Sustainable Economics

Econ 4999-300   Instructor: Don Roper
Office Hours: 4-6 Mon 12:15-1pm Tue Thur 4:45-6pm Tue
August 28, 1995

The traditional economics paradigm has come under increasing criticism both from within and from the outside. Some of this criticism has been generated by the perception of greater environmental degradation - with more writers arguing that mainstream economics is a cause of environmental degradation, not the cure.

A major purpose of this course is to develop skills of critical thought and writing. Many of the readings will be by the critics of mainstream economics but several readings are by chief architects of the ruling orthodoxy, Friedman and Coase. A purpose of the course is to study this criticism in a critical manner. A critical reading of the critics does not mean that the purpose is to trash the readings, but rather to study the authors closely – to evaluate the assumptions and the coherence of their arguments – just as they evaluate the assumptions and coherence of neoclassical economics.

The course can be regarded as addressing the question “What constitutes sustainable economics?”

The course is divided into three parts:
(i) 7 weeks of discussion/writing on various articles
(ii) 6 weeks for short term papers and class lectures
(iii) 2 weeks for a discussion of the popular book, *Island*.

Electronic mail, a discussion list, and web pages will be used during the course. Electronic networking facilitates the logistics of the course in which students will be expected to write ‘critical’ comments on one another's writings. One or two sessions at the first of the course will be given to computer instructions. There are no computer prerequisites for the course – typing skills are more helpful than programming skills. It is unnecessary to have a home computer to participate effectively in course, especially since it is often difficult to log into the CU network in the evenings. The Boulder campus is well endowed with outstanding printing facilities; consequently, much of the reading will be from hardcopy although student writings will be submitted in electronic form.

Part One: Some Theory

During each of six weeks, several articles will be given to the students and some introductory comments about the articles will be given in class. The assignment is to read the articles carefully and write a short precis that gives your view of the most persuasive and the least persuasive parts of the articles. The objective is not to articulate your beliefs about the topic in question, but to master the arguments in the papers, identify the essential ideas, and evaluate them critically.

Short written critiques are due at 6pm each Monday, posted on the network (except for Labor Day when it is due at 11am 9/5). In response to these posts the instructor and/or students will write comments on Tuesdays which are to be followed by student replies by 6pm Wednesdays. The instructor will write comments the first several Tuesdays and the students will write comments on one another's original postings as we acquire more experience.

Please distinguish the frequency of writing – which is often (2-3 times per week during the first part of the course) – from the volume of writing. The emphasis is on quality, not quantity, and each subsequent bit of writing, no matter how short, becomes a refinement of the previous writing. Greater clarity is acquired as one comes back to their writing/thinking and makes revisions. Some guidelines will be given for the early assignment to help students focus on key issues. During the course students are expected to develop greater skill at determining the critical issues of the readings.
Part Two: Sustainability in Practice

There is extensive debate about whether institutions like the World Bank and the IMF (International Monetary Fund) foster or undermine sustainable development. Each student is expected to explore one or more cases in which the WB and/or IMF has been criticized in their lending policies and to evaluate the lending policies from the viewpoint of sustainable economics.

Each student is expected to write a short term paper on the lending policies of one or both of these institutions and to make constructive comments on the papers of other students. New drafts of the papers will be posted on Monday evenings at 6pm. Comments on another student’s paper will be posted by 6pm each Wednesday. Lectures will be given as background information on the institutions and the relationship between their loans and countries’ balance of payments and external indebtedness. At least half the class time during Part Two of the course will be devoted to a discussion of student papers.

Some material on the World Bank and IMF will be found on reserve and students are expected to do research for further materials.

Readings for Part One - mostly xeroxed handouts

wk1: Garrett Hardin “Tragedy of the Commons” “Second Thoughts”
George Monbiot “Tragedy of the Enclosure” Scientific American.
Herb Gintis and Alan McGowen “Biocentrism-Antropoecentric Debate”
Lester Brown “The Demographic Trap” 1987 (Norlin reserve)
wk2: “Global 2000 report to the President” (excerpts)
Garrett Hardin “The Benign Demographic Transition”
John Caldwell “Toward a Restatement of Demographic Transition Theory” (reserve)
wk3: Garrett Hardin “Growth: Real and Spurious”
Ecological Economics Reader “Living within Limits”
wk4: John Cobb and Herman Daly “Measuring Economic Success”
wk5: Milton Friedman “Methodology of Positive Economics”
Thomas Kuhn “Revolutions as Changes of World View”
wk6: Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen “The Entropy Law and the Economic Problem”
Paul and Anne Ehrlich “Availability, Entropy and the Laws of Thermodynamics”
wk7: Ronald Coase “The Problem of Social Cost”
Boyce, Schulze, et. al. “Intrinsic Values as a Source of WTA-WTP Disparity”

Reserve Readings for Part Two (complete list in library)

Pat Auferheide and Bruce Rich “Environmental Reform and the Multilateral Banks” World Policy J. (20pp)
Steve Lerner (ed.) Earth Summit (1991)
Bruce Rich, “Pressure on the World Bank to Make its Loans Promote Sustainable Development” (25pp)
Brent Blackwelder, “Campaign to Reform MDBs” (16pp)
Friends of the Earth, “ Financing Ecological Destruction” 1988 (45pp)
Bank Information Center “ Funding Ecological and Social Destruction” (1980)
Case studies on Bolivia, Brazil, Costa Rica, Ghana, Jamaica, India, Indonesia, and Sudan. (40pp)