economic sociology
_the european electronic newsletter

Volume 22 · Number 3 · July 2021
econsoc.mpifg.de

22.3

Note from the editor

Climate change, capitalism, and growth

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Content

Welcome to the third and last issue of this Newsletter on economic sociology and climate change. The past months have been very exciting for someone who is interested in the fate of the Paris climate goals. An increasing number of countries and companies have declared so-called net-zero emissions, carbon neutrality or climate neutrality targets by the year 2050, 2040, or even 2030. In addition, study after study tends to show how these goals can actually still be achieved, even though time is almost up. Among them is a report issued by the International Energy Agency in May 2021 which argued that the "world has a viable pathway to building a global energy sector with net-zero emissions in 2050" (IEA 2021) – an institution that seemed so far firmly rooted in the fossil fuel era.

One could have the impression that suddenly the world is really moving in the direction of deep decarbonization, and that despite the Covid-19 crisis, climate policies are now gearing up. However, if you look closely, two things are really important to mention and pour some cold water on the enthusiasm. First, and not surprising to social scientists, the declaration of goals does not equal the implementation of policies towards achieving the goals. Adopting an ambitious goal can signal to others that the problem is already taken care of; therefore, ambitious goals are sometimes only adopted in order to buffer core activities from public pressure and to get on with business as usual. Second, there is currently hopeless confusion about the actual meaning of the different neutrality and net-zero goals. What does climate neutrality mean in comparison to CO_2 net-zero emissions, if we are looking for a measurable goal that offers some avenues for transparent monitoring? It is fair to assume that some goal adopters do not really know what their own goal implies, whereas others use vague concepts intentionally to get away with lax practice (Roegelj et al. 2021).

My own burning question in these past months has been how we can contribute as sociologists to providing a more realistic assessment of the seemingly ongoing great transformation towards climate neutrality. Together with my colleagues from many other disciplines in Hamburg, I looked at the question of how plausible it is that our complex contemporary society – spanning the globe, under conditions of extreme inequality, and firmly embedded in capitalist modes of production and consumption – will actually enter the path towards achieving the Paris goal by 2050. We ended up with a rather bleak assessment: given our current understanding of enabling and constraining conditions for social drivers that might bring about this great transformation, and given the empirical evidence that we can weigh against this conceptual model of change, we conclude that achieving the Paris goal by 2050 is currently *not plausible*, however *possible* it might still be (Stammer et al. 2021). Our detailed assessment of corporate responses, fossil fuel divestment, and of consumption patterns were key to that assessment outcome.

Through this collaborative writing process in the Cluster of Excellence Climate, Climatic Change, and Society (CLICCS), but also by editing the three issues of this Newsletter, it became very clear to me that economic sociology is in large parts still an untapped treasure trove. We have seen many topics that are key to ongoing climate debates and to which economic sociology can offer unique research perspectives. In the first issue, we looked at processes of financialization, and the second issue covered topics like mitigation, adaptation, and compensation. When collecting material for the Newsletter, I was also interested in my colleagues' experiences of how and where economic sociology scholarship was situated, and how attempts to make their research perspectives more broadly available found ways through business schools, interdisciplinary programs, academic networks, new journals, and advisory panels up to the global assessment activities of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Other colleagues responded by suggesting more systematic networking among economic sociologists working on climate change, and adopting a more strategic approach to widen the field and deepen the impacts of economic sociology.

In this issue, Ian Gray and Stéphanie Barral picked up on this networking idea and analyzed meticulously how the Society for the Advancement of Socio-Economics (SASE) and Socio-Economic Review (SER) have covered climate change and related topics in the past years, and how, slowly but steadily, a growing number of people have dedicated their contributions to topics of climate change and have started to build a specialists' community in the context of SASE. Altogether Gray and Barral come to the conclusion that "there are currently two principal strands of economic sociology research on climate action, one focusing on institutionalized answers to the climate crisis and a more marginal strand showing interest in degrowth and alternatives to capitalism" (Gray and Barral, this issue, p. 7).

It was exactly the topics of capitalism and growth (or alternatives to capitalism and de- or post-growth) that I wanted to bring to the attention of the economic sociology community in this third issue of the Newsletter. This is like finally talking about the elephant in the room, as we have merely touched on capitalism in previous issues. Matthew Soener from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign contributes an essay "to elaborate on how growth drives climate change, how neoclassical ideas are embedded within this, and how economic sociology can intervene in this discussion." He emphasizes that climate change is rooted in an economy that not only requires endless growth but

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also depends on grossly unequal social relations. Soener relates the problems coming from climate change to the commodification of labor and natural resources, so he seeks a solution by marrying "decarbonization with decommodification." He ends his essay by referring to the works of three classics: 1) Karl Marx emphasizes exploitive profit-making and conflicts over resources, which would point the analysis towards questions of climate justice; 2) Max Weber demonstrates how growth rests on a rationalized culture; and 3) Karl Polanyi provides insights into contradictions of market societies and the implications of the commodification of land.

A slightly different take on the growth imperative is developed by Milena Buchs from the University of Leeds. In my interview with her, she draws a sharp distinction between capitalism and markets. The real problem, according to her, lies in the in-built profit – and thus growth – imperative of capitalism, and that currently the institutions of the welfare state and the systems that support our well-being are all very much depending on capitalist growth. So she and her co-author Max Koch discuss what a degrowth phase of economic contraction in the Global North and a resulting post-growth phase with a sustainable steady state might look like and what this would mean for the institutions of well-being. She refers to ecological economists when describing this debate: "By steady state, ecological economists do not mean a static economy, just an economy that is not growing in terms of its material and energy throughput; and some sectors of the economy could expand while others shrink, technologies could still develop, etc. […] At the same time, we made it quite explicit in the book that we assume that any type of degrowth/post-growth/steady-state system would be incompatible with capitalism because growth is at the very heart of the definition of capitalism." I discuss with her the implications of working on such radical questions as an economic sociologist in terms of publications, research funding, collaborations, and public debates.

Finally, Achim Oberg (University of Hamburg), Lianne Lefsrud (Alberta School of Business), and Renate Meyer (WU Vienna) take us on a fascinating journey through an organizational issue field analysis, identifying network structures in digital media representations of topics by organizations such as companies, news producers, financial institutions, and NGOs. They point to the relevance of organizations for both CO_2 emissions and the public debates around climate change. By looking at the relational interactions between organizations, they are able to detect changes in production practices and in the ways these practices are debated – the relationships between organizational actions and discourse. The contribution focuses on methodological aspects and suggests a fresh view on working with big data, by accessing the websites of thousands of organizations and their links to each other. As the authors suggest: "Such a research approach helps to inform our understanding of climate change debates and practices, highlights barriers, and offers alternative solutions."

So my job as editor ends here with big questions and big data. It was a pleasure to edit these three issues. Hopefully, they have motivated more students and scholars of economic sociology to see the need and the many opportunities to work on climate change and thereby to contribute to understanding this exceedingly urgent global social problem.

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