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Gray, Ian; Barral, Stephanie

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A (rapid) climate audit of economic sociology

Ian Gray and Stephanie Barral

This Newsletter series argues that climate change is an increasingly global force of social change and, as such, deserves more attention from economic sociologists. It has made the case through interviews with established scholars (Hoffman 2020; Sovacool 2020; Pulver 2020) and short articles on current, climate-centered economic sociology, including the contested role of markets in mitigating emissions (Ehrenstein and Valiergue 2021), the thorny problem of sorting out who deserves compensation for climate damage (Elliott 2021), and the value of crises in creating openings for new modes of collective action (Ergen and Suckert 2021). In this shared spirit of thinking about how economic sociology might contribute to both an understanding and praxis of climate futures, we review how the subdiscipline has explored the issue to date. Using the annual conferences of the Society for the Advancement of Socio-Economics (SASE) and the pages of *Socio-Economic Review* (*SER*) as proxies for the field of economic sociology, we provide an "audit" of how the topic of climate change has evolved in each venue over the past decade.

Stephanie Barral is a social scientist at the French National Institute for Agronomic and Environmental Research (INRAE), with expertise in economic and political sociology. Her work focuses on the contemporary transformations of environmental and agricultural policies. Her first book ("Capitalismes Agraires", Presses de Sciences Po, 2015) analyzes the growth of capitalist palm oil plantations in South East Asia despite social and environmental criticism. Her current research focuses on the development of economic instruments to solve environmental problems through the cases of biodiversity and carbon markets. *stephanie.barral@inrae.fr*

Ian Gray Gray is finishing a PhD in sociology at the University of California – Los Angeles. His dissertation examines how efforts to calculate the physical impacts and costs of climate change are reconfiguring institutional relations in various administrative and economic sectors such as catastrophe insurance, public water management, and agricultural development. His research blends approaches from STS, economic sociology, and organizational studies. Currently a Visiting Predoctoral Fellow in the Anthropocene Formations Working Group of the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science (in Berlin), he also holds a Master in City Planning from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. *igray@ucla.edu*

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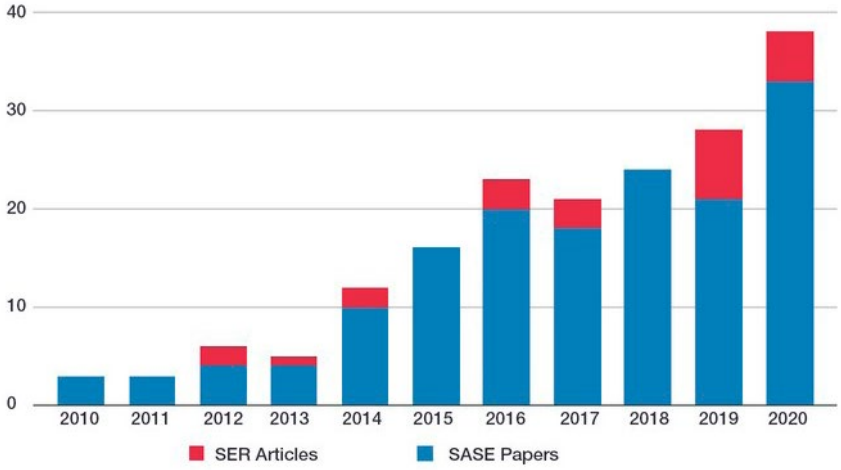
Tracing climate references

Disciplinary associations, and their respective conferences and publications, are good places to seek out what matters to an academic community (Abbott 2000). While economic sociology spans everything from political economy to organizational theory to the social studies of finance, SASE and *SER* represent a core constituency of researchers in the domain. SASE's annual meeting is one of the largest gatherings in the field, regularly boasting over 1,000 individual paper presentations per conference; *SER*, meanwhile, is the highest-ranking journal in the subdiscipline.[1] Additionally, *SER* grew out of SASE, so the two entities can be considered complementary in terms of their coverage of the different stages of scholarly work – the conference paper ("work in progress"), and the peer-reviewed article (i.e., polished contribution to the field).

Using the digital archives of both entities, we performed basic key-term searches of paper titles and abstracts to construct a rudimentary corpus of economic sociology's recent intellectual and empirical engagement with climate change. In setting the scope of our query, we had to contend with the archiving practices of our two sources. While *SER*'s back issues are searchable from 2003 (the journal's inception), SASE's digital archive extends only to 2010 (despite its founding in 1989). The SASE archive had other inconsistencies, including (1) a lack of records for the 2011 conference and (2) changes in digital conference providers, which created holes in the archiving of some abstracts in earlier years. We mitigated these challenges by using a wide set of key terms to find titles where climate was perhaps not explicitly mentioned but likely a background motivator of a paper's stated topic of interest.[2] We then hand-reviewed the results, discarded irrelevant records, and retained the remainder as our "climate" corpus.[3]

We conducted a similar process with *SER*, although to focus our query we limited our search to items catalogued as "research articles" and "discussions" (excluding, for instance, "book reviews"). Only



Graph 1: Climate change mentions in SASE and SER papers (2010–2020)

three papers in *SER* mention climate change prior to 2010, so for the sake of comparability between our archives, we excluded these three from our corpus. *Graph 1* contains the records for the combined SASE/*SER* corpus of papers mentioning climate change.

The data shows a clear growth in SASE scholars' interest in climate change over the past decade, while the trend in *SER* is upward but more ambiguous. Looking at the gains proportionally, less than one percent of papers presented at SASE in 2010 had something to do with climate change (three out of 413). In 2014, this figure increased to roughly one percent of all papers; in 2016 it doubled to over two percent of all presentations; and in 2020, climate change was discussed, at least marginally, in roughly three percent of the conference's paper slots. While the trend is positive, these figures remain underwhelming. They show how little economic sociology was engaged with a topic that, by 2009, had nonetheless prompted the launch (however flawed) of a regulated carbon market in Europe, been the focus of major legislative battles in the US (and numerous successful state-based regulations), and triggered a raft of lobbying, lawsuits, and advocacy across multiple levels of society in the US, Europe, and elsewhere. In other words, despite climate being a well-established economic policy issue by 2009, both SASE and *SER* appear to be barely warming up to the topic.[4]

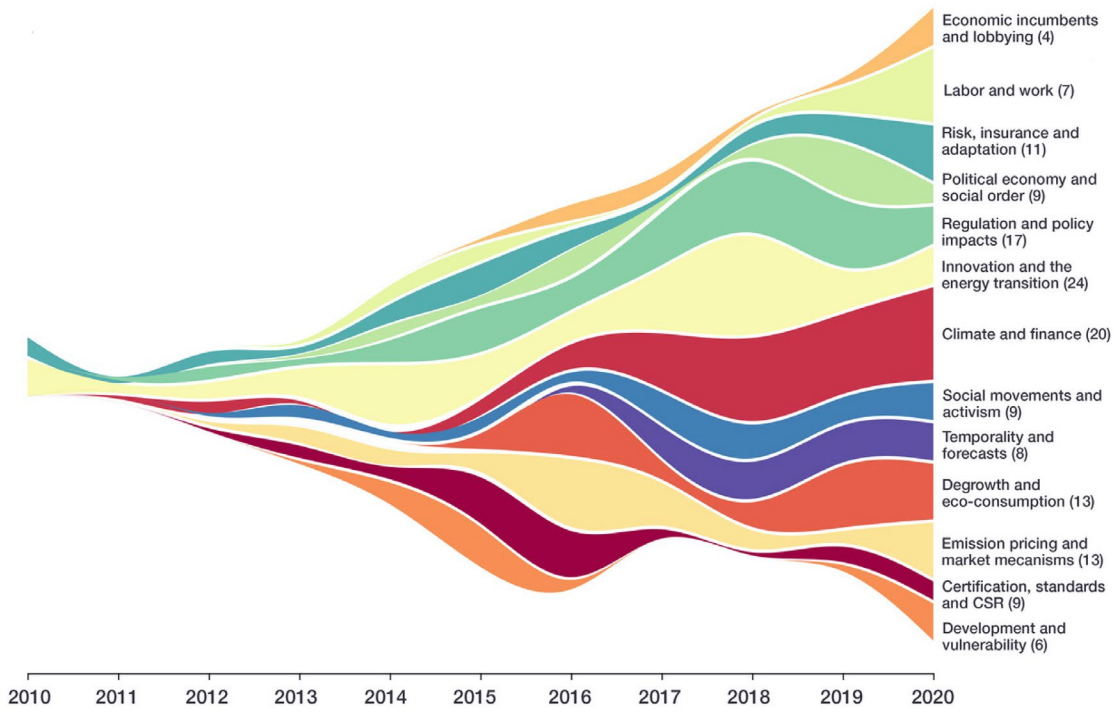
Categorizing climate topics within economic sociology

Viewed from a different stance, however, these numbers suggest that economic sociology has much more to contribute in clarifying and critiquing current processes of climate-driven social transformation. To make sense of this opportunity, we turned to our corpus to see how scholars within SASE and *SER* have treated the topic to date. Below, we split our analysis to focus on the particularities of each component of our corpus – the conference venue and the peer-review publication.

SASE

To understand what aspects of climate change appear within SASE sessions, and how they morph over time, we reviewed all the papers and abstracts for each year of our dataset and categorized these papers into broader topics. To limit the arbitrariness of our categories, we sought to achieve a practical level of intercoder reliability (O'Connor and Joffe 2020). Independently, each of us coded the papers in the dataset and then compared and discussed our two sets of codes until we arrived at a set of consensus categories. We then re-classed the papers (again independently) using our consensus code and conducted a final reliability check by discussing variation in our classing until we again reached mutual agreement on which papers belonged to which categories. In the process of reaching agreement, we tended to favor categories that captured an abstract's substantive climate change angle. For instance, a paper about small-scale solar installations in South Africa and a paper about energy innovation regimes in Germany are both classed as "innovation and the energy transition," rather than situating them in categories of, say, macro-change and micro-habits, or methodological orientations, or other possible orderings.

Another aspect of our data worth mentioning is that part of the growth in mentions of climate change can be accounted for by what we call "climate cameos." These are instances where climate change makes a single appearance in an abstract, usually as an example of a "grand challenge" or "crisis" facing contemporary societies. For instance, an abstract for a 2020 paper,



Graph 2. Climate change categories in SASE papers (2010–2020)

called "Will Robots Take your Jobs? The Workers' Point of View," opens with the line: "Currently, we are experiencing various trends: climate change, demographic contraction, globalization and the spread of digitalization," before going on to discuss the topic of the paper, which is about the impacts of automation on labor markets. These "cameos" appear repeatedly in our data, but since they point to an important analogic use of climate change within economic sociology, we decided to retain them for our corpus.

The results of our categorizations (see *Graph 2* above*)* reveal interesting trends (and gaps) in terms of how the field of economic sociology is currently attending to climate change. Out of the 150 papers we classed, nearly half are grouped in four categories on "innovation and the energy transition," "climate and finance," "regulation and policy impacts," and "emission pricing and market mechanisms." These papers highlight how climate attention from economic sociologists is concentrated particularly on recent technological advances and institutional initiatives, mainly dealing with efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and increase renewable energy production. The fields of engineering and economics, which have brought about numerous material and policy innovations, heavily structure the way that solutions to climate change (and environmental issues more broadly) are framed in contemporary societies. Economic sociology seems to be critically following these innovations as technologies, policies, and markets attract the bulk of scholarly attention.

Our other nine categories capture alternative (and sometimes conflicting) approaches to thinking about the economic implications of climate change (as shown through the categories of "degrowth and eco-consumption," "social movements and activism," and "economic incumbents and lobbying"). The social effects of climate change policies also offer a more discrete analytical angle that is followed by papers in our categories on "labor and work" and "development and vulnerability." This latter category also contains a couple of papers focusing on the role played by climate change itself – in the guise of extreme weather, drought, and food insecurity – in exacerbating existing social vulnerabilities in the Global South. The theme of vulnerability is picked up with reference to advanced economies by a group of papers on "risk, insurance, and adaptation," which think through these topics as matters of hazard management, risk transfer, and infrastructure investment. Finally, a smattering of other papers deal with more macro-theoretical considerations, such as what climate change reveals about the "political economy and social orders" of capitalism, and another category examining divergent "temporalities" between economic and policy cycles and the medium- to long-term horizons of the climate crisis.

SER

Peer-review articles in *SER* give us a parallel marker with which to follow the evolution of economic sociologists' interest in climate change. Out of the twenty-six papers that mention climate change at least once, less than half (twelve) incorporate the topic as more than a "cameo" appearance. The first article in our corpus to explicitly discuss climate change is Fred Block's paper titled "Crisis and Renewal: The Outlines of a Twenty-First Century New Deal," where Block raises prescient questions (given current policy discussions in the US) about capitalism, climate change, and the welfare state (Block 2011). The papers that follow, however, largely use climate as a shorthand for crisis, or discuss it within the context of Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives. In 2016, Craig Calhoun returns to themes evoked by Block as part of a discussion section on "The Future of Capitalism" (Streeck et al. 2016), and subsequent volumes of *SER* in 2017–2020 include a few empirical articles that can be organized around three themes: (1) studies of institutional innovation dealing with the energy transition; (2) studies of the impact of social movements and civil society on climate-related business practices and economic policy; and (3) one paper that evokes potential economic consequences of climate impacts through an analysis of disaster insurance. Given the small number of papers, there was no need for a more extensive categorization.

Going forward

What does this little exercise show us about where economic sociology might go from here? In a moment where societies seem increasingly aware of the stark reality of climate change, yet also stuck between the promises of transformative policies and doubts about their outcomes, it is encouraging to see a growing – though still timid – attention to the matter among SASE members. It also pushes us to reflect on how a more explicit "economic sociology of climate change" might contribute to new thinking about the accelerating entanglements between our own socioeconomic systems and the rapidly changing earth system.

Our "audit" suggests 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. While we remain convinced of the need to scrutinize mainstream propositions coming from the fields of economics and engineering, more room could be made for heterodox domains of economic sociology, i.e., research on circular economies, redistribution, gift exchange, and local modes of solidarity (cf. Reichel and Perey 2018; Hickel and Kallis 2020; Corlet-Walker et al. 2021). The tools of economic sociology should be tuned to the emergence of alternative logics of economic production and, furthermore, help identify (and imagine) processes by which local economies might re-embed themselves in the biophysical environment. By exploring these directions, climate change also offers economic sociology a way to renew its own sources of critique and reflexivity, a direction long suggested by scholars such as Ulrich Beck (2014; 2016). Rather than following behind economic projections, or waiting for the passage of policy, economic sociology might, in other words, contribute more projective thinking of its own.

Our categorizations also reveal substantive areas of research that, while present in current conversations, are still deeply underrepresented. An increasing range of studies from the field of "attribution" science show that climate change is already ratcheting up economic losses by exacerbating extreme weather events (Herring et al. 2021). Despite such signals, the topic of "risk, insurance, and adaptation" accounts for just seven percent of current research in our corpus. With expenditures on adaptation and resilience expected to absorb an increasing amount of public and private money (Reidmiller et al. 2018; Goldstein et al. 2018), the emerging political economy of climate protection seems in urgent need of more analysis.

Scholars in other social science fields, from urban planning to public health and economics, are looking at numerous climate risk issues, such as fiscal stress for homeowners and municipalities (Shi and Varuzzo 2020; Keenan and Bradt 2020) and implications of heat on labor markets and human capital (Park et al. 2020; Flouris et al. 2018), just to name a couple. Another area ripe for study includes the increasingly privatized world of advanced risk analytics, where asymmetries in predictive powers may constrain economic future for analytically outgunned subgroups (i.e. insurees, farmers, or public mortgage lenders) as much as climate impacts themselves (Fielder et al. 2021; Gray 2020; Flavelle 2020). Other areas will likely come to mind for other readers, and economic sociology has much to add to these conversations.

How should we think about strengthening space for a more climate-engaged economic sociology? Patterns from the collected data suggest that, at least within SASE, mini-conferences currently drive the bulk of attention to climate change. Roughly forty percent of the papers in our corpus were spurred by topical mini-conferences. In 2020, a mini-conference co-organized by one of the authors (Barral) welcomed seventeen papers on climate, and another, co-organized in 2021 by both authors (and other collabora-

tors), has accepted twenty-two climate-related papers (out of thirty-five submitted). Looking briefly at the SASE 2021 online program (released as this study was going to print) shows further expansion of the topic across the conference. Perhaps it is time for a network at SASE focused on the economic life of climate change? Or more broadly on eco-social transformations? Whether this makes sense or not, we hope the climate-related research continues to spread across every substantive group within SASE. Conferences, of course, help draw attention to new topics, but action is also needed, upstream (in the training and encouragement of PhD students), downstream (in solicitations by editors for publications on the topic), and laterally (through collaboration with other disciplines). The climate crisis is too critical to be siloed into subdisciplinary tracks; a plurality of approaches, even within economic sociology, is surely what is needed.

Endnotes

1 *SER* ranked sixth among all sociology journals in the Social Science Citations Index for 2020. These rankings are based on Web of Science's scoring of journal impact factors and were retrieved from the Observatory of International Research (OOIR) at https://ooir.org/journals.php?category=sociology. Other rankings, such as those based on Scopus by Scimago, combine sociology and political science journals in the same ranking; SER ranks 33rd for Scimago 2020 rankings, still higher than any other journal of economic sociology.

2 Key terms = "climate change," "global warming," "greenhouse gases," "carbon," "energy," "renewable," "fossil fuel," "green," "environmental," "sustainab*." When we say "implied," we mean that a paper discussing the renewable energy policy, despite not mentioning climate change, is nonetheless engaged with the subject.

3 Results from the key terms "environmental" and "sustainab*" were substantial and only slightly overlapping with the category of climate, providing a glimpse of a parallel but separate set of topics (rivaling and surpassing sometimes those mentioning climate) operating at the conjuncture of economy and the environment. We do not discuss these other papers in this brief analysis.

4 The surprising variation in the number of papers at SASE compared to *SER* may also speak to the nature of how social science subfields emerge – there is a time lag between new research and its consolidation into the stuff of peer-reviewed publication. Perhaps those doing this work are also early-career scholars looking to carve out their own space in the field, rather than scholars already established in the domain, which may also explain the divergence in our two datasets (assuming more established scholars publish more regularly in *SER*). A social network analysis (feasible from our data) could clarify this point, but such an analysis lies outside the scope of this short article.

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