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New Frontiers in Economic Sociology: Socio-Economic Approaches to Sustainability

Constructing Sustainability: Reframing Environmental Considerations and the Market

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In May 2014, four of the largest environmental advocacy organizations in the United States co-sponsored *Fortune* magazine's annual "Brainstorm GREEN" conference, a gathering of corporate, non-profit and government professionals working on sustainability, held at the Ritz-Carlton luxury hotel in Laguna Beach, California. The environmentalists spoke at strategy panels alongside executives from car companies (General Motors, BMW), technology firms (Microsoft, Dell), agribusiness (Cargill) and retail giants (Wal-Mart, Proctor & Gamble). The sessions had titles such as "Show Me The Money," "Managing Natural Capital," and "Marketing Nature." Clearly, by 2014, "sustainability" has arrived in markets, interacted with and spawned different forms of value, and become commodified – precisely the processes that have long been of interest to economic sociologists. As economic sociologists, we can and should play a role in theorizing sustainability, connecting it to the key questions that have helped us interrogate socio-economic relations, practices, and institutions.

It is tempting to make the first theoretical task one of defining what, precisely, sustainability is. Its faddishness and ubiquity have served only to muddy attempts to engage with it. Sustainability debuted as a policy principle in the context of economic development in the late 1980s; "sustainable development" at that stage was understood as development "that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987:43). But as sustainability has migrated into new contexts, the concept has taken on additional valences and complexity. For instance, in some quarters, it is about "triple bottom line" thinking: the prosperity of people, planet, and profit. In others, it is a more radical vision of collective prosperity disentangled from the imper-

atives of relentless and carbon-intensive consumption. In still others, it is a technical matter of innovation in energy, transit, supply chains, urban spaces, and workplaces. The multiplicity, occasional overlap, and potency of these meanings should warn us off trying to impose hard and fast boundaries around what sustainability is or can be. We ought instead to ask the questions: How is "sustainability" constructed as an economic principle and mobilized in markets, firms, and economic practices? What is made possible in its name? Below, I offer three broad angles from which economic sociologists might press further, taking the contours of sustainability themselves as the object of empirical inquiry: (i) sustainability in markets and economies, (ii) sustainability with markets and economies, and (iii) sustainability of markets and economies.

Sustainability *in* Markets and Economies

Sustainability *in* markets and economies refers to the ways in which sustainability appears as a discursive frame in market activities and economic life. In other words, it examines the social processes through which sustainability is made "marketable," constructed as something that might increase consumer appeal, bolster firm reputation, attract new employees or investors, and thereby come to be regarded as a source of economic value. A robust and growing literature on "corporate sustainability" has documented these developments, but often focuses on questions of motivation and effectiveness: why companies "go green" and whether their environmental impacts change as a result (see Banerjee 2008; Bansal and Roth 2000; Bartley 2007; Hoffman 2001; Ramus and Montiel 2005). In contrast to other environmentalist frames, which emphasize difficult trade-offs, sacrifice for the greater good, and humility in the face of nature, corporate and other market actors have interpreted sustainability as part of a "transition," as a source of new, profitable opportunities (Janković and Bowman 2013) and "win-wins." Economic sociologists are equipped to mount a rigorous examination of the symbolic meanings of sustainability as it enters into systems of production, consumption, and exchange, and might consider, for example, how this interpretation generates moral claims about economic practice, and what kinds of obligations those claims create. We might ask

whose professional interests and which forms of expertise influence how sustainability is defined and mobilized in different contexts. We could capture how attempts to enhance sustainability reframe the meanings of different economic practices, objects, and relations. In brief, theorizing sustainability *in* markets means taking seriously the plasticity of the concept for making possible new economic arrangements.

Sustainability *with* Markets and Economies

Whereas sustainability *in* markets addresses how ideas of sustainability are brought into market processes, sustainability *with* markets reverses the relationship, examining the application of market concepts to environmental questions. It refers to the use of market devices, instruments, theories, and economic valuations to “solve” problems of resource use, ecological degradation, climate change, and so forth. For economists (as well as policymakers influenced by them), this is a matter of figuring out how to “price-in” externalities so that markets and economies respond to them more adequately. But how does sustainability become this object of economic knowledge and intervention? Economic sociologists, particularly those inspired by performativity and the science-studies approach more generally, can call attention to the conflicts, erasures, disciplinary implications, and the precarity of knowledge production involved in such efforts to measure, commensurate, quantify, and value nature and environmental impacts (Asdal 2008; Fourcade 2011; Freidberg 2013; Lohmann 2009; MacKenzie 2009; Nyberg and Wright 2013; Stephan 2012). When we look to calculative agencies, price mechanisms, and markets to “redesign” our relationship with the ecological world, we enhance certain modes of governance and social provision and foreclose on others (for instance, the assertion that carbon markets can “efficiently” solve excessive greenhouse gas emissions forms part of an argument against “unnecessary” regulation). Economic sociologists can and should be part of theorizing how, why, and to what effect we have increasingly come to refract the pursuit of environmental improvements through the lens of market-based solutions and economic fixes.

Sustainability of Markets and Economies

The sustainability of markets and economies refers to how various patterns of production, consumption, and exchange might be more or less environmentally intensive – are there existing or possible economic arrangements that,

for instance, lower our carbon footprint and mitigate any further effects of climate change? The relational practices set in motion by the architecture of markets, the embeddedness of economic actors in social structures, and the interactional development of shared meanings, strategies, and objectives all affect the resource-intensiveness and wastefulness of our structures of production, consumption, and exchange. Economic sociologists can illuminate how histories of economic and political development have patterned the relationships of political systems to energy use (Mitchell 2009), of growth to nature (Moore 2011), and of individuals to consumerism and waste (Jorgenson 2003; Shove 2010). We can question how imperatives to (re)organize economic life in more “sustainable” ways both emerge from and result in a complex set of interactions.

The Reality of Sustainability

This third angle – the sustainability of markets and economies – most directly targets an existential question that motivates scholarly interest in sustainability more generally: is sustainability “real”? Is sustainability a laudable and achievable organizing principle of capitalism? Or is capitalism, in its very essence, “unsustainable”? Are the participants in Brainstorm GREEN on to something, or are they merely promulgating empty rhetoric? In environmental sociology, this has often been framed as the debate between ecological modernization theory and the treadmill of production. Ecological modernization theorists argue that capitalism can (or even must) be reformed to achieve “sustainability”; it has the tools for its own repair (Spaargaren and Mol 1992). Treadmill-of-production theorists, by contrast, locate ecological degradation at the core of a monopoly-capitalist system that cannot reconcile ecological sustainability because it depends upon increasingly resource-intensive production for its growth (Gould, et al. 2004). Economic sociologists can and should participate in this debate, with a constructionist approach that does not presume *a priori* what sustainability is, does, or looks like. We might reframe the question to ask not “is sustainability real?,” but rather, “how have we made sustainability real?”

Rebecca Elliott is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley. Her dissertation investigates the social classification, pricing, and distribution of climate change impacts, with a focus on flood risk and insurance in the United States. She has also published research on “green” consumption.

Endnotes

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