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Transforming Economics from the Side Lane? The New Economy Space and its Thinktanks

Lukas Bäuerle and Sabine Maasen

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Transforming Economics from the Side Lane?

The New Economy Space and its Think Tanks

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Abstract

Contemporary societies face a persistent *polycrisis* in which socioeconomic, ecological, technological, and geopolitical challenges intersect and reinforce each other. This volatility exposes the limitations of linear, mono-paradigmatic responses and places new demands on the production and circulation of knowledge. This is also true for economic matters, policies and rationales: While mainstream economics remains characterised by abstraction, disciplinary closure, and expertocratic policy advisory, an alternative ecosystem has emerged, also in the German-speaking world: the *New Economy Space* (NES). This article reconstructs the NES as a boundary-spanning dispositif of knowledge production that combines critical resources from pluralist economics with broader societal trends towards transdisciplinarity and impact orientation. Drawing on interviews, organisational documents, and observations of networking events, the study identifies three defining features of NES knowledge production: the continuous establishment of *agile addresses*, a pronounced *orientation towards political impact*, and the *organisation of transversality* across fields. NES think tanks thereby translate heterogeneous knowledges and normative positions into strategically crafted interventions for policymakers, media, and civil society. The article situates NES practices in contrast to academic economics and highlights their potential to reshape the epistemic and institutional foundations of economic expertise. It concludes by reflecting on the implications of this emerging model for the future of economics as a science and as a mode of public intervention.

Keywords

New Production of Knowledge, Thinktanks, Pluralist Economics, New Economy Space, Polycrisis

Statements and Declarations

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Transforming Economics from the Side Lane?

The New Economy Space and its Think Tanks

1. Introduction

‘To be honest, it’s a bit of cherry-picking from the broad field of pluralist economics, selecting the approaches that actually help solve the problem. It doesn’t matter where they come from – if a neoclassical solution works and is economically convincing, we’ll use it.’

Interviewee

Contemporary societies are increasingly confronted with a constellation of multiple, interlinked challenges—socioeconomic, ecological, technological, and geopolitical—that mutually reinforce one another and generate persistent instability. This condition of *polycrisis* (Lawrence et al. 2024) produces an environment of uncertainty, rendering linear, mono-paradigmatic, or sector-specific responses unsuitable. Against this backdrop, transgressive and integrative approaches, capable of systematically bringing together diverse actors, standards, and procedures from distinct social fields such as science, politics, media, and the economy, are increasingly called for and fostered. The need for such boundary-crossing strategies is particularly acute in the economic realm: contemporary economic crises and developmental challenges are deeply entangled with socio-political issues, ecological degradation, and rapid technological change, making it impossible to isolate ‘economic issues’ from broader societal transformations.

Despite the significant pressure to change, a particularly influential science and its institutions within the higher education system have been reluctant to adapt (Maesse et al. 2021): economics. Indeed, academic economics continues to be characterised by a high degree of internal streamlining in paradigmatic (Glötzl and Aigner 2019), institutional (Korom 2020; Rossier 2020) and social (Bayer and Rouse 2016; Chelwa 2021) terms. This also appears to hold true for the German-speaking world (Aigner 2020; Graber et al. 2008; Verein für Socialpolitik e.V. 2024), though there is an important policy-relevant deviation due to its strong ordoliberal tradition (Ötsch et al. 2018).¹ Overall, the field of economics adopts a general stance towards ‘the economy’ that is characterised by high abstraction (Levy 2025), ‘market universalism’ (Hodgson 2019), and the notion that economic processes can be controlled and predicted (Beckert and Bronk 2018).

Outreach activities, particularly economic advice in policymaking, predominantly adhere to traditional, linear formats. This elitism dispositif (Maesse 2017) is manifested institutionally in the form of a small number of highly visible expert bodies, a case in point being the so-called *Wirtschaftsweisen* (German Council of Economic Experts). This body has long exhibited a pronounced technocratic orientation encapsulated by the notion of ‘politics without politics’ (Dean 2009; see Foucault 2010 for the historical traces of this entanglement in economics). As these bodies are tied to the reputation mechanisms within academic economics, mainstream professors often take leading roles in shaping and commenting on economic policymaking in Germany (Pühringer and Beyer 2021; Reinke and Porak 2025). This expertocratic mode is also supported by the structure of

¹ As ordoliberalism belongs to the market-liberal paradigm, the ‘German Sonderweg’ should be disregarded here, given that the epistemic positioning in the NES goes beyond market liberalism.

economic journalism, which is closely aligned with orthodox tertiary economic training (Sagvosdkin 2021) and results in the continued dominance of prominent academic economists as authoritative voices in public economic discourse (Theine 2021).

However, several commentators emphasise that the discipline of economics has, indeed, shown tendencies of change in the last decades (Rommel and Urban 2022). The integration of behavioural economics, new institutional economics and mechanism design into the disciplinary mainstream are regularly referenced in this vein. Methodologically, there has been a profound shift from model Platonism towards econometrics (Backhouse and Cherrier 2017). With psychologists (Kahneman) and political scientists (Ostrom) winning the economics 'Nobel Prize', even interdisciplinarity seems to penetrate disciplinary orthodoxy. Against the backdrop of this increased fragmentation (Roncaglia 2019), there is even talk of a 'mainstream pluralism' (Davis 2006). Critical voices, however, point out that these shifts have, so far, not reached the paradigmatic core of the discipline, a 'Holy Trinity' (Colander et al. 2004) of rationality, selfishness, and equilibrium combined with methodological individualism. This is most evident in the way the discipline is presented to newcomers (Bäuerle 2021). It depicts itself as a science that 'covers a wide range of topics and encompasses many approaches, but it is unified by several central ideas' (Mankiw 2024: 2). In fact, the integration of 'hot' topics such as sustainability, AI and institutional change often reflects, at closer sight, what Chicago economist Gary Becker (1993) introduced as 'economic imperialism', i.e., the analysis of formerly non-economic topics using narrow econo-scientific means.

It should be noted that critical voices also have a genealogy. In fact, the emergence of a dominant 'mainstream economics' during the 20th century occurred alongside critical discourse on the margins of the discipline. One such tradition is heterodox economics (Jo et al. 2025). It comprises a vast array of different economic schools or paradigms that all challenge mainstream orthodoxy in one way or another. Despite providing far-reaching criticisms, this tradition has largely remained on the fringes of economics and economic policy advisory. This has partly been explained by the heterodox scene's notorious scatteredness and infighting (Bigo and Negru 2008). Against the backdrop of continued fragmentation and marginalisation, the tradition has notably gained momentum since the 2007 financial crisis. Inspired by a 'reflexive' (ibid.) or 'interested pluralism' (Dobusch and Kapeller 2012), a Pluralist Economics has emerged that in some national cases has gained institutional strength. This pluralist turn heavily relies on a student movement insisting on an economic education fit for 21st-century challenges (Bäuerle and Groenewald forthcoming). Crucially, this quest involves reaching out not only among pluralist economists but also to other disciplines and is usually accompanied by a call for critical self-reflection on epistemological traits. Both strands are philosophically inspired by critical realism and constructivism, urging economics to realign with 'real-world economic issues'. So far, they have done so within the academic field, aiming to renew the science of economics and its epistemological underpinnings.

Since around 10 years, these critical currents have been combined with general trends in the relationship between science and society at large, culminating into what we will introduce shortly as the New Economy Space (NES). For about the last four decades, new concepts aiming at describing an increasing orientation of science towards strategic goals (Irvine and Martin 1984), the production of relevant knowledge (Böhme et al. 1983; Gibbons et al. 1994) and the emergence of post-normal science (Funtowicz and Ravetz 1993) have emerged. Science is being asked to become more inter- and transdisciplinary (Maasen and Lieven 2006), creating innovation networks modelled as triple helix (science / university–government / politics–business / industry; Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff 2000) to quadruple helix (plus media/society) and, finally, quintuple helix (adding environment; Carayannis and Campbell 2010). While all of these concepts are contested, they still show considerable transformative effects of science and higher education systems vis-à-vis perceived

challenges and crises. In a nutshell: On the one hand, virtually all disciplines have increased their engagement in third-stream activities such as expertise, entrepreneurship, public engagement, and/or continuing education. On the other hand, most universities today are developing their third mission by providing increasingly professionalised infrastructures and services to help researchers engage in such activities (see, for instance, Smit et al. 2025). Taken together, these concepts demonstrate an increased responsiveness of science and higher education to societal expectations, which, in turn, thrive on perceived challenges and crises.

By, albeit tentatively, embracing these advancements and integrating them with the epistemic resources available at the periphery of academic economics, a New Economy Space is about to come to the fore. This space challenges not only academic economics but also the performative entanglements that this science establishes in contemporary societies. In rearranging these entanglements, it is crafting not just new speaker positions, new relationships and institutions but actually an entire *dispositif* in the Foucauldian sense: a sandbox that continually reframes and redoes what 'economic knowledge', 'economic policymaking', and 'the economy' itself mean. This new framework is potentially more aligned with the dynamics of accelerating uncertainty and ambiguity in both content and form. It encompasses networks of professionals, academics, students, and non-governmental institutions at universities, as well as engaged funders, and new locations and formats for meetings, all of which are geared towards economic change. It enables politicians, economists, the media and citizens to interact more intensely and in new, more agile, open and problem-orientated ways.

As we will show, these innovations crystallise in a knowledge production model encompassing three defining elements: placing agile addresses, orienting towards impact, and organising (for) transversality. We will further argue that, although inspired by academic economics, the emerging NES is not originating from a specific societal field. Rather, it is emerging from so-called 'spaces between fields' (Eyal 2020), 'open, underdetermined spheres in which actors from proximate fields encounter and engage with one another' (Saner 2022: 25–26; our translation). This is why actors in the NES make use of a type of organisation known as Think Tank (TT). TTs have been described as 'boundary spanners' (Medvetz 2012), particularly between science and politics, providing translation, exchange and recalibration between differentiated societal spheres such as science, politics, the media, the business world, etc. While not all of the studied organisations self-describe themselves as TTs – some strategically, some implicitly – they practically all engage in what the literature identifies as typical TT practices (see subsequent section). Although the NES encompasses more than just TTs, their crucial role at the hinges of societal reproduction and innovation provides a proper case to study the emerging *dispositif* in detail.

This article addresses the central research question of how the NES is developing a new model of economic knowledge production in response to the aforementioned challenges and how this model seeks to inject pluralist economic perspectives into policymaking and public discourse. To this end, it presents a case study of NES think tanks in the German-speaking world. Think tanks are considered powerful catalysts within the NES, providing a suitable opportunity to study the innovations infused by and within the NES. The overarching question is complemented by sub-questions concerning the role of scientific legitimacy within the NES, as well as the socio-epistemic configuration of this emerging ecosystem. Therefore, we are not addressing what NES think tanks know, but rather *how* they systematically co-produce knowledge in a space convening heterogeneous actors and connecting various communicative channels. The next section outlines the methodology and data basis of the case study and provides an overview of the NES. Section 3 presents an empirical reconstruction of the NES's knowledge production model. Section 4 depicts the role of science within the NES. Section 5 discusses the findings in light of the broader research

context and offers an outlook on the question of whether academic economics itself is subject to fundamental change provoked by the NES.

2. NES: the object and method of study

Think tanks² within the New Economy Space (NES) have emerged over the past decade. As of autumn 2024, a total of 14 organisations exist in the German-speaking world (see Table 1). The emergence of these organisations was driven by both extra-academic and intra-academic factors. Externally, there has been a political demand for post-orthodox economic policy options at various governance levels, including the EU, national governments and municipalities. Since the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 and subsequent economic turmoil, public opinion in Europe has shifted increasingly away from market liberal paradigms. However, there has been no clear consensus on alternative directions, prompting philanthropists, the media, and political actors to experiment with new economic concepts. Since around 2015, Anglo-Saxon funders have notably targeted Germany, viewing it as a key economic power that can drive broader European economic transformation. They have actively supported experimental initiatives and policy pilots.

Internally, the NES significantly benefits from a well-networked community of non-orthodox scholars and students, which fosters the academic consolidation of alternative economic concepts and schools of thought. The emergence of skilled alumni from specialised programmes has further strengthened this ecosystem by providing personnel who are adept at impact-orientated and transdisciplinary knowledge production. Since 2022, these actors have been brought together annually in 'Strategy Platforms', organised by ZOE and the *Netzwerk Plurale Ökonomik*. They self-identify as part of a broader 'New Economy' movement, space or ecosystem. As well as think tanks, the NES comprises a wide range of stakeholders, as detailed in the documentation of the 2023 Strategy Platform: 'Participants are selected by invitation or recommendation and represent key stakeholders of the economic paradigm shift. Representatives come from think tanks, environmental NGOs, campaign organisations, parliamentary parties and representatives' offices, social movements and universities' (ZOE and NPÖ 2023: 3). A key unifying characteristic of the NES is its post-market-liberal orientation. Importantly, this collective identity is primarily defined negatively — through shared opposition to political neoliberalism rather than adherence to a coherent, positively articulated economic vision. Within strategic and convening events, academic debates on economic paradigms and schools of thought are intentionally minimised, with the focus instead lying on strategic and tactical discussions aimed at maximising political influence.

The NES ecosystem predominantly employs the organisational form of the think tank,³ which offers lower market entry barriers and reduced dependence on traditional academic hierarchies compared

² For the purposes of this study, only those organisations within the broader NES that have an overtly political impetus were included. For instance, this criterion excluded the *Netzwerk Plurale Ökonomik*, as it does not have a political mission, but rather follows the vision of a renewed academic economics. However, *Konzeptwerk Neue Ökonomie* was included, despite not primarily seeking to impact institutions of representative democracy (political parties, ministries and parliament), as it focuses on grassroots organisations and multipliers instead. Conversely, only think tanks with an explicit focus on economic matters were included. This is why the *Öko-Institut Freiburg* and *Agora Energiewende* were not considered, despite covering economic topics *amongst other topics*.

³ Although highly visible and influential, think tanks remain notoriously difficult to define (Hauck 2017). This ambiguity is not a flaw, but a structural feature. One of the defining characteristics of think tanks is their ability to transgress rigid institutional boundaries between science, politics, the media and business, and to establish operational footholds in the spaces between these domains. In doing so, they function as 'boundary spanners' (Medvetz 2012), creating temporary bridges between epistemic and normative logics that would otherwise

to policy institutes and expert councils. The central aim of NES think tanks is to achieve meaningful political impact by disseminating and applying non-orthodox economic knowledge.

#	Name	Founded	HQ(s)
1	Dezernat Zukunft	2018	Berlin
2	ZOE Institute for Future-Fit Economics	2017	Cologne Berlin Brussels
3	Momentum Institut	2019	Vienna
4	Bürgerbewegung Finanzwende	2018	Berlin
5	Konzeptwerk Neue Ökonomie	2012	Leipzig
6	Forum Ökologisch-Soziale Marktwirtschaft	1994	Berlin
7	Fiscal Future	2021	Berlin
8	Communia	2020	Berlin
9	Purpose Foundation	2015	Hamburg
10	Mission Wertvoll	2023	Berlin
11	Zukunft KlimaSozial	2024	Berlin
12	NELA – Next Economy Lab	2020	Bonn
13	Forum New Economy	2019	Berlin
14	rebalance now	2024	Cologne

Table 1: NES Think Tanks in the German-speaking area

The present case study approached and studied the NES based on three sets of data:

1. Overall, 14 semi-structured interviews, each lasting between 30 and 60 minutes, were conducted in the summer of 2024 with leading personnel from 12 of the think tanks listed above. This included two stakeholders who were central to the Strategy Platform, which was organised jointly by ZOE and das *Netzwerk Plurale Ökonomik*. In many cases, the interviewees were also involved in founding the respective institutions.⁴

remain separate. This is why TTs are amongst prominent examples of what has been called ‘knowledge intermediaries’ (Feser 2023) or ‘knowledge brokers’ (MacKillop et al. 2023). The connected practices and rationales widely differ between individual TTs, but also between different policy fields which leads to a variety of TT cultures or ‘types’ as reconstructed, for instance, by McGann and Weaver (2000: 10–11): Contract Researcher, Advocacy Tank, Party Think Tanks etc.

⁴ Think tanks are notoriously secretive institutions, with a strong emphasis on professional confidentiality. This makes it difficult to gain an insight into their operations and strategic deliberations. For this reason, all interviews were conducted on the condition of strict anonymity and without direct quotations from the gathered corpus. All citations stemming from interviews are therefore generic in nature. They were formulated during

2. The think tanks' webpages were taken into account, notably the impact and transparency reports published there with information concerning activities, networks, personnel and funding.
3. Finally, material capturing networking events in the ecosystem (e.g., programmes, outlines and reports of Strategy Platforms and the Berlin Summit organised by Forum New Economy) was collected.

This threefold dataset was subsequently analysed using a structured content analysis (Kuckartz & Rädiker 2024), relying on a two-step inductive coding procedure (Bücker 2020). First, overarching aspects referred to when describing their respective institutions were inductively reconstructed: normative, procedural, organisational, and epistemic. Within these first-order codes, second-order codes were reconstructed to provide an overall picture of the topics discussed. This led to the final abductive step of identifying the typical elements of the knowledge production model within the NES based on the reconstructed codes (Reichert 1993). To this end, the normative, procedural, organisational and epistemic aspects were examined for their interlinkages and cross-supporting functions. This process led to the reconstruction of the model presented in the following section.

3. Knowledge production within the NES

Knowledge production within the NES takes place in the interstices of science, politics, economy and the mass media. For, only in such interstices can new economic or economic policy theories, concepts and ideas unfold. However, operating in the interstices is not only a necessity but also offers numerous degrees of freedom in organisational, procedural, epistemic, and normative terms due to the absence of institutionalised regulatory systems. The reconstruction of the empirical material revealed an overall picture of a persistent knowledge production model within the NES consisting of three operations: (1) continuous self-placement as agile addresses; (2) a pronounced orientation towards political impact; and (3) a transversal *modus operandi* marked by the inbound and outbound integration and translation of diverse knowledges, resources, and capabilities spanning established field boundaries (see figure 1). Depending on their objectives and available resources, individual think tanks enact this model differently. Despite its internal heterogeneity, it emerges as a stark contrast to the linear, rule-based knowledge production model of academic economics. The model will now be introduced based on the empirical material, thereby focusing on three defining operations, resulting in a presentation of the strategies to transversally deploy personnel.

the writing process based on the interviews and represent the typical meanings embedded within them, rather than the speakers. This is why the interview citations do not have references. The explicit naming of individual organizations is only carried out where based on publicly accessible sources.

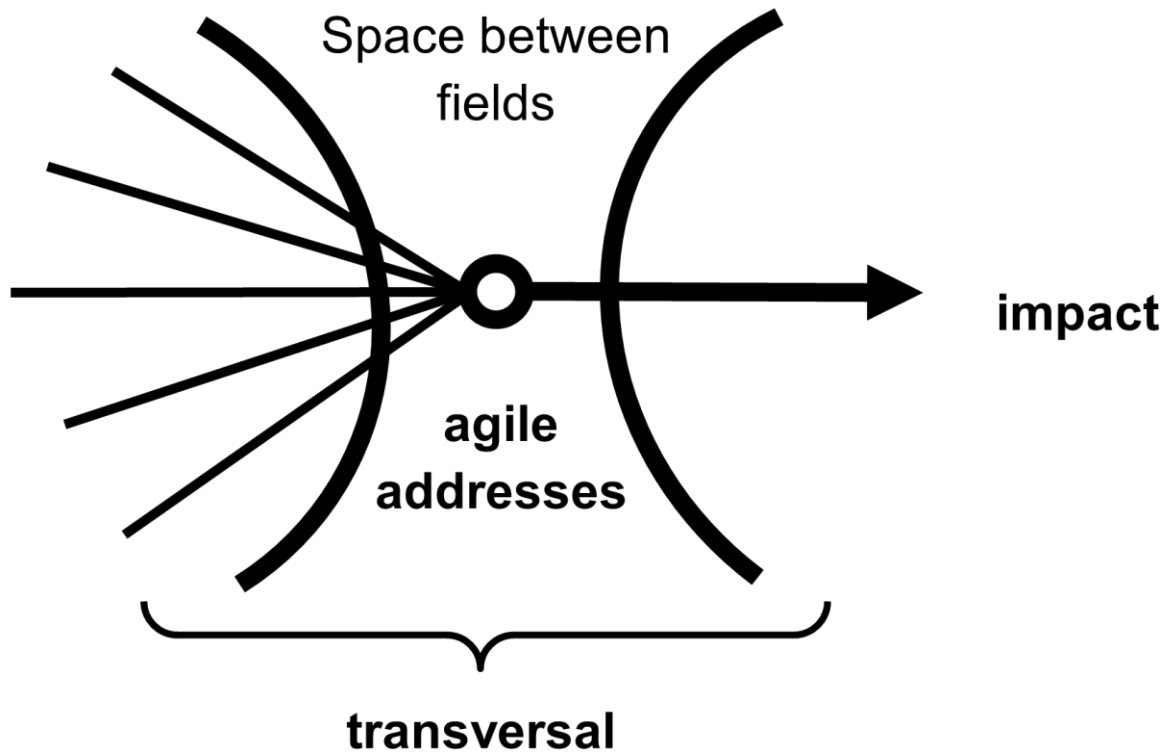


Figure 1: Graphical representation of the knowledge production model persistent within the NES

3.1 Placing Agile Addresses

The ability of NES actors to operate in the space between fields hinges on their ability to construct an institutional presence—an address—that enables others to connect with them, reference them, and interact with them. In the absence of positionality induced by a particular field (e.g., academic chairs, party mandates or media platforms), the address becomes the primary vehicle for visibility, credibility and engagement. NES actors often describe their entry into public and political spheres as creative acts driven by perceived structural gaps rather than existing institutional trajectories: ‘The gap that we saw back then, which very few people saw, I think, is central.’ This entrepreneurial dynamic involves assuming hybrid roles that blend analysis, advocacy and communication, producing organisational forms that borrow from and transcend traditional categories. ‘We sometimes call it an octopus organisation, with many arms,’ or ‘Yes, we would rather describe ourselves as a network because it refers to the individuals we work with. They are part of what makes us powerful, and at the same time they represent our attempt to bring science, media and business together.’ However, establishing and maintaining such an entity as a socio-epistemic infrastructure is not a one-off act of institution-building; it is an ongoing epistemic and organisational task.

The institutional form predominantly chosen by NES actors — the think tank — offers legitimacy and flexibility. While some organisations embrace the label ‘think tank’, others omit it. It carries connotations of professionalism and policy relevance, which are valuable in political and media interactions. At the same time, it allows agility and independence from disciplinary or political constraints. Thus, this organisational form enables a lightweight operational structure combined with a recognisable institutional presence. This agility extends beyond the founding phase and becomes

embedded in the daily practices of positioning and adjustment. 'We are relatively small, i.e., small and flexible, which is why we can make decisions relatively quickly. This enables us to work on a topic that is currently relevant or one that has recently caught our interest.' Given the volatile nature of attention, funding and political opportunities, NES actors adopt operational strategies capable of a rapid response. Working at variable speeds—sometimes deliberate, sometimes reactive—allows these actors to maintain relevance and seize strategic opportunities across different fields: 'When we apply for funding, for instance, we emphasise very strongly that we work together and have this practical, cross-sectoral approach.' Taken together, these approaches form dynamic interfaces that evolve continually in response to changing environments. NES actors regularly reassess their strategic orientations and thematic priorities, experimenting with new alliances and formats. Consequently, the address serves as both a stable anchor and a flexible node within the NES ecosystem, facilitating ongoing adaptation and responsiveness.

Another important factor to consider when allocating addresses within a field is normative signalling. As they lack established field-specific identities, NES organisations must explicitly construct legitimacy through articulated values, narratives and political orientations. 'We have a political agenda; we want a socially and ecologically just world and a democratic economy,' and 'I believe that our normative compass is also always a unique selling point. We are extremely open about the fact that we do everything in a value-orientated way.' Such signalling serves dual purposes: it distinguishes NES actors from orthodox academic institutions, and it provides external audiences with clear narratives that they can use to categorise and assess the overall normative alignment of NES actors with their own positions. Internally, communicating normative positions takes on an orienting function, reminding staff of the overall mission amid the notoriously blurry, dependent, and fluid stream of institutional development. 'Our quality standard breaks down to this: We only want to publish things that we truly believe in.' A normative motivation also serves as a binding glue in the particularly difficult situations of establishing addresses from scratch:

'But then I realised again that I actually wanted to make a difference in the world, not just at university. [...] People told us that this would never work out. But I want it anyway. I don't care, dude. Let's just do it! So we were basically in the right place in life. I couldn't do that now; it wasn't easy spending a year or a year and a half building something up with no money. At the beginning, we didn't have any money at all. Then we had very little. We worked for a very long time for very little money. So we endured precariousness.'

The agility of NES addresses is also reflected in their predominantly hybrid organisational structures. Shared office spaces and distributed working arrangements are commonplace, with team members often working from different locations rather than being co-located in one place. In some cases, however, multiple NES organisations even share the same physical office space, further highlighting the inter-field-specific hybridity. At the same time, official addresses listed on websites and social media profiles are strategically located close to centres of power, particularly in Berlin, to enhance political accessibility and symbolic legitimacy (see Table 1).

Overall, the process of establishing agile addresses is dynamic and iterative, enabling NES actors to create, stabilise, and adapt their organisational presence in a volatile and contested epistemic space. These addresses must fulfil multiple, sometimes contradictory, functions: they must be formal enough to be taken seriously but also flexible enough to navigate shifting alliances and discourses. They must be normatively clear without being dogmatic and agile without appearing erratic. This agility facilitates the transversal flow of ideas, actors and practices, forming the core infrastructure of knowledge production in the NES. Ultimately, the address itself becomes a boundary object — a material and symbolic interface that mediates between fields, audiences and logics of legitimacy.

3.2 Orienting towards impact

A second defining aspect of the NES knowledge production model could be reconstructed with regard to its underlying, orienting vector. NES organisations have a strong focus on societal and political impact, which significantly influences their knowledge production practices. The underlying ambition of knowledge production is therefore to generate tangible change, as reflected in theories of change, assessment criteria and financing models.

‘How do we overcome the knowledge-action gap? How can we ensure that the papers are actually put into practice? Ultimately, we took these wonderful visions of how things could be with this new economic thinking and, together with politicians, turned them into feasible, implementable solutions.’

This impact orientation is reinforced through ‘theories of change’ developed by NES organisations. These theories vary considerably, but they all emphasise political transformation and practical influence: ‘The paradigm shifts we are talking about are not academic but socio-political. In the long term, it is a matter of changing social patterns and paradigms.’ Some NES think tanks, such as *ZOE* and *Dezernat Z*, focus explicitly on top-down policy advocacy, working to influence legislative processes or governmental policy directly. Others, such as *Momentum* and *Bürgerbewegung Finanzwende*, prioritise shaping public discourse and opinion through strategic communications, public engagement and social media presence. Alternatively, organisations such as *NELA*, *Communia* and *Konzeptwerk Neue Ökonomie* emphasise building coalitions and networks among civil society actors and policymakers, leveraging bottom-up collective action for systemic change.

The criteria used to assess success among NES organisations further emphasise this focus on (political) impact. Success is explicitly valued and measured through indicators such as policy changes, influence on political agendas, and the adoption of proposed ideas by key decision-makers and established coalitions. These tangible outcomes are often communicated through narratives and illustrative examples rather than ‘hard’ quantitative metrics: ‘The fact that we are regularly quoted and people want to interview us’ or ‘For me, it’s when I feel that I’ve built up lots of new networks within the project, reached people with certain topics, and perhaps made them think. Then it’s definitely a success for me.’ Similarly, NES TTs routinely highlight practical achievements, such as policy adoption, changes in public opinion or direct influence on legislative proposals, as evidence of their effectiveness. ‘We are now so well established in specific political circles that we call key political players, and they want to talk to us because they know us, and they know we do good work. That wasn’t the case at the beginning. Nobody knew us and we were nobodies.’ Furthermore, this success orientation transcends the individual organisation and is reflected in the wider NES spectrum: ‘You can tell that people who haven’t understood these hegemonic struggles are those who are jealous when others in similar positions achieve more quickly. That’s really bad. We’re happy about every new player, even if they don’t exactly follow our line,’ and ‘We know that we cannot independently initiate or provide lasting impetus for debate. But if this comes from different directions at the same time, then we will have achieved our goal.’

The financing structure of NES organisations significantly contributes to their pronounced impact orientation. Predominantly reliant on project-based funding (see figure 2), NES organisations have limited core financial support. ‘The problem with German funders, from whom we are particularly dependent, is that they hardly, if at all, support core funding.’ Such funding arrangements favour outcomes-based evaluations and require clear demonstrations of tangible impact to satisfy the expectations of funders and secure future financing. ‘This means that we work in a wide variety of project contexts, both as contractors and as grant or funding recipients from foundations and similar

organisations. That's why our core instrument is the policy brief study, or something similar — the publication that we then try to publicise in various ways, through traditional public relations work or our networking activities.' For some organisations, these demands threaten the way the organisation works, both operationally and normatively:

'These funds mostly come from a position of mistrust and are based on linear thinking. They need to know what happens and when. You have to prove that it happened. These demands do not align with the needs of system change work, which requires flexibility, adaptability and the ability to seize opportunities. Of course, I have an idea of what I want to do this year, next year and the year after. But I can also say that, in three months' time, things will have changed completely. So, if I then have a systemic flow of energy that always makes me pretend that I can plan, it will tear apart the people who work in these organizations.'

Whether embraced or not, the production of knowledge within NES is strategically packaged and tailored not only to the needs of target audiences but also designed meticulously to fulfil reporting requirements and demonstrate measurable impacts.

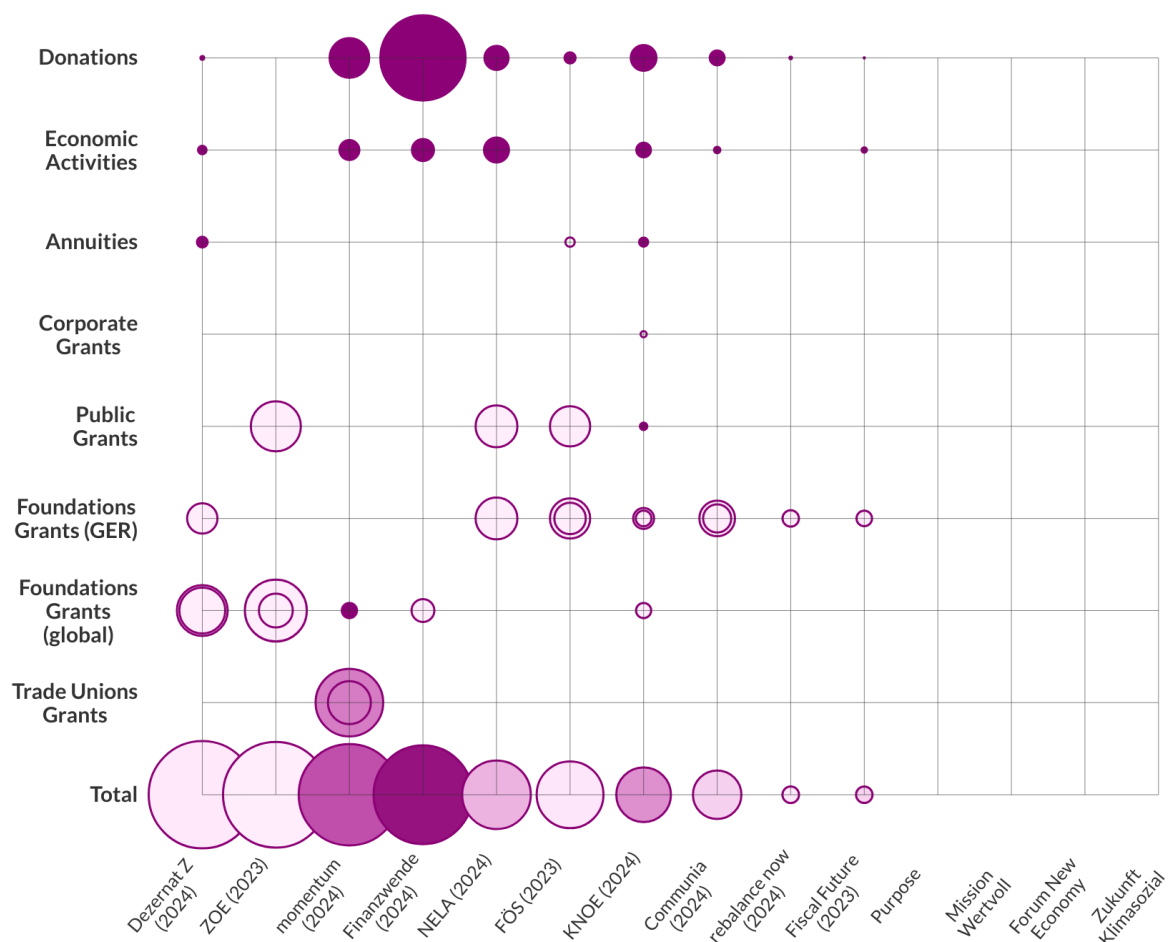


Figure 2: Financing structure within the NES. Per annum, 2023 or 2024, depending on data availability. Bubble opacity reflects core (●) or project-based (○) type of funding. Dezernat Zukunft total 2024: €2,491,475; Fiscal Future total 2023: €59,017.

In conclusion, the impact orientation of NES organisations profoundly shapes their operational logic, success criteria and financial strategies. By prioritising practical influence and measurable societal change over academic reputation or theoretical contributions, NES actors closely align their activities

with their normative ambitions, demonstrating a clear and strategic commitment to transformative outcomes.

3.3 Organising (for) transversality

This section addresses the capability and *modus operandi* that are central to the NES knowledge production model: organising for transversality. In this context, transversality is understood as the strategic and continuous process of creating, sustaining and expanding connections across distinct societal fields, institutional logics and diverse audiences. It involves integrating diverse demands, resources and epistemic inputs from various fields into NES organisations and targeted outreach tailored to specific external audiences. This capability is closely linked to a specific concept, which we call connect-ability (in German: *Anschlussfähigkeit*). Connect-ability denotes both a disposition — that is, the ability to be recognised, addressed and engaged with by actors from different institutional contexts — and the active practice of cultivating such engagements strategically. In this sense, connect-ability is not a fixed trait but rather a continuously enacted and reflexively maintained capability. It unfolds across multiple dimensions: linguistic fluency across epistemic and political registers; the tactical design of communicative formats; the flexible structuring of institutional arrangements; and the situational calibration of knowledge products and narratives. Together, these elements form the performative infrastructure through which language use, epistemic framing, organisational form, and outreach strategy appear as interconnected layers of a single organisational challenge: how to produce and maintain connectivity in volatile and fragmented environments. Within the NES, this capacity emerges as a distinctive organisational asset and the key to navigating, and potentially reshaping, the boundaries of economic knowledge production marked by both the result and the process of an ‘epistemological bricolage’ (Bandola-Gill 2023).

This transversal mode of operation is essential for navigating and managing the complexities and opportunities inherent in a boundary-spanning environment. ‘We fundamentally see ourselves as a transsectoral organisation that can build bridges. Science communication is a dialogue that builds bridges.’ Or:

‘If paradigms do indeed transgress social boundaries, then it is clear that one should also work across these boundaries. This, in turn, led us to make the following strategic decision from the outset: We see ourselves more as a platform than as activists.’

When organising transversality, an archetypal practice is convening, which involves bringing together diverse actors and organisations in a systematic way. Convening can take many different forms, such as semi-public strategy workshops, regular online meetings, closed-door sessions with select invitees and large-scale public conferences: ‘We also organise event formats ranging from conferences to webinars to parliamentary breakfasts, and so on.’ These gatherings are often organised around vague topics, encouraging participation from individuals with different backgrounds, skills, and viewpoints.

‘The catalyst for setting up this congress was the idea of bringing together politically active people from civil society and academia without any specific purpose, i.e., not with the aim of getting them to agree on anything. Yes, but they should come together if they are working on similar topics. They should get to know each other. They should simply have a space.’

Such events are designed to operate free from conventional field constraints, thus providing an inspiring and productive environment characterised by openness, experimentation and innovation. Some think tanks even describe themselves as ‘a field of experimentation’. Participants often value

these settings as uniquely liberating and enabling, fostering rich exchanges of ideas and collaboration across typical institutional hierarchies and boundaries.

Furthermore, organising (for) transversality in the NES ecosystem involves strategically tailoring communication and actions to effectively resonate with diverse external stakeholders. NES TTs excel at mastering and anticipating the communicative norms, jargon and pre-linguistic routines of their target audiences, adapting their language and strategies accordingly. 'Above all, in the wider landscape, we are perceived as players who can provide this translation service to diverse target groups effectively.' This ability to speak many tongues is particularly crucial for organisations engaged in agenda-setting, as it allows them to explore and exploit discursive opportunities and performative spaces effectively. 'We proactively try to speak a language, use forms, and ask questions that are ultimately useful for a state secretary or a member of parliament.' In this sense, digital platforms and digital forms of communication in general represent significant and relatively untapped opportunities within established fields such as academia and politics. 'We did this primarily via Instagram, reaching out to young people on Twitter to establish a presence on Econ Twitter and get on the radar of journalists and academics.' NES TTs are often staffed by young, digitally savvy individuals, able to use these channels effectively to reach and engage with audiences that have been overlooked by traditional economic policy advisory. This strategic digital outreach not only broadens their audience base but also provides an accessible entry point for impactful communication. However, there are serious risks that need to be managed carefully: 'It is also true, of course, that a social media audience requires exaggerated wording and presentation to a certain degree, which sometimes conflicts with the more serious approach of think tanks.'

To secure target-group-specific communication, demand scanning and engagement NES organisations actively interpret and anticipate the needs, interests and expectations of their target groups and regularly involve stakeholders directly in the development and refinement of knowledge products and engagement formats.

'Apart from co-creative workshops with policymakers, we often carry out visibility impact analyses. This involves assessing which policy tools are most likely to be implemented and, at the same time, have the greatest impact depending on the current needs. So, for example, you develop a user-centred product, meaning that the product you develop isn't just random stuff that nobody needs; rather, you involve the user in the development process'.

This participatory approach ensures that outputs closely align with stakeholder preferences, enhancing their legitimacy and uptake. It creates feedback loops that further refine the think tanks' strategies, thereby reinforcing their capacity to remain responsive to changing societal and political environments. At the same time, there are challenges associated:

'One of our first projects was a disaster. The content was excellent. We brought together around 30 scientists and practitioners. Our task was to rethink the economy and society for the post-corona era. We distilled 14 very concrete ideas from these discussions and summarised them in concise one-page documents. We wrote a short introduction and ended up with a 20-page document, which we took to various people in the political arena. However, it completely fizzled out — politicians couldn't do anything with it. This came as a surprise, but it was also a valuable lesson. Today, we consistently consider the boundaries within which administration and politics operate, as well as the boundaries within which they can think and act. Previously, we had not considered these boundaries, and all the ideas we developed and promoted were outside the scope of action of these actors.'

Organising (for) transversality thus involves creating precise, applicable knowledge packages tailored to target audiences. These packages are carefully crafted as ready-to-use tools, such as legal opinions that support legislative initiatives, policy reports that legitimise political actions, and strategically timed workshops that bring together the right people to generate impactful results. This form of applicable, toolified knowledge exemplifies the NES commitment to practical and immediate relevance.

Visual branding, web presence and corporate identity are additional tools through which NES think tanks can establish external connections. They are designed to align with the expectations and preferences of their target audience, making it easier to accept radical economic ideas such as post-growth strategies. Presenting innovative economic concepts in a professional, agile and approachable manner significantly enhances the legitimacy and persuasive potential of NES organisations.



Figure 3: Examples of the visual communication on the websites for Forum New Economy, Communia, Mission Wertvoll, and ZOE Institute, respectively.

3.4 Strategic deployment of personnel

The successful management of transversality fundamentally depends on the strategic deployment of personnel. Human resources within NES organisations must embody a diverse and complementary set of skills, knowledge and institutional affiliations. Central to the organisation of

transversality are individuals who perform connect-ability — individuals capable of understanding, translating and integrating diverse epistemic and normative languages from multiple societal fields. Especially management levels in NES organisations typically consist of personnel experienced in navigating between distinct institutional contexts. One example is *Mission Wertvoll*, which has been led since 2024 by political economist Maja Göpel, entrepreneur and consultant David Wortmann, and cinematographer Lars Jessen. In other cases, connectivity is concentrated in a single individual through a professional biography characterised by boundary-crossing.

In addition to (1) management staff, NES organisations strategically incorporate (2) administrative staff, who handle operational and logistical tasks, (3) academic personnel, who ensure the organisations' outputs have a rigorous evidential basis, as well as (4) high-profile 'stars' or 'starlets' drawn from academia, politics, civil society and business. Their involvement enhances the visibility and credibility of NES organisations. These individuals lend legitimacy and facilitate broader networking opportunities, which are crucial for the organisations' strategic positioning and effectiveness. Figure 3 shows the number of individuals involved in each of the four categories, distinguishing between in-house and affiliated personnel. Personnel arrangements vary significantly depending on organisational objectives, resources and target impacts. For instance, organisations focused on media-driven public advocacy campaigns, such as *Bürgerbewegung Finanzwende* or the Vienna-based *Momentum*, invest heavily in public relations staff and maintain extensive advisory boards comprising prominent public figures from various fields in Germany and Austria. Conversely, organisations focusing on evidence-based policy advice, such as *Dezernat Zukunft*, prioritise hiring individuals with academic training and cultivate extensive networks of fellows with robust international scholarly credentials. These tailored personnel configurations ensure that NES organisations can remain agile, responsive and impactful against the backdrop of their overall 'theories of change'.

	Group (1)								Group (2)				Group (3)				Group (4)																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																													
	Management (with PhD)				Administrative Staff				Public Relations				Academic Staff (senior)				Academic Staff (medium)				Academic Staff (junior)				TOTAL STAFF				Advisory board (academic)				Fellows (academic with PhD)				Fellows (academic)				Advisory board (political)				Fellows (political)				Advisory board (business)				Fellows (business)				Advisory board (NGO)				Fellows (NGO)				Advisory board (activist)				TOTAL NON-STAFF				TOTAL																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																					
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Figure 4: Number of in-house (green) and affiliated (blue) personnel of NES Think Tanks, clustered along seniority, background, and functions, and groups (1)-(4) as of August 2024.

NES organisations generally adopt a transversal rather than adversarial stance towards potential competitors or ideological opponents, at least in the public domain. Notable exceptions to this include *Momentum*, *Bürgerbewegung Finanzwende*, *Rebalance Now*, *Fiscal Future* and *Konzeptwerk Neue Ökonomie*. A transversal orientation prioritises broad networking efforts aimed at continuously establishing and maintaining cross-field connections, even beyond the NES borders. ‘That’s why I would say we don’t have any opponents. That would also be contrary to our approach, which is to try to be a constructive voice for new economic practices and opportunities for socio-ecological transformation.’ NES TTs thus function as dynamic and inclusive nodes within expanding networks, continually adapting and extending their relational configurations to achieve strategic objectives. In some cases, this highly pragmatic approach transcends epistemic orientations: ‘That means we didn’t really focus so much on the content itself, but rather on the networks and the people we’re actually addressing with it’. Notably, there is very little reflection on neoliberal think tanks in the German-speaking world, nor any operational alignment with their activities and campaigns.⁵

Characteristic of all features of NES discussed so far is its pervasive experimentalism. In the absence of predefined strategic blueprints, NES organisations are constantly exploring and testing new combinations and configurations of resources, strategies, methodologies and deployment of personnel. This experimental ethos manifests itself in various formats, including traditional policy briefs, targeted workshops, social media campaigns, real-world laboratories and informal networking events. These formats are not fixed but are adapted according to the audience, funding requirements, and so on. Over time, this leads to an expansion of the toolkit within the NES sandbox, as well as the knowledge of when and how to use each tool. This ongoing experimentation ensures that NES interventions remain relevant and innovative and are capable of effectively navigating and influencing complex, multifaceted policy landscapes.

4. NES: on the role of and repercussions on science

Science and scientificity play an important role for all of the actors examined, insofar as they understand their respective knowledge work as ‘evidence-based’ or ‘scientifically based’. In this respect, the integration of knowledge resources from classical scientific knowledge production is the rule, which is also indicated by the integration of scientists into the in-house staff or the supervisory bodies and fellowship programmes of NES TTs. However, scientificity is not an end in itself of one’s own knowledge production but is rather integrated due to its discursive authority in daily, boundary-spanning work. Scientificity thus appears to be a means to the central end of generating impact. One interviewee put it bluntly:

‘We have a political agenda. We want a world that is socially and environmentally just and a democratic economy. That’s why we do science. We only conduct open-ended research if we want to learn something. If we want to make an argument, we use scientific evidence

⁵ This is probably due to the less important role of (neoliberal) TTs in the overall economic advisory process in Germany when compared, for instance, to the US (Beyer et al. 2017). If at all, intellectual ‘adversaries’ are reflected not in TTs but in mainstream economists.

accordingly. That's why we say we have a fairly thorough, yet instrumental, relationship with science.'

NES TTs strategically leverage scientific legitimacy to bolster the persuasiveness of their arguments and improve their reception without rigidly adhering to academic procedural norms. This can be seen in the criteria by which NES TTs evaluate their own work: indicators of success inherent to science, such as academic impact factors, play no role here. Instead of being evaluated solely through traditional academic metrics, knowledge in NES contexts is primarily assessed on its ability to deliver tangible social and political outcomes.

'We publish differently. By publishing, I don't just mean our written papers; I also mean the way we present our work to the public. We consciously try to use language and forms that are useful to a secretary of state or a member of parliament. That's simply different from writing papers that are primarily intended to be relevant to other scientists.'

This knowledge production explicitly aligns with the operational logics and expectations of specific target audiences, such as policymakers, bureaucracies, civil society groups and the general public. Consequently, attributes such as clarity, accessibility, applicability and immediate relevance are paramount. Empirical data and statistical analyses that are perceived as undisputed and easy to communicate are particularly valuable due to their direct and practical relevance to policy discussions.

NES actors emphasise that the traditional model of simply handing over 'finished' expert knowledge, as exemplified by established institutions such as the German Council of Economic Experts (*SVR Wirtschaft*), is insufficient. Instead, knowledge must be carefully adapted to the reception dynamics and needs of its intended recipients, and engagement with these dynamics must be continuous. This is why the concept of 'science communication' was emphasised in many of the interviews conducted. As outlined in Section 3.3, this often involves collaborative processes of knowledge production and co-creation to ensure that outputs effectively resonate with stakeholders and enhance their practical impact and uptake. Such participatory approaches also foster the deeper integration of NES-produced knowledge into the workflows and decision-making processes of target systems.

Explicit normative transparency complements this approach, serving as both a method of institutional honesty and a proactive defence mechanism against critique. By openly acknowledging and articulating their normative positions, NES actors contrast themselves with mainstream economic institutions, which they view as equally normative but less forthcoming about their underlying value assumptions: 'Mainstream economists often deny the normativity of every cognitive process, yet they make all sorts of morally-laden statements in public debates [...] One answer may be radical openness about one's normativity'.

In terms of its relationship with traditional academic economics, the NES ecosystem adopts a highly pragmatic stance. Due to its strong historical ties with market liberal economic policy, academic economics, and Germany-based scientists and institutes in particular, it is viewed critically and adopted sparingly within the NES. However, NES actors demonstrate pragmatic flexibility by selectively incorporating mainstream German economic scholarship when it is beneficial to their political objectives. 'After all, we are looking for new answers. We are always trying to be very constructive and practical. For instance, when it comes to inequality, we don't ask which schools of thought exist. But how can it be reduced? To put it provocatively, I don't really care which school someone comes from, as long as they present me with a convincing concept and model.' To preserve broad-based appeal and avoid unnecessary polarisation or marginalisation, NES actors deliberately steer clear of academic debates framed around specific economic schools or paradigms.

Simultaneously, they circumvent the rigidity of domestic economic discourse by engaging with international, predominantly Anglo-Saxon economic scholarship. NES organisations strategically leverage the credibility and visibility of prominent international public intellectuals such as Mariana Mazzucato, Kate Raworth and Tim Jackson. In the case of the Forum New Economy, they even engage Nobel laureates, thereby broadening their intellectual base and enhancing their public legitimacy.

Furthermore, the epistemic base of the NES integrates interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary perspectives, drawing from fields beyond conventional economics, such as sociology, political science, and environmental studies. It also incorporates the knowledge of practitioners, including politicians, entrepreneurs, and citizens (see group 4 in figure 3 again in this regard). The epistemic resources of the NES extend far beyond academic economics and even academia itself. This approach enriches analytical depth and enhances the appeal of their arguments to diverse audiences, thereby increasing their potential impact. Thus, the economy appears to be a multifaceted domain whose inner workings and possible futures are informed by a vast array of experts and expertise.

Indeed, the role of science within the NES appears to represent a significant departure from the traditional academic conventions and economic policy advisory practices observed in the German-speaking world. While it remains an indispensable source of sound knowledge that lends legitimacy to debates and recommendations by NES actors who explicitly embrace evidence and facts, NES actors prioritise practical relevance, strategic adaptability, interdisciplinary synthesis and normative transparency. Despite their heterogeneity, TTs in the NES carefully arrange the role of science to effectively address contemporary societal challenges. This orientation towards solutions for pressing issues contributes to the repositioning of economic knowledge in pursuit of political impact.

5. From NES to New Economics?

The New Economy Space is a highly unruly space, marked by rapid growth and diversification, filled with contradictions and competitions. During the course of this study alone, two new organisations were founded, and the ecosystem continues to expand when other institutional forms such as NGOs, donor institutions, and student associations are included. Several frontrunners have demonstrated that operating at the edges of economic discourse and practice can yield tangible successes. This momentum is partly driven by the mainstream's persistent inability to adapt to contemporary challenges, creating space for alternative approaches. Based on the empirical findings, we are now equipped to rationalise the NES as a comprehensive *dispositif* in the Foucauldian sense — a 'thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, and philosophical, moral, and philanthropic propositions' (Foucault and Gordon, 1980: 194). Understood in this way and adopting a relational ontology embedded in co-productionist understandings of sociotechnical development (Chilvers and Kearnes 2016; Jasanoff 2010; Tyfield 2012), the NES is a 'social innovation', signifying the formation of new relationships between ideas, objects, practices and people, as opposed to established ones (Godin and Vinck 2017). By experimenting with 'new ways of doing' (practices, technologies, and material commitments) and organising (rules, decision-making, modes of governance) economics in political contexts, the NES challenges the production of academic knowledge production in economics—far beyond the dimensions of 'framing' and 'knowing' (Pel et al. 2020: 3). Based on the empirical findings, we are now equipped to compare the two knowledge production models in more detail (see table 2).

	Mainstream (academic) economics	New Economy Space
Main rationale	tested truth	successful impact
Procedure	linear (re-)production of knowledge	orchestration of interesting knowledge bundles
Target audience	peers	depending on TT: politicians, bureaucrats, mediatic publics, civil society
Status of science	self-sufficient	source of discursive authority
Scientificity	mono-disciplinary	multi-paradigmatic
Epistemic structure	paradigmatically aligned	pluralist
modus operandi	rule-based	pragmatic
indicators of success	scientific (h-factor, A-journals, funding, prizes...). Mostly quantitative	depending upon the specific impact to be achieved. Mixed: narrative and quantitative
power architecture	hierarchical	heterarchical
Normativity	implicit or avoided	explicit
Institutional form	University, research institute	Thinktank

Table 2: Comparison of knowledge production models in Mainstream (academic) economics and the New Economy Space, respectively

While the NES has successfully transcended established field boundaries and diversified the range of economic possibilities, it has not yet transformed the targeted systems themselves. The incumbent *dispositif* — its underlying elements and how they interact — remains largely intact. Similarly, this is also true of established academic economics, as outlined in the introduction. Having set out to transform parts of the *economy*, why not also transform its academic base — contemporary *economics* as established in German universities? In fact, the NES's ability to establish itself in the German-speaking area could be seen as 'proof of concept' for a transition towards econo-political impact with new forms and goals. The situation is more complicated, however, when assessed in terms of its push and pull effects. From the perspective of the push effect, the NES does not shy away from pragmatically integrating mainstream research and legitimacy where useful on this journey. This is why we can speak of the contemporary coexistence of knowledge production models, as depicted in the above table. The NES operates as a science-based ecosystem in which scientificity is a cornerstone of its socio-epistemic configuration. However, scientific knowledge is mobilised instrumentally and tailored to the needs of specific audiences. It is also evaluated based on its capacity to generate tangible societal and political impact.

From the perspective of the pull effect, the question arises as to the extent to which dependence on academic knowledge production can be maintained and innovated. So far, and especially in the German-speaking world, the NES has largely relied on the epistemic resources provided by respective (heterodox) research institutions. These institutions are fragile and marginalised compared to those in other countries. While the internationalisation of knowledge inflow is already a reality, this strategy may not be sufficient to compete with established national policy advisory regimes closely linked to academic and disciplinary excellence. This, however, is precisely an area where the eventual and pragmatic symbiosis with mainstream economics could come under pressure in the future. Although the NES has gained momentum and established cross-field links to exert transformative pressure, traditional economic policy advisory might remain unaffected, undermining the efforts orchestrated across fields. In this case, economics may have to be transformed itself, potentially channelling pluralist rationales into these impact arenas and the epistemic underpinnings of its knowledge production.

Thus, as and whenever push and pull factors may meet, this is where epistemic agency would advance from the space between fields into the distinct field of academia itself. The *European Macro Policy Network*, launched by Dezernat Zukunft could be interpreted as a signpost in this direction. Given the mounting pressures on science to resonate more strongly with societal needs and developments, the NES could thus prepare *from the side lane* what numerous attempts to innovate the discipline from within could not achieve before. The NES's need and potential to transform economics itself will, ultimately, depend on broader developments within academia and, crucially, within economics as a discipline. Macro-trends such as the continued fragmentation of mainstream economics in theoretical and methodological terms, the growing urgency of economic-political challenges, and the NES's pragmatic stance towards the mainstream may already foreshadow emerging 'weird connections' in economic knowledge production and diffusion under the auspices of a renewed societal resonance.

Given the increasing pressure on science to demonstrate societal impact and the urgency of addressing grand challenges, it remains an empirically open question whether the NES might yet become a role model for an economics-to-be.

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