

Pulver, Simone

Article

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Interview with Simone Pulver

What was your motivation to engage in the ASA Task Force on Sociology and Global Climate Change?

I first got involved in this a very long time ago. The National Science Foundation (NSF) and American Sociological Association (ASA) co-ran a workshop in 2008, titled “Sociological Perspectives on Global Climate Change,” which was a precursor to the ASA Task Force on Sociology and Global Climate Change, launched in 2010. You remember how it was back then; for a long time, climate change was an issue of interest in other disciplines. It was studied in the ecological and physical sciences, in economics, and in the international relations community in political science, but it didn’t come into sociology for a long time. In the early 2000s, environmental sociology was concerned about other issues. Climate change was not something that people in sociology would talk about ...

... unless from a Science and Technology Studies (STS) perspective, like deconstructing climate change knowledge and the climate models, right?

That’s right. But even that was a relatively small community. In American academia, STS scholars are more at home in the disciplines of anthropology and political ecology. There is a sociology of knowledge section in the ASA, but STS is less prominent in that community.

So I remember going to this 2008 NSF-ASA workshop way back when I was an assistant professor at Brown University. At the time, I felt that I was one of only a few people working on climate change in sociology. I had started my graduate education in an interdisciplinary energy and resources master’s program at UC Berkeley, where I developed my interest in cli-

mate politics, and then transitioned to the PhD program in sociology. At the time, there was no environmental sociologist on the faculty in the Berkeley sociology department, and certainly no climate sociologist. I still remember when I was in graduate school and during my first years at Brown, I went to ASA meetings and ISA, the International Studies Association, meetings. At the ISA conferences I would really find my people. There you had the global environmental politics scholars who were interested in the climate policy process. In contrast, the ASA had no focus on climate change and certainly not climate change in a transnational perspective, with a focus on the global negotiations. Arguably, climate change is only ten years old as a topic in American sociology. Now it has become a popular issue. But for a long time, it just was not talked about, so for me the 2008 NSF-ASA workshop elicited the feeling of, yay, there are other people working on climate change in sociology. There were a range of perspectives and disciplines represented at the workshop. One of the workshop leaders was Joane Nagel, who came to issues of climate from a natural hazards perspective. My contribution focused on corporations and climate change.

Following that workshop, one of my main motivations for participating in the ASA Task Force was really about supporting the statement that sociology as an area of research has all these important insights to contribute to how we understand climate change, the consequences of climate change, the drivers of climate change, and how you might think about solutions. I believe sociology has a really powerful set of tools – theories and methods – to understand lots of issues, climate change being one of them, and we as a discipline should be addressing this issue that is absolutely foundational to society.

A second benefit of the task force was for environmental sociology. Climate change is an issue, more so than any other, that has opened other sociologists’ eyes to environmental sociology. At the time, environmental sociology was not central to the discipline. Sociologists emphasized issues of race, class, and gender, but environment was sidelined; a colleague once dismissed the entire subdiscipline as being about how people try to save whales. I don’t think that is what environmental sociology is about at all. Look at environmental justice. You come to realize how central the environment is to questions of race, class, and gender. I feel that climate change has helped to pull environmental sociology into the mainstream of sociology.

The third motivation behind that task force was a public-facing one. We had to convince sociologists that climate change is an important issue, but we also had to convince the climate policy community that sociology is a useful source of knowledge, of actionable

science. Folks who were putting together the task force were both trying to show the best that sociology can offer in all these different ways, and also to inform the periodic climate assessments of the US Global Change Research Program. For me, all of these motivations were interesting. And as a junior scholar it connected me with other people who were working on the things I cared about.

What was the process like for you? You were central in bringing together the chapter on markets, and you had been working on the corporate world and how it responded to climate risks – how did that play into your experiences with writing the report in the task force?

In a community of sociologists, you don't have to convince people that markets matter, and that markets are about power and not the result of abstract interests. So the task force experience itself was very positive. The hardest task was naming the thing we, my co-author Chick Perrow and I, wanted to write about. We went back and forth over the title of the chapter; should it be "Capitalism and Climate Change," "Organizations and Climate Change," etc.? In the end, we decided on "Organizations and Markets." When you are writing about markets and climate change, it's a really unwieldy subject. It includes what companies are doing internally, the larger market systems in which they operate, which in turn includes the policies that regulate markets. Moreover, you can't talk about climate change without talking about energy, which brings in the topics of traditional and clean energy markets. In short...it's a beast.

At that time, there was some great economic sociology of climate change, including work by you and your team on the European Emissions Trading System, but there was not enough sociology of climate change and markets research to constitute a chapter. That meant we had to open it up to other disciplines. There is so much work on markets and the climate change from an economics perspective, from anthropologists, and from political scientists. For us it was almost unmanageable. We couldn't do a systematic review of the work in all those other disciplines, but if we only limited ourselves to sociology, there would not have been enough there. That is no longer true.

Once the book was published, and press releases sent out, how was it received in different audiences?

That is a great question. Within the sociological community it was definitely well received. I remember we did sessions at the ASA, and they were packed, big rooms and they were full to the back. We clearly thought about other sociologists as an audience for this book; we wanted to bring the climate change issue to the broader sociological community, and many contributors to the book came from all sorts of sub-fields. So there it was successful, and the ASA was also very supportive of it.

I don't think it was as successful in bridging that gap to a wider audience and to policy circles. I know that we were asked in the chapters to write a set of policy recommendations, but I don't think that was ever separately marketed, and there was no follow-up activity in which I was involved. We did not try to bring a group of people to Washington to do the rounds within policy circles. The one topic that has gotten extensive attention is the work on the organization of denial by Aaron McCright, Riley Dunlap, and others. Climate change denial is not an exclusively American thing, but it is significant in US politics. More recently, another topic that has done the successful crossover, from the academic to the policy world, is climate jus-

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tice. A lot of that comes from the environmental justice community, from work on climate as a justice issue, and from sociological research on climate adaptation and vulnerability.

I think economic sociology faces a daunting, daunting, daunting mountain to climb in terms of contributing to policy. Scholarship on the organization of denial and climate justice challenges very powerful interests but does not have to displace research

by other academics. For economic sociology, for anything that we want to transfer into the public policy arena, we have to elbow our way in and create space among the economists already actively contributing to those arenas. To me, that is the big challenge. How can you showcase that an economic sociology of climate change will tell policy makers something sufficiently compelling that it displaces the traditional, rational actor ways of thinking about economies, markets, and corporations that are so prevalent in US public policy? That is going to be a real challenge.

Did it get attention among climate activists?

I don't think so. It succeeded with its immediate audience. It did generate attention among sociologists, and it did consolidate what a sociology of climate change could be, showing that there are all these different aspects to it. But I think beyond that, less so. I think it was most successful as an academic book.

In hindsight, would you do that again, or would you try to do things differently?

Definitely. What the task force and book were trying to do within the discipline of sociology was of value in and of itself. That made it worth it. Plus, I am always skeptical of attempts to bridge the science-policy interface. That is such a hard thing to navigate, and that is part of why I became involved as a contributor to the most recent IPCC assessment report. An advantage of the IPCC process is that the policy audience is already predetermined, and the format is there, and it is about pushing your work, your perspective, into that format. Luckily, the lead author for the section to which I contributed, Elin Lerum Boasson from the University of Oslo, is very familiar with economic sociology and welcomed a sociological analysis of corporations and climate change. It is exciting that in this current IPCC assessment report, corporations are explicitly recognized as an actor group relevant to climate change. That said, the IPCC process can make it challenging to insert a critical perspective on corporate climate action. The format favors research on innovative climate action by a handful of corporate actors over theoretical analyses of why the majority of corporations and businesses in general are doing nothing to reduce their emissions.

Where do you see the most important contribution by economic sociology to understanding climate change?

Economic sociology offers at least two unique and important contributions to understanding climate change.

First, economic sociology helps us understand how organizations function; both internally and in their operational environments. Understanding how organizations work is central to researching how corporations engage with climate change. One of my first projects examined oil industry responses to climate change. I tried to understand how they first started thinking about the climate issue, and what were the conduits through which they first started to get information. I showed that their responses to the climate challenge could be explained by the networks in which they were embedded. Of course corporate decisions are about profit and loss and effective strategies, but, under conditions of uncertainty, what corporate leaders think of as an effective strategy is shaped by their understandings of what else is happening in the communities in which they are operating. What are peer actors doing? What are they showcasing as the right strategy? This is a network or field view of the corporation, which is just one of several theoretical approaches used in economic sociology. A more cultural approach characterizes corporations as performing or manifesting their environments. This approach has been applied to analyzing how corporate carbon accounting practices create, assign, and extract value from carbon.

Second, economic sociology recognizes the state as central to the existence of markets and corporations. Anita, your work is relevant here. You analyzed how different national variants of capitalism informed corporate carbon trading strategies. I see this as falling under the broader umbrella of national styles of accumulation, reflective of underlying state-corporate relationships. For example, the US and EU are evolving distinct modes of carbon governance, reflective of the different relationships between states and various forms of collective organization. There are all kinds of capitalisms out there, and thinking about how the state and civil society mesh with corporations and create these different forms of carbon governance is a core concern of the institutional strand of economic sociology.

I remember one of your research projects in which you looked for polluting companies that refuse to respond. Can you say anything about the results of this project and how this would also provide a useful perspective on climate change?

Thanks for asking. That project focuses on toxic pollution, so it is a different form of pollution, and the companies we look at do not actually refuse to respond. In the US, there are mandatory reporting rules that require all facilities that meet certain thresholds to report annual releases of toxic chemicals. What we are finding in that project is that toxic pollution in US

manufacturing is very disproportionate. Hypothetically, let's imagine the frozen seafood industry, and you look at the fifty facilities all operating in the frozen seafood industry, and you control for the size of their operations. You would think that pollution would be relatively equal across the facilities, because they are all in the frozen seafood business. In fact, the opposite is true. Even when normalizing for facility size, there are a handful of very highly polluting facilities and the rest are moderate to low polluters. That is a fact and a pattern we have now established in over 300 industries with 15 years of Toxics Release Inventory data. How does this happen? We don't know yet, but the policy implications are very clear; with a little targeted intervention you can get a huge effect. The research also challenges a tendency in corporate environmental research to focus on the companies at the "green" end of the spectrum, who are already doing great. Our data suggest that we should focus research attention on the companies at the polluting end of the spectrum to determine what is holding them back.

And while our project focuses on toxic pollution, other research confirms that this disproportional pattern in pollution is also true for methane emissions, greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions at both the national and household levels, and, to a more limited extent, GHG emissions associated with power plants. For example, when you look at methane releases from the US oil and gas sector, they are highly disproportionately distributed. There is a small group of very big emitters. Some colleagues, like Andrew Jorgenson, Don Grant, Wesley Longhofer, Mary Collins, and Anya Galli Robertson, have looked for patterns in GHG emissions in the electric power sector. At the facility level, Collins and Galli Robertson find limited disproportionality in GHG emissions, but when they look at the parent company level, it reappears. In other words, there are certain parent companies that are more polluting than others. Jorgenson, Longhofer, and Grant were interested in disproportionality in GHG emissions as an independent variable, showing that higher disproportionality in the electric power sector was associated with higher national GHG emissions levels. That said, the dramatic differences we see in toxic pollution, we don't see in GHG pollution from electric power. You do see it with toxic releases from electric power, and you do see it in methane emissions.

Do you have recommendations for people who are in economic sociology and want to contribute to our understanding of the issue of climate change?

Looking ahead, I see two research directions that could be very interesting. First is the economic sociology of climate adaptation. There is fascinating work

on flood risk maps and how they affect real estate markets. How does the "growth machine," which is how the sociologist Harvey Molotch characterized the interests that coalesced to promote real estate development in cities, intersect with sea-level rise? How do patterns in business-state relationships determine adaptation strategies? There are so many ways in which climate impacts affect the foundations of the economic system, or at least important parts of the market. So the business of adaptation and the politics of adaptation from an economic sociology perspective are areas of great interest to me.

The second research direction relates to theories of social and economic transformation. One of the limitations of climate change research in the past was the way in which it was parceled out – climate change in the energy sector, in the water sector, in the transportation sector, etc. – and I think we are coming to an understanding that dealing with climate change is about systems transformation. I think European research communities are way ahead of US perspectives on this. We are still operating in a pretty fragmented research world. The low-carbon economy is not just about eliminating greenhouse gas emissions, it is about agriculture, transportation, the media – think about Google and the GHG emissions associated with their data centers and server farms – it is about that entire complex. Economic sociology offers a theory of the economy that includes the state and society, which are central to theories of economic transformation.

How would you suggest dealing with the space already occupied by economists?

That's a tough one. I think the best example of the way forward was provided by one of my professors in graduate school, Neil Fligstein, a professor of sociology at UC Berkeley. I remember Neil was invited to speak to a group of leaders from European central banks. They invited him to speak because he had this interesting view on European unification and also on the banks' roles in that process. Now, who knows if any of the bankers in his audience acted on his insights and changed their behavior. That of course is the end goal. But there is still a lesson in this anecdote. Neil was invited to give this talk because he has something to offer. He had a perspective in which the bankers were interested, and I think that is your way in. I talked before about elbowing your way in, but that approach is the least likely to be effective. Instead, focus on articulating insights that are tangible and actionable, and then you get invited in.

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