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Article

Note from the editor: Economic sociology in times of war

economic sociology. perspectives and conversations

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Note from the editor

Economic sociology in times of war

Marcin Serafin

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Since it was launched, *economic sociology. perspectives and conversations* (or, as it used to be known, *economic sociology_the european electronic newsletter*) has combined a focus on global topics, such as financialization, inequality, and climate change, with attention to important topics related to specific regions, such as the future of the euro, capitalism in Latin America, or economic sociology in Asia. Over the years, the local topics discussed have covered much of the globe.

This issue focuses on Central and Eastern Europe, a region already discussed before in this publication. In 2007, Nina Bandelj edited the issue “Economic Sociology of Postsocialist Transformations.” At the time, the change from state socialism to capitalism was the central topic of economic sociology in this region. After 1989, the notion of postsocialism provided scholars with what, following Andrew Abbott, can be called a “generational paradigm” (Abbott 2001, 23–25), which shaped much of economic sociology from the re-

gion for more than two decades. Since the issue edited by Nina Bandelj was published, this interest in postsocialist transformation has been gradually fading, as many economic sociologists from the region have moved on to other topics, such as consumption, credit, housing, digital platforms, or illiberal backlash and the rise of populism.

Originally, this issue was supposed to spotlight this development or, to put it differently, to look at economic sociology after postsocialist transformations. But the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the horrors of the war changed those plans. Instead of looking more broadly at the recent developments of economic sociology in Central and Eastern Europe, this issue focuses on the war in Ukraine and its impact on the region and beyond. The impact of the war is, of course, mainly on and within Ukraine. But the war has also greatly impacted Russia, if only as a result of the extended economic sanctions. And the war

is also widely felt in other countries of the region, which are in the position of having an armed conflict take place so close to their borders. The consequences of the war, however, also reach outside the region, as the war in Ukraine is not only a historical event, in the full theoretical sense of the term (Sewell 2005), but also a global one.

This issue sheds light on economic sociology from a region at a time of war. But it also aims to highlight the more global consequences of the armed conflict and, at the same time, contribute to the debate on the importance of what can be called an economic sociology of war. In their comprehensive overview of the significance of war in the history of social thought, Hans Joas and Wolfgang Knöbl (2013) pointed out the limited attention devoted to the subject in contemporary sociology. Criticizing this state of affairs, they argued that the study of war is not something that can be left to a subdiscipline of “military sociology” but rather should “provide points to the construction of a more empirically convincing sociological theory and theory of modernity” (Joas and Knöbl 2013, 5). While economic sociology, like much of contemporary sociology, has neglected the topic of war, focusing instead on economic processes in times of peace, the articles in this issue show that economic sociology can nevertheless contribute to such a theory. The theories developed in economic sociology can help us understand the various economic aspects of war and engage in debates on its causes and consequences. Moreover, studying economic processes in times of war can tell us something about them in times of peace as well, in a similar way as studying illegal markets helps us understand legal ones (Beckert and Dewey 2017).

In the first article of the issue, Fabio Parasecoli and Mihai Varga investigate how the war has impacted wheat markets and how this impact has reverberated around the globe. Their article shows how control over wheat trade became an element of the war. Parasecoli and Varga argue that, while the weaponization of food during war is not a new strategy, the consequences of this strategy have been amplified both by local structures of agriculture in Ukraine and by the globalization of supply chains and the deregulation and financialization of food commodities. Their article thus continues the topic of price instability and inflation of the previous issue, which made the point that in an economy not all prices are equally important. Since

the previous issue came out, this idea has been put more formally by Isabella M. Weber, Jesús Lara Jáuregui, Lucas Teixeira, and Luiza Nassif Pires, who proposed the concept of a “systemically significant price” (Weber et al. 2022). Parasecoli and Varga show how a systemically significant price can not only contribute to inflation in times of peace but also become a weapon in times of war.

Their article is followed by Karolina Mikołajewska-Zajac’s, which focuses on the role of Airbnb during

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the war in Ukraine. In recent years, digital platforms like Twitter, Facebook, or Airbnb have become important actors during wars. Platforms have impacted the logistics of fighting and have played a central role in the distribution of information and misinformation. They have been used both for fundraising to finance war and humanitarian aid aimed at mitigating its effects. Mikołajewska-Zajac’s article on Airbnb’s humanitarian aid shows that platforms are used to coordinate bottom-up activism but at the same time engage in top-down diplomacy as global political actors. She points out the dangers of digital philanthropy and discusses how philanthropy helps platforms establish legitimacy, which is crucial for them at a time when the legality of some of their actions are in question. If Parasecoli and Varga show that studying wheat trade in times of war helps us understand the financialization of food commodities, Mikołajewska-Zajac shows that studying platforms in times of war can contribute to our understanding of the processes of digitalization and the emergence of what, following Katharina Pistor, can be called “digital statehood” (Pistor 2020).

The third article, by Maciej Kassner, revisits Karl Polanyi’s writings on war. Polanyi has been a central figure in economic sociology, yet his writings on war have received little attention. Kassner argues that the topic of war was central for Polanyi not only in his magnum opus, *The Great Transformation*, but also in his other writings. Kassner shows that Polanyi’s views on war can be opposed both to liberal and Marxist ideas on the subject, as the former often saw war as something that would become impossible in advanced

capitalism and the latter saw war as an inevitable result of it. Kassner argues that Polanyi's ideas of war as a social institution and his critique of psychological and purely economic theories of war remain relevant today, as those types of theories have been used to explain the war in Ukraine.

Finally, the article by Gábor Scheiring provides an analysis of the specific moment in which this war is taking place. This moment is very different from the one in which the issue edited in 2007 by Nina Bandelj came out. At the time, this was just before the financial crisis, there was much optimism in Central and Eastern Europe about the future. Scheiring's article focuses on the decay of liberal democracy and the rise of populism and nationalism that has taken place since then. He ascribes this development to the exhaustion of the export-led growth model, which characterized many of the region's countries after 1989. He argues that by the end of the 2000s, this growth model had generated disillusionment and social disintegration and gave rise to different populist coalitions in Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. The different composition of the coalitions in these three countries depended on how the exhaustion of the growth model and the social disintegration it created was managed by what Scheiring calls, following the growth models literature, the dominant social bloc. While contributing to an important regional discussion, Scheiring's article

makes a more global theoretical claim as to the origins of democratic backsliding.

What these articles share is that, like much of the work that has appeared in this publication over the years, they look across the local and global dichotomy. They provide a glimpse into economic sociology from a region at a time of war, but they also outline some of the possibilities related to a larger research agenda on an economic sociology of war.

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