

Incommensurability, Environment and Planning: A Response to Hahnel's Reply

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Abstract: This paper responds to Hahnel's reply to my paper 'Pluralism, ecology and planning' in this special issue. It focuses on disagreements concerning value commensurability and growth. It defends the possibility of rational choices in the use of resources in the absence of value commensurability. It defends the claim that the systematic drive for growth in capitalism is a central source of environmental problems and of environmental injustice. It questions Hahnel's assertion that substitution in production and consumption alone is the only strategy to achieve environmental sustainability. Substitution is necessary but not sufficient. Environmental limits require consumption and production corridors above sufficiency for all but below excess. Those corridors are a condition for meeting the needs of the poor within environmental limits. Both the examination of environmental problems in capitalism and democratic planning require forms of in-kind analysis defended by Neurath and Kapp to address the problem of meeting human needs within environmental limits.

Keywords: growth, incommensurability, environmental justice, environmental limits

JEL Classification: B13, B14, B24, B25, B51, B53, O44, P20, P21, P28

This is a short response to Robin Hahnel's reply to my paper 'Pluralism, ecology and planning' in this special issue. There are many points on which we agree, although I would phrase some of those points of agreement differently.¹ There is much on what Hahnel calls minor differences that deserves further conversation. However, for reasons of space, here I focus on the major differences concerning value commensurability and growth.

¹ Hahnel writes that we agree that environmental costs should be considered. Given that the concept of cost normally refers to monetary costs, for analytical clarity I would phrase the agreement differently.

I. COMMENSURABILITY

There is great pressure for research into techniques to make larger ranges of social value commensurable. Some of the effort should rather be devoted to learning—or learning again, perhaps—how to think intelligently about conflicts of value which are incommensurable. (Williams 1972, 103)

In response to my arguments about the significance of value pluralism and incommensurability for the use of resources, Hahnel reiterates the assumption shared with Mises and Lange that, in the absence of commensurability, rational choices are not possible: “What can we do with economic benefits and costs to which no magnitude is attached, or which we label ‘incomparable’? Nothing.” (Hahnel 2025, 98). He adds, on investment costs and benefits, that in the absence of commensurability the alternative is throwing up our hands and giving up trying, or “worse still” engaging in debates “over what to do where prevailing depends not on the strength and merits of one’s argument about costs and benefits, but rather on how stubborn one is willing to be” (99).

Here we have major disagreements. The rejection of value commensurability does not entail that we are left with doing ‘nothing’, throwing up our hands and giving up trying (aa). A central aim of my paper was to argue that rational choices could be made in the absence of commensurability. It is the grounds for the distinction drawn in the paper between substantive and formal rationality.

Value commensurability is the claim that there is a common measure of value through which different options can be ordered. The term is used in different senses (Martinez-Alier et al. 1998, O’Neill 1993, Ch. 7, 2017). The scale of value can be cardinal or ordinal. A cardinal scale of measurement is sometimes taken to define commensurability (Chang 1997, 1-2; Aldred 2006). Commensurability thus defined is distinct from comparability which promises only an ordering of options. Others use the terms commensurability and comparability interchangeably (Raz 1986, Ch. 13). Monetary valuation promises a cardinal scale of measurement. Hahnel claims that such a single cardinal measure of value is required to make rational choices between uses of resources. He assumes strong commensurability. This claim is distinct from the claim of incomparability. What Neurath and Kapp argue is that rational choices can be made without assuming a single cardinal measure. Hence the concept of substantive rationality that Kapp develops from Weber:

As far as social benefits are concerned the criteria available are social minima based upon a substantive and democratic evaluation of social needs and requirements and their comparison in real (physical) terms. (Kapp 1963, 195)

To make decisions on this basis is not to throw our hands up or do nothing. Neither does it entail there are no measures of resource use, nor any measures of gains and losses in well-being. However, both resource measures and measures of well-being will be plural. There is work to be done on how to improve decision-making under these assumptions. Hence my remark at the end of my paper on the need to explore further “deliberative non-compensatory forms of multi-criteria decision analysis in planning” (O’Neill 2025, 46). Deliberation here is not a matter of “debates over what to do where prevailing depends not on the strength and merits of one’s argument about costs and benefits, but rather on how stubborn one is willing to be” (Hahnel 2025, 99). It is precisely a matter of the strength and merits of reasons for and against different proposals. However, reasons for and against are not reducible to the calculation of costs and benefits according to some single cardinal price metric. It is only if one reduces all rationality to a particular form of formal rationality that this follows.²

Hahnel does offer an alternative formulation of his objection, that incommensurability entails that “some cost or benefit is *infinitely* greater than the magnitude of another cost or benefit” (Hahnel 2025, 98). This formulation of the problem misstates what is at issue. The claim that the different values of goods cannot be captured by a single monetary price metric is inconsistent with the claim that they have an infinite value (O’Neill 2020, 290). To make that claim assumes a single monetary metric which is just what the value incommensurability claim denies.

II. GROWTH

I turn now to the arguments about growth. My central aim here was to defend a Marxian argument that the systematic drive for growth in capitalism is a central source of environmental problems. Marx in *Capital* notes the subordination of labour power and nature to the end of the accumulation of capital, to “production for production’s sake” (Marx [1887] 1970, Ch. 24, section 3), to the detriment of both the labourer and

² Space here does not allow important further discussion about the nature of comparability in contexts of partial orderings of options, which raises other issues that I allude to in footnote 5 of my paper.

the natural world (Marx [1887] 1970, Ch. 15, section 10). Central to that argument is the argument in chapter 4 of *Capital* that the capitalist is forced by market competition to continually recycle surplus value into expanding total capital (Marx [1887] 1970, Ch. 4). Hahnel and I agree in drawing the conceptual distinction between growth in GDP and growth in material and energy throughput. However, as I had noted in a discussion prior to this debate with Hahnel, it is a fallacy to move from this conceptual claim to claims about the empirical relationship between them (O'Neill 2018, 141). I argued that there is a strong empirical relationship between the expansion of capital and increasing energy and material throughput. Economic growth drives increasing emissions in greenhouse gases. The debate on the truth of this empirical claim brings to the fore the need for the in-kind analysis of economic systems in terms of their material and energy flows and how they enable or disable the realisation of human well-being that Neurath and Kapp defended. I argued that this needs to be taken to the fore in how we also think of democratic planning given environmental constraints.

Hahnel's response focuses not on these claims in the paper, but on the general defensibility of the 'degrowth' and 'steady state' arguments. Those labels include a wide range of positions. In response to them he raises important questions about the appeal of such a programme to the poor. The promise and appeal of socialism is that it would increase economic wellbeing for all: "The vast majority of people living in lesser developed countries today have yet to enjoy the benefits of economic development, as have a significant percentage of people living in more developed countries as well." (Hahnel 2025, 99) The point about poverty is well taken. In the paper I agree that "there is clearly a relationship between material consumption and energy in meeting certain basic needs, and many in the world fail to meet that basic level" (O'Neill 2025, 42). Meeting the needs of the worst off is compelling—and must be central to any argument for socialism. It is the framing that I suggest Neurath and Kapp provide: how do we meet the plurality of human needs with the resources we have within environmental limits? Nothing I say denies the problem of poverty and the need for increases in the material and energy consumption of those whose needs have not been met.

However, just as there are lower limits to what is required for a good life, so also there are upper limits. The question 'have you had enough?' can ask two different things: Have you met a level of sufficiency? Have you reached a level of satiation? You can have less than and more than

enough. The existence of upper limits is central to Aristotle's distinction between the economic acquisition of goods to meet some human needs and chrematistic acquisition characteristic of the market which aims at the accumulation of the means of exchange. The first form of acquisition has limits given by the needs it satisfies; the second knows no limits (Aristotle 1948, Book 1, Chs. 8-9). These are the passages of Aristotle's that Marx draws on in his account of capitalism as driven by accumulation without limits (Marx [1887] 1970, Ch. 4).

In our current economy many have more than enough and are encouraged to have still more. The ever increasing consumption of goods is not necessarily correlated with increasing well-being. One central reason noted by Hirsch in *The Social Limits to Growth* is the positional nature of many goods in market society—goods, like status goods, whose value to the individual is affected by their availability and possession by others. In a market economy where individuals pursue their personal improvement through positional goods each agent makes an individual choice for a good that is affected by the same choice by others and hence there is no increase in well-being (Hirsch 1977).

Two observations need to be made in response to Hahnel on poverty and growth. First, meeting the needs of the poor within environmental limits requires the reduction of consumption by those who have more than enough. The meeting of subsistence emissions requires the reduction of private luxury emissions (Shue 1993). Second, the drive for the accumulation of capital requires the expansion of the frontiers for the extraction of resources which creates its own forms of injustice at the point of extraction, putting increasing pressure on environmental goods, and the dispossession of those whose livelihoods depend on them. In that context there is an alliance between the environmentalism of the poor and criticism of the internal drive to growth that is central to capitalism (Martinez-Alier 2002).

III. KICKING THE CAN DOWN THE ROAD

Hahnel presents our disagreements about environmental sustainability as a disagreement on whether socialists should abandon the aim of improving labour productivity. This misrepresents our disagreement. Nowhere do I make the claim about abandoning labour productivity that Hahnel attributes to me. Where then do the disagreements lie? In reply to my scepticism about the 'kicking the can down the road' strategy for addressing the problem of climate change (O'Neill 2025, 42) Hahnel makes two

different points. The first is that there is no alternative to that strategy. He writes that “the *only* strategy to achieve environmental sustainability is one that amounts to ‘kicking the can down the road’” (Hahnel 2025, 100). As he defines the strategy, the claim is false. The strategy is defined purely in terms of substitution: in production, the substitution of renewable for non-renewable resources, of abundant non-renewable for scarce resources and the development of technologies that do not use non-renewable resources before they run out; and in consumption the substitution of goods produced with renewables for goods produced with non-renewable resources and of goods produced with less scarce non-renewable resources for goods produced with more scarce non-renewable resources (Hahnel 2025, 100). I have no argument about the significance of substitutions in production and consumption for the solution of pressing environmental problems. They will be part of the solution. They are necessary conditions. Are they sufficient? Hahnel claims that they are. Here lies the disagreement. What is not included in his strategy is a reduction in levels of consumption or in the growth of consumption of goods. The strategy relies upon substitution alone. This pure substitution strategy doesn’t define the field of possibilities. Can substitution on its own solve the problem? My view is that it cannot. We need to keep within certain consumption and production corridors above sufficiency for all but below excess, levels that exceed requirements for human flourishing (Gough 2020; Bärnthaler and Gough 2023). A condition for those with less than enough getting what they need within environmental limits is that those with more than enough consume less. A defence of this claim is beyond the scope of this exchange. Its truth or falsity turns not on conceptual distinctions and abstract economic models but the kinds of evidence that Neurath and Kapp outline about real material and energy flows and the conditions to meet human needs.

The second point Hahnel makes concerns my claim that kicking the can down the road is not a good strategy as we approach the end of the street. Hahnel’s response is that we needn’t worry as end of street is ‘a very very very long way off.’

Yes, at some point the solar system will no longer exist. Before that, planet Earth may become as lifeless as Mars. But scientists correctly assume these “endings” are a long way off, and more to the point, they are irrelevant to the debate over whether or not human economic well-being can continue to grow for the time being. (Hahnel 2025, 101)

This response misses the point of my argument. The end of the road I appealed to in the paper clearly refers to impending scenarios in which the carbon budget for greenhouse emissions is overshoot such that a basic decent life is no longer possible for a large proportion of human beings. Given the already increasing likelihood of exceeding budgets to stay within 1.5°C or 2°C warming these are not distant scenarios. The far distant possibilities of a lifeless planet or the death of the sun are irrelevant to the argument.

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