

Just Another Change?

Which continuity the socio-ecological shift needs – and which not.

Opening address of Dr. Dr. Frank Fehlbeg, Head of Labor and Economy Studies, Protestant Academy of Thuringia

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Welcome to the 7th Pluralist Summer Academy 2023 in Neudietendorf!

My name is Frank Fehlbeg, I am Head of Labor and Economy Studies at the *Protestant Academy of Thuringia* that is organising that event in collaboration with the *Network for Pluralist Economics*.

Almost one year ago, we were faced to choose the main topics for today's Summer Academy; the first Summer School after the global pandemic, finally back in presence, with "real" people at "real" places! As you all could imagine, the choice of topics turned out to be challenging and fundamental.

The Summer Academy 2023 is based on a broadly conceived complex of questions. It seeks to open up space for what is known as "real world economics," which cannot stop at „value-free“ theoretical, logical, or scientific analyses.

A „real world science“ of human being (i.e. *Wirklichkeitswissenschaft vom Menschen*), whether it wants to be descriptive, explanatory or consciously intervening, should never miss the fundamental connections of the motivation of acting, the alignment of acting and the scope and range of acting. This is true for their object of research as well as for their self-reflection as anthropological epistemology.

Given this background our summer academy is ultimately about questions that we personally face every day, that society faces historically, and indeed that today's planetary ecosystem, dominated by humanity, faces existentially.

Will humanity achieve a peaceable symbiosis of culture and nature or will it continue to practice this relationship as a domination or technologised distancing? Will it transform itself into an unprecedented technobiological

species - even have to do so due to environmental changes? What characteristics will persist as „human“ within future humanity?

These are speculative questions, which can make us feeling a kind of queasy - because we all feel that we are already part of a confusing nexus of, in some terms, predetermined paths.

But don't be afraid of being overwhelmed. The Summer Academy should not and cannot explain the whole world and save it at the same time. In the social and economic disciplines, such grand thoughts begin with more easily digestible questions:

What are the challenges facing our economic system? Which disadvantages and shortcomings of the present need to be put to the test? What achievements do we need to maintain in order to be prepared for the future?

Which technology and resource strategy ensures a socially acceptable and sustainable management of the planetary habitat? And what are those approaches that primarily secure the so-called "imperial way of living" of privileged minorities?

What are, on the one hand, the material and historical foundations, and what are, on the other, the ethical and legal foundations of a dignified existence of human being?

Do we pursue a „closed ethics“ of definitive ultimate justifications, accepting the risk to unfold a rigid dogmatism? Or do we pursue an „open ethics“ of value diversity and value development, accepting the risk of an unstable competition of values? What does a combination of both strategies look like, as Max Weber, the best-known representative of the discipline of socio-economics (i.e. *Sozialökonomik*), indicated with his combination of the ethics of attitude resp. conviction (i.e. *Gesinnungsethik*) and the ethics of responsibility (i.e. *Verantwortungsethik*)?

Such non-trivial sub-questions constitute the very heart of the PLUSA's issue: If it's not human economy at all, drop it.

Ina Praetorius, a Protestant theologian, economic ethicist and founder of the *Economy is Care* network, once summed up in the *Handelsblatt* newspaper what underlies such a value-conscious view of economy and science (2020):

"Economy is *Oikonomia*. And *Oikonomia* is planet stewardship. It means caring for the world prudently and wisely."

Praetorius refers to an ancient thinker who introduced the concept of the *Oikos* resp. *Oikoi* (plur.), i.e. the communities of human life, family and group households and non-business economies. His starting point of economic thinking wasn't the artificially isolated individual but real human communities and their intrinsic cooperation to make a living. We are talking about the Greek philosopher Aristotle.

In Aristotle's point of view, talking about "the economy" did not represent a special, independent or even self-legislated part of human life. Rather, he was regarding economy as an holistic process of the mutual satisfaction of needs within a human community and the securing of the existence of this community as one.

Modern economics is very often based exclusively on the economic individual. One could say: This kind of economic discipline has placed out the *homo oeconomicus* into this world and he's living out life lonely and alone, not longer being able to know the community-related concepts of the provision of the common good and care work.

Of course, Aristotle was a child and class representative of his time. As an advocate of patriarchy, Aristotle at least included in his conception of the *Oikos* the role of women and all care work as self-evident prerequisites of material human existence. As a slave owner, however, he also included slave labor.

In the 20th century, the social economist and political scientist Siegfried Landshut revived Aristotle's concept of *Oikos* again and reframed it within the contexts of his time. Landshut discarded the archaic ethics of gender and „natural“ slavery of the greek philosopher – the judgement was clear: "Let's trash it!"

Landshut's second habilitation thesis on the "concept of the economic" had failed in 1933 due to the anti-Semitism of the new National Socialist rulers in Germany. He still considered the *Oikos* with its historical, theoretical, political, social, and cultural implications, to be the most realistic and therefore the best defining concept of economics as a discipline. No wonder that the *Oikos* also provided Landshut with various analytical dimensions underlying his perceptive studies of the kibbutz movements in Palestine and Israel.

From Landshut's point of view, the concentration of the so-called *economic classics* on the phenomenon of the industrial and private-law-constructed market meant a shortcoming of the true economics of the Aristotelian tradition. In other words: They recognized the modern market despite of its historical specific social and legal appearance as a natural phenomenon and continued their science on this supposedly unshakeable rock.

Market and *Oikos* – these basic categories of economy and economics both have their own right and space at the PLUSA. This suits a pluralistic real world science of human being that wants to cover the entire spectrum of socioeconomic phenomena.

Pluralism as a balancing relativism (i.e. *austarierender Relativismus*), however, is reaching its tolerance limits where the market alone defines the edges of thought in economics and economic policies. Suppose, the market absolutely prevails: the concepts of community and society and also the human "planet stewardship" (Ina Praetorius) will be torn apart and not be visible as a nexus anymore. They will be lost in history like it nearly happened to the *Oikos*. And before our eyes only autonomous parts and summed up aggregates are appearing in future. Planet stewardship becomes unimaginable.

From now on, the Pluralist Summer Academy – a collaboration of the *Network for Pluralist Economics* and the *Protestant Academy of Thuringia* with support of many students and other volunteers – shall meet the full range of theoretical and practical aspects of the socio-ecological change that we all are facing and have to deal with.

This wishful but serious thinking covers the traditional pluralist focus on economic theory and its different schools of economic thought and also includes epistemological and transdisciplinary pluralism.

Above all, however, the motivation of acting, the alignment of acting and the ability to act in order to transform our economy and society in concrete ways are to be awakened and trained on this basis.

Herewith the PLUSA 2023 is opened!