economic sociology.
perspectives and conversations

Volume 26 · Number 1 · November 2024
econsoc.mpifg.de

26.1

Note from the editor

Ecologizing economic sociology

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Content

Financialization, globalization through digital networks and flows, deindustrialization, and the rise of economies dominated by the knowledge and service sector: if one tries to understand the global economy through the lens of economic sociology's major themes, one is left with the impression that socioeconomic structures have become dematerialized as they have grown more complex and global. But in the very period most strongly associated with post-Fordist economic change (1970 ff.), global material extraction has almost tripled (Krausmann et al. 2018). Growing extractions of biomass, fossil fuels, ores, and non-metallic minerals are performed through global divisions of labor. Stagnating material production in the Western capitalist core has been overcompensated by rising primary material and energy use in China. Major extraction economies in Africa and Latin America have redrawn their relationships accordingly, loosening ties with Europe and North America while strengthening those with the production centers in South-East Asia.

The nexus between the economy and nature also becomes increasingly visible at the "other end" of the entropic sequence (Georgescu-Roegen 1971; Pineault 2022). Economic activities force earth systems to undergo dramatic changes while some ecosystems collapse. In consequence, conditions for economic activities change, sometimes rapidly and sometimes in slow motion. Extended dry zones, regions and cities with deadly heat, coastal areas gradually drowning in the sea, as well as unexpected, yet ever more expectable, catastrophes of wild fires, floods, and storms undermine diverse economic activities and destroy economic assets. Small-scale farmers as well as big insurance companies account for growing losses, recalculate risks, and anticipate fundamentally more uncertain, unstable futures (Scoones 2024).

In this context, economic sociologists can no longer afford to study selected markets and firms as if they existed in some immaterial

social space rather than on planet earth. They should also abandon the last bastion of modernization theory, namely the supposition that all economies will somehow tend towards dematerialization as they become more advanced. Even high finance has impacts on, and is affected by, transformations in geobiochemical processes. Economic growth implies ever more goods production, digital as well as physical, which consumes increasing amounts of energy and matter. And value chains do not just cause locally specific environmental problems (often discussed in sustainability literatures) but also create "telecouplings" (Liu et al. 2013) and induce profound changes in earth systemic cycles. Pandemics are an example of this. Warnings of ever higher pandemic risks due to intensified trade linkages reaching from extractive commodity frontiers to metropolitan consumer centers were long ignored. They suddenly became all too real when SARS-CoV-2 spread rapidly and with devastating consequences around the globe.[1]

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I am making this wake-up call to economic sociologists to recognize economy's strong and consequential couplings with natural environments as somebody who has been socialized neither as an environmental sociologist nor as a social or political ecologist. But this is precisely the point, and why I am making it. Ecologizing economic sociology should not remain a task just for those who have always been interested in environmental matters. The destabilization of key earth systemic processes is too existential for "conventional" economic sociologists to push the respective questions outside of their accustomed fields of inquiry. We must recognize that today's massively expanded economy feeds ever faster and more consequential feedback loops with natural environments, forcing the atmosphere, oceans, and earth's surfaces to evolve away from the conditions that have provided benign conditions for human development for more than 10,000 years. Evidence for this is overwhelming, no matter whether we use the term Anthropocene or not (Ghosh 2024).

In the past, social scientists often treated global warming and other environmental issues in terms of risk, recognizing their importance but also framing the consequences in terms of avertable possibilities. Just four years ago, Anita Engels edited three issues of this publication on the topic of climate change and issued the warning that, should policymakers and corporate leaders fail to deliver on the promises of the Paris Accord, existential risks were looming. But we are past this point. Even with a real surge in emission reduction efforts unleashed by Paris, oceans have warmed much faster than scientists had ever anticipated; glaciers and ice sheets are disappearing; temperature records are the new normal; and even if signatories deliver on the promises made in Paris, CO_2 forcing will still lead us to a planet with temperature rises above two degrees Celsius. Earth systems and environmental scientists also point out that accelerating climate change is intimately connected to other unfolding earth-spanning environmental crises, such as species extinction, loss of biodiversity, the eutrophication of waters, deforestation, the poisoning of soils. Many of these developments entail major risks. But risk as a sociological framework downplays and somehow fictionalizes what is actually at stake. The speed and depth of current human forcing of different earth systems is too systemic to be adequately framed as risk. Risk also fails to articulate irreversible and highly unpredictable transitions in ecosystems (Petryna 2024). Not just "out there" in nature but also within socioeconomic institutions and structures, ecological polycrisis has become a pervasive socioeconomic reality (Elliott 2018, 304).

This situation opens up rich research opportunities for economic sociologists. If we only concentrate on decarbonization efforts, we confront exciting questions about developments in, and variations between, sectors, countries, and firms (e.g., Aklin and Mildenberger 2020; Colgan, Green, and Hale 2021; Finnegan 2022; Mildenberger 2020; Nahm 2022). While fossil incumbents (and petrostates) remain the main opponents of decarbonization, scholars identify other interesting distributional conflicts, e.g., between and within trade unions, within and between currently fossil-dependent but "decarbonizable" sectors (Kupzok and Nahm 2024), as well as within (former) fossil extraction regions (Beckfield and Evrard 2023). The study of decarbonization efforts also reinvigorates research on state capacities and industrial policies (Bradlow and Kentikelenis 2024; Ergen and Schmidt 2023; Rodrik 2014). One great advancement in this burgeoning literature is that, rather than selecting and perhaps overemphasizing some avantgarde areas of "green transition" (e.g., the renewables sector), it tackles decarbonization efforts, resistances, and conflicts much more systematically and systemically, widening considerably what has hitherto been theorized as "carbon lock-ins" (Unruh 2000). The literature thereby

also connects to broader debates on the deep fossil dependencies of modern capitalism (Malm 2018; Mitchell 2013) and the limits of a market-driven climate policy approach. Another great advancement is that this new scholarship critically discusses socioeconomic redistributions, the emergence of new extraction frontiers (Riofrancos 2023), and power shifts (Gabor 2021; Rice et al. 2020) within "green capitalism." Beyond these important debates, deep questions linger. If capitalism – green or brown – fails in its response to growing environmental instabilities and stress and confronts new legitimacy challenges in the face of deteriorating living conditions, what kind of Polanyian "great transformations" can we expect in the decades to come?

Even if greenhouse gas emissions and other dissipations generated by economic activities have increasingly palpable socioeconomic feedback effects through asset losses and growing instabilities, individual harm cannot be mitigated through individual decarbonization efforts. It is worth reminding ourselves of this all too obvious point, which has been extensively discussed in terms of common goods dilemmas and the temporal mismatch between short-term decision horizons and long-term carbon cycles. For even if we are increasingly confronted with global warming as a crisis rather than a risk, the crisis does not in itself motivate stronger mitigation efforts. For instance, in financial markets, attempts to tie the issues of mitigation and adaptation together have been discussed in terms of *double materiality* and *ESG*. The idea behind both of these terms is that long-term investors anticipate increased risks and therefore, to safeguard their own profits, decide to put their money into sustainable activities. But empirical studies find that the reality on markets looks quite different. In the time horizons that matter to economic actors, investments in sustainable activities are just as much – or more – exposed to climate risks than fossil investments; and for individual companies as well as for whole countries, rating agencies punish expensive mitigation activities while rewarding the buildup of financial buffers to establish capacities for dealing with concrete damages and losses when and if they occur (Barta 2024). While major polluters thus are in a more advantageous situation if they make good money from polluting to be well-prepared for an environmentally destabilized world, those already most affected by these destabilizations have hardly any means to practice adaptation, let alone mitigation, because "their" climate risks are already priced into borrowing costs. These distributional mechanisms work at the level of countries as they do at the level of individual households, which are extremely unequally exposed to the costs of asset losses, insurance coverage, and costs. Indeed, while Elliott (2021), Cox (2023), and others (for a review, see Klinenberg, Araos, and Koslov 2020) have explored these issues for the American housing market – the US's major social policy pillar – it is worth pointing out that most loss absorption and adaptation work happens invisibly in the Global South (Johnson et al. 2023), triggering no action from a potent bailout state.

Relying on climate modeling, the economist Esther Duflo recently suggested that, with their carbon emissions, the US and Europe cause losses of life in Global South countries due to excess heat whose value she estimates to be USD 518 billion *per year* – a cruel process of redistribution.[2] Still, the politics of restitution remains notoriously weak and is dramatically overshadowed by intensified competition over means of geopolitical power, fossil or otherwise. Meanwhile, in rich capitalist countries we observe a renewed emphasis on an exclusionary protective politics in favor of one's own (sometimes racially defined) people at the expense of refugees, humanitarian/development aid, etc. If these are contours of the politics of loss that gain traction as the atmosphere and oceans heat up (Elliott 2018), we should indeed prepare for Polanyi-sized transformations.

I am writing this not to encourage more works in the dystopian genre but to emphasize that *ecologizing economic sociology* is not some niche project occupying the small area at the intersecting circles of economic and environmental sociology. Rather, more than any other intellectual maneuver, ecologization implies a destabilization of the usual distinctions and separations between micro, meso, and macro, as well as between topics covering the "here and now" versus those that engage long temporalities. The climate crisis covers the time of geological ages as well as sudden disruptive events (Chakrabarty 2021); and it is at home in our daily consumption patterns as it is in the history and ongoing legacy of the English industrial revolution (Wrigley 2010). The question of ecology makes particular demands on reconnecting empirical work and theory in our field. This means recognizing important ideas (as well as methods) in adjacent fields, but also going to the heart of economic sociology itself in order to rethink its defining categories and concepts.

I am happy that the contributors to this issue have agreed to take up this challenge. In Limerick, Ireland, at the SASE conference in June 2024, Jens Beckert and Neil Fligstein sat down with me to discuss the legacies and future of economic sociology in the face of our ecological polycrisis. In our conversation, these eminent economic sociologists describe their own motivations to turn to environmental issues and where they see the specific strengths of economic sociology in studying climate change. With some subtle differ-

ences in their perspectives, Jens and Neil debate the promises and limits of "green capitalism."

In the next piece, Ute Tellmann articulates a more principled critique of new economic sociology as an intellectual project that carries with it the ecological forgetfulness of both economics and modernist sociology. She suggests that, as markets, firms, and the world economy are always already embedded in earth systems and concrete ecologies, a research program of ecologized economic sociology should trace how these entanglements are rendered selectively invisible and selectively calculable through processes of "disembedding." To map the entanglements, calculative exclusions, and dislocations of this process, she chooses the concept of "land."

Caleb Scoville, in the next contribution, discusses the relationship between environmental sciences and economic sociology. The tension that Scoville negotiates is that between sociologists' reliance on environmental sciences as an indispensable resource to observe ecological consequences and conditions (in the simplest – but not so simple case of – measurements of CO_2 emissions), on the one hand, and a necessary methodological as well as theoretical distance to such sciences, on the other. The latter argument for distance arises particularly from Scoville's own work on the predominant economistic thinking in environmental sciences when researchers are urged to translate their data into socioeconomically meaningful categories. Scoville advocates a critical-constructive engagement with environmental expertise that combines careful examinations of measurements and concepts with useful, practicable divisions of intellectual labor.

In the last, but equally important, contribution, Annika Rieger brings to light the meso-level neglect of much climate sociology and points to the importance of firms in driving the greenhouse gas effect. Indeed, it would not take a major football stadium to hold the CEOs of those companies that are majorly responsible for the rise in temperatures. In 2022, 28% of CO_2 emissions could be attributed to 13,500 corporations. Rieger goes on to argue that the most fruitful approach to understanding firms' emissions behavior is to draw on established as well as new contextualizations. Sectors certainly count, as do varieties of capitalism and material production structures (input energy is more easily decarbonizable than carbon feedstock). Much work remains to be done to reveal these contexts and structures. Rieger thereby reconnects to and innovates a tradition of economic sociology associated with the study of institutions, cognitive frames, and networks constituting markets (e.g., Beckert 2010). This and the other pieces make evident that, now that nature-economy couplings have been taken out of "pandora's box," there is a tremendous amount of work ahead of us.

Endnotes

1 Another, less recognized but well-researched example is the import of fire ants to the USA together with goods imports from South America, and from there to new habitats. This is not only a story about ants but about losses in agricultural income, damaged property, and yet uncertain impacts on local ecosystems.

2 https://www.lse.ac.uk/Events/2024/05/202405021845/climate.

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