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WINS Seminar

Date of presentation:
19.05.2016, IRI THESys, Friedrichstraße 191, 10117 Berlin, Room 4088

Title of presentation: The Idea of Institution: a survey of concepts and approaches

Abstract

One of the peculiar things about institutions, made laws, is that they are both a product of and involved in the process of producing ideas. This is one of the reasons why they are of such central importance for the study of sustainability: because they are intimately involved in the process through which humans and human societies go about developing their self understandings of environmental place. The Janus-faced character of institutions has both ontological and epistemological implications for how they may be effectively studied. Ontologically, there is wide acceptance across the social sciences and humanities that something institution-like plays an important role in social organisation, while there is, at the same time, a great diversity of concrete ontological positions regarding what actually constitutes an institution, and indeed whether or not it makes any sense to talk about institutions as independent objects. Epistemologically, insofar as the idea of institutions is understood to be ontologically relevant, and insofar as this is understood to include their involvement in the process of producing ideas, and assuming that modern scientific knowledge production is an ordinary human practice, embedded, like any other ordinary human practice, in an institutional context, the meta-ontological positioning (i.e. within the self-understanding of environmental place of societies involved in producing modern scientific knowledge, and within the societies impacted by this) of particular ontologies of institutionality can be understood to have implications for how ideas, including ideas about institutions, are generated within modern science. Taking that proposition as a point of departure, this lecture and the associated working paper aim to develop a rough inventory and mapping of the variety of modern science ontologies of institutionality available to inter- and transdisciplinary teams of investigators that are concerned with better understanding how institutions are involved in facilitating both virtuous and vicious anthropogenic environmental impacts.

Short bio

Katharine N. Farrell is an Ecological Economist holding three honours degrees in the social sciences and one engineering degree, by research. She is a member of Pi Sigma Alpha National Political Science Honors Society of the United States of America, alumnus of the Marie Curie Intra-European Fellowship Program, and author of numerous internationally recognized academic texts concerning questions of ecological political economy. Her work focuses on the political economy of knowledge in environmental governance, including the areas of green constitutional theory, institutional aspects of ecosystems services valuation, the role of science (and scientists) in sustainable development and the role of time and tradition in processes and principles of ecological economic production. She is currently a senior researcher and lecturer with Prof. Klaus Eisenack's Resource Economics Group at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, a Habilitant within the Department of Agricultural Economics, a Member of the Coordination Team of the Berlin Workshop in Institutional Analysis of Social-Ecological Systems (WINS) and an Associated Researcher with the Institute of Environmental Science and Technology at the Autonomous University of Barcelona.