's important to provide new theoretical justifications to policies that are already running, helping their diffusion and adaptation to further contexts.

8. Be included in mixed teams

Policy implementation is always done through teams that mix several competencies, both formal and informal. Think tanks build up operative linkages with people that deserve the trust of policymakers and in working hand-in-hand you'll get inestimable access to knowledge.

9. Learn from experience

The policy-driven events tend to follow stop-and-go dynamics, with real action taking place in a rush and to exhaustion. It is however crucial to write down the experience gained, comment with other participants, because the memory can quickly disappear in the wake of further events.

10. Feedback to other researchers

Individual tacit knowledge acquired at hard price over the time should be fed back into more formal circuits and shared with our broad colleagues, building networks of trust and cumulating a capital of insights, suggestions and prones to action.

5. The next steps

It should be clear that the goal of the present paper is to shortly and confidently share some very initial hints about the crucial process of bringing heterodox recipes to policymakers and implementing them in real contexts.

We are utmost open to cooperation with other research groups, ready to discuss insights and approaches, both for the free advancement of social sciences and for the urgent need of pushing the direction of the world towards a better future.

We are eager to listen about other experiences and to find out together how to accomplish this historical task.

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