# Sustainable Futures as Problems of Social Order

## Editorial Introduction

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**Abstract.** Sustainability has become a general horizon of political legitimacy, economic justification and moral evaluation, yet its sociological significance remains insufficiently specified. This Special Issue argues that sustainability should be treated not as a specialized environmental topic, nor as a managerial language of policy adjustment, but as a problem of social order under ecological constraint. Recent scholarship have shown that sustainability is contested, future-oriented, institutionally mediated and normatively charged. The contribution of this special issue lies in conceptualizing sustainability by emphasizing four dimensions usually analyzed separately: Solidarity, collective action, money and imagination. The articles combine theoretical concepts with empirical case studies and demonstrate how sustainability can be theoretically conceptualized in sociology. Sustainable futures, we argue, are struggles over who counts, how common goals are reached, what is institutionally valued and which futures become credible enough to organize present action. This framework reconnects theory, empirical inquiry and reflexive normativity.

**Keywords:** sustainability; sociological theory; solidarity; coordination; money; imagined futures; localism; ecological crises

## 1 Introduction

Societies are more aware than ever of the environmental consequences of their economic and social life, yet they continue to cling to institutions that hinder appropriate policy responses and perpetuate social inequalities. This gap between knowledge and action is not simply a policy failure. It is a problem of social order. The question is how obligations are delimited, how short-term interests are stabilized, how infrastructures reward some futures over others, and why even widely acknowledged dangers fail to reorganize collective priorities (Beckert 2024; Diekmann 2024; Richardson et al. 2023). Sustainability has become the dominant language for naming this predicament, but the spread of the term has not produced

much conceptual effort. Governments invoke it to legitimate industrial policy and infrastructure spending. Corporations translate it into reporting standards, disclosure regimes, reputational claims and markets to define particular segments. Municipalities mobilize it in transport and urban planning. Social movements deploy it in struggles over climate justice, energy democracy, food systems and everyday life. Its remarkable diffusion has instead revealed its conflictual character. Sustainability now names a field of competing projects rather than a shared destination. In one register, it promises a greener version of modernization through innovation, efficiency and market coordination. In another, it names a more demanding transformation of social and economic institutions. In yet another, it becomes a language of control, emergency and strategic state steering.

Viewed from a sociological perspective, the concept of sustainability is highly ambiguous, prompting the sociological question of whether this ambiguity is rooted in systemic factors or results from the processes of transnational policymaking. Most likely, as the articles show, it is both. Authors in the field of Sustainability Research also address the vagueness of the concept of sustainability, although primarily as a practical rather than a theoretical problem. Brinkmann (2023), for example, describes the diversity of sustainability concepts as a result of the varied applications and multiple policy definitions since the 1980s, the different practical approaches (small changes versus foundational societal change), the differing conditions in the Global South and Global North, and the various organizations that have engaged with the topic over the past decades. In a 2017 text, Sighard Neckel, from a sociological perspective, describes a similar problem, noting that sustainability has »diversified in many directions and has been cited to support quite contradictory social agendas« (Neckel 2017: 46). Consequently, »sociology should not regard sustainability as a long-sought solution to every environmental and societal problem. On the contrary, sustainability needs to be approached as itself a problem« (Neckel 2017: 46). Neckel further elaborates on how closely the discussion of sustainability is tied to the capitalist economic system. Sustainability has established itself globally as an »ubiquitous ideal for societal change«, which encompasses the normative idea that »the needs of the present must not be realised at the expense of those who will wish to realise their own needs in the future« (Neckel 2017: 47). This indeterminate normative ideal, in turn, is highly compatible with – and exploitable by – capitalist logics, which is why the concept should not be adopted naively in sociology, but rather discussed in a sober and reflexive manner (Neckel 2017: 47 f.).

In the majority of sociological debates, sustainability primarily functions as a theoretically indeterminate and predominantly normative concept. Sustainability is discussed as a value or a policy goal to be achieved, rather than as a concept of theoretical interest. In this respect, it shares the fate of other concepts that are widely used yet remain theoretically indeterminate.

Even these few notes should show: The plurality and ambiguity of the term sustainability is substantive rather than merely semantic. It reveals that sustainability is not a neutral descriptor but a contested attempt to organize the present considering anticipated ecological limits and socially imagined futures. That contestation is intensified by the fact that ecological disruption is no longer plausibly external to social life. Climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, resource depletion and the destabilization of life-support systems now shape the conditions of future. They affect infrastructures, labor markets, public health, migration, regional inequality, insurance systems, political legitimacy and the temporal horizons through which institutions justify themselves (Richardson et al. 2023; Domingues/Teixeira 2024). The question is no longer whether ecological crisis matters for social life. The question is how societies can manage them and how sociology can conceptualize collective life once ecological constraint becomes constitutive of social order itself.

Contemporary literature has registered this challenge, but it has not yet fully absorbed its theoretical implications. Important advances have been made. Sustainability has been reconceptualized as a conflict among trajectories of modernization, transformation and control rather than as a consensual civic goal (Adloff/Neckel 2019; Adloff 2024). Climate change has increasingly been presented as a core sociological issue rather than a peripheral topic for environmental subfields (Diekmann 2024; Domingues/Teixeira 2024). Sustainability research has moved away from narrow impact management toward relational, regenerative and social-ecological understandings of reproduction over time (Ostrom 2009; West et al. 2020; Tàbara 2023). Research on solidarity, prosociality and collective action has reopened the question of how obligations extend beyond bounded communities under conditions of global interdependence (Prainsack/Buyx 2017; Simpson/Willer 2015; Bazzani 2023; 2024; 2025). Economic sociology and critical monetary scholarship have also shown that money is an important means and vehicle of transformation (Ingham 2004; Braun 2016; Caliskan 2020).

Yet these advances remain fragmented. Given these circumstances, it seems worthwhile to explore the theoretical foundations of the concept of sustainability in greater depth. The problem is not a shortage of good scholarship. It is the absence of a debate on how to link and develop sociological research. We think that such developments should speak to the main dimensions through which sustainable futures are socially organized. This special issue helps address and link four questions that should not be analytically separated for too long: Who counts, how collective goals are coordinated, what is valued, and which futures orient present action. The contributions presented here emerged from discussions first developed at the ESA RN09 Economic Sociology mid-term conference, *European economies in transition: On the way to pro-environmental and prosocial economies*, held at the University of Florence on 6–8 September 2023, and were subsequently reworked into a more explicitly theoretical conversation on sustainability, social or-

der and socio-ecological transformation (European Sociological Association Research Network 09 Economic Sociology 2023).

The argument advanced here is that sustainability should be theorized as a problem of social order under ecological constraint. This formulation is meant to shift the analytical center of gravity. The relevant question is not only how to reduce emissions or improve environmental policy. It is how societies organize responsibility, cooperation, valuation and temporality when ecological limits can no longer be indefinitely externalized. Framed in this way, sustainability is not a specialized environmental theme but a site where sociology's core concerns are reopened. It raises questions of solidarity, coordination, money, legitimacy, futurity and social reproduction at once.

The distinct contribution to the debate of this special issue lies less in identifying these features separately than in bringing them into a shared sociological framework structured around four analytically distinct but empirically entangled dimensions of social order: Solidaristic inclusion, cooperation, valuation, and expectation. This framework allows sustainable futures to be analyzed as socially organized rather than as the cumulative effect of policy tools, technological change, or moralized consumption. Sustainable futures are not simply the cumulative effect of policy tools, technological change or moralized consumption. They are organized through institutions and practices that define who bears costs for whom, how cooperative action becomes durable, what forms of labor and contribution are recognized as valuable, and which futures become believable enough to reshape present commitments. Taken together, the contributions assembled in this issue allow these processes to be analyzed as interconnected dimensions of sustainable futures. Diekmann's interview offers a critical-analytical perspective on research into the climate crisis and argues for a clear distinction between the micro, meso, and macro levels in the conceptualization of social problems. Maurer reopens the problem of cooperation beyond markets and hierarchies when it comes to collective action. Barinaga and Massó put money and monetary design at the center of sustainability analysis. Bazzani reconstructs the solidaristic problem of sustainability transitions. Rycombel shows that ecological futures are imagined through local, classed and morally coded forms of environmental imagination. Beckert's interview adds a sociological reflection on capitalism, growth, legitimacy and the limits of climate policy.

The introduction proceeds in eight sections to outline a framework. The next section, section two, reconstructs sustainability as a problem of social order rather than a thematic extension of environmental policy. Section three situates the current debate and identifies the analytical gap this issue addresses. Sections four through seven elaborate the four dimensions of the proposed framework: Solidarity, coordination, valuation and expectation. Section eight discusses the multiple relationships between theory, empirical inquiry and reflexive normativity. The

conclusion formulates a broader research agenda for the sociology of sustainable futures.

## 2 Sustainability as a Problem of Social Order

Treating sustainability as a problem of social order means rejecting the assumption that ecological crisis is external to the organization of society. The old image of nature as a passive background or as a reservoir of inputs and sink for waste has become sociologically untenable. The current ecological crisis is not an external disturbance that social institutions encounter from the outside. It enters directly into the terms on which livelihoods, infrastructures, state strategies and everyday practices are reproduced. Climate impacts intensify regional inequality, reshape energy systems, alter insurance markets, affect mobility and housing, and change the temporal calculus of public and private investment. Ecological crisis thus operates through institutions rather than beside them (Richardson et al. 2023; Domingues / Teixeira 2024).

The planetary-boundaries literature has made this shift visible in a particularly forceful way. Richardson et al. (2023) argue that Earth has moved beyond six of nine planetary boundaries, which implies that modern societies are reproducing themselves by destabilizing conditions on which long-term collective life depends. Sociology need not simply adopt the epistemic language of Earth-system science to see the broader implication. The relevant sociological point is that ecological constraints now shape struggles over distribution, infrastructure, public authority and the legitimacy of growth in ways that can no longer be treated as peripheral. Ecological crisis is therefore not merely a thematic topic added to existing analyses of capitalism, the state or inequality. It changes the terms under which those analyses proceed.

Recent work in environmental sociology and sustainability studies has begun to formulate this more relationally. Tàbara argues that sustainability should be understood not as one fixed definition or one stable end-state, but as a relational and regenerative problem involving the reorganization of social and ecological conditions of collective life over time (Tàbara 2023). West et al. (2020) likewise call for a relational turn in sustainability science because many dominant frameworks continue to reproduce the separation between social and ecological systems that the empirical world increasingly undermines. These interventions matter for sociology because they redirect attention from isolated outcomes toward the institutionalized relations through which societies secure – or fail to secure – their own conditions of reproduction.

A relational understanding of sustainability also makes clear why the concept is irreducibly normative without in and of itself collapsing into moral exhortation. To describe an arrangement as ›sustainable‹ is never simply to register a neutral

fact. It is also to imply judgments about endurance, viability, justice, sacrifice and acceptable futures. The task of sociology is not to remove that normativity, which would be an impossible undertaking anyway. It is to analyze how normative claims are institutionalized, contested and translated into specific projects of shaping the present. Adloff's recent work on post-sustainability is particularly useful here because it shows that sustainability operates as a conflictual framework that condenses divergent projects of modernization, transformation and control rather than as a single social ideal (Adloff 2024; see also Neckel 2017).

A sociologically stronger definition follows from this. Sustainable futures are contested attempts to institutionalize forms of life that can reproduce livelihoods, infrastructures and obligations over time within biophysical constraints while remaining socially and politically legitimate across unequal groups and scales. This definition is demanding by design. It refuses to identify sustainability with lower emissions alone, or with green technology, or with responsible consumption. Sustainability concerns the organization of collective life itself: How burdens are distributed, how cooperation is stabilized, how value is assigned, how time horizons are structured and how legitimacy is produced under ecological constraints.

Once sustainability is understood in this way, the central sociological questions become sharper. Who belongs within the relevant circle of responsibility? How are collective goals coordinated under conditions of uncertainty and conflict? What forms of labor, contribution and livelihood are institutionally valued? How are future risks, benefits and obligations represented and made politically credible? Which organizations, scales and infrastructures mediate between diffuse ecological interdependence and actually existing communities of accountability? These are not secondary questions. They are questions of order in the strongest sociological sense.

This reframing also clarifies why sustainability cannot be reduced to environmental governance. Governance is itself one institutional dimension of a broader problem of social order. The task is to study how social order comes into being and maintains itself through social interaction and manifests in morale and norms, legal rules, institutions, infrastructures, organizations and not at least in money. Ecological disruption interacts with all of these. The issue is therefore not only to govern environmental externalities more effectively. It is to understand how the basic architecture of modern social orders is implicated in the production of unsustainability, in the limited credibility of alternative futures and which social forms and mechanisms work into the direction of more sustainable futures.

## 3 What Current Sociology Has Achieved and What It Still Lacks

Transformation points toward deeper reorganization of production, consumption and social relations (Adloff/Neckel 2019). Another line of research has cen-

tered climate change more explicitly within sociology. Diekmann's provocation – whether climate change has hardly become a topic for sociology at all – matters because it names a disciplinary asymmetry. Sociology has generated extensive research on consumption, inequality, labor, nationalism, migration and risk, but has often treated ecological disruption as external to those domains rather than constitutive of them (Diekmann 2024). Domingues and Teixeira make a similar point by arguing that climate change now belongs to sociology's own province because it transforms the problem of social reproduction and collective futures rather than merely adding one more issue to a crowded agenda (Domingues / Teixeira 2024).

A third cluster of work has shifted sustainability research toward social-ecological systems, regeneration, resilience and institutional adaptation. Ostrom's framework remains decisive because it treats sustainability problems as problems of collective action embedded in social-ecological systems rather than as mere failures of markets or motivations (Ostrom 2009). Tàbara extends this move by emphasizing regenerative capacities and positive tipping points rather than simply impact mitigation (Tàbara 2023). This work has helped move the debate away from purely technocratic or managerial understandings of sustainability.

Yet these advances are still marked by fragmentation. The trajectory literature is strong on future projects and political semantics but often says relatively little about how social order is linked to the overuse of nature. Climate sociology is strong on discipline formation and issue salience, but often less precise about coordination forms and valuation. Commons and collective-action research explain cooperation under certain conditions, but is often less attentive to future imagination, classed culture or the symbolic politics of localism. Monetary and alternative-currency scholarship reveals the institutional structure of money but does not always connect itself to the broader sociology of sustainable futures. Research on ethical consumption and localism is sharp on distinction and culture but less developed on monetary infrastructures or organizational capacity. The empirical object cuts across all these fields, but research and literature often remain separated.

The costs of this fragmentation are analytical rather than merely organizational. A purely cultural account of sustainability does not see infrastructures, rights and institutions. A purely institutional account misses the moral boundaries and imaginaries through which actors interpret transition. A purely economic account ignores solidarity and legitimacy. A purely normative account lacks mechanisms, conflict and constraints. What is still lacking is not another call for complexity, but a more exacting sociological architecture that shows how different dimensions of sustainable futures are co-constituted.

Our special issue brings important questions and perspectives together to initiate a more integrated analytical conversation. It shows that sustainability can be reconstructed around four connected dimensions: Obligation, capacity, valu-

ation and expectation. Obligation concerns who count within the relevant moral and political ›we‹. Capacity concerns how collective goals become achievable and therefore directs attention to coordination forms beyond the market-state binary. Valuation concerns how labor, livelihood, and contribution are institutionally organized and therefore directs attention to money and monetary infrastructures. Expectation concerns how futures become credible enough to orient present action and therefore directs attention to imagination, scale, and the politics of futurity. This four-part formulation does not resolve all problems, but it gives sociology a stronger way of organizing them.

## 4 Solidarity Beyond Bounded Reciprocity

If sustainability is a problem of social order, it is unavoidably also a problem of obligation. Ecological transitions require decisions about who bears costs, who receives benefits, and who is included within the effective circle of responsibility. Bazzani's contribution refuses to treat solidarity as vague moral rhetoric and instead conceptualizes it as patterned prosocial practice. The analytical gain of this move is that it turns solidarity from an evaluative slogan into an observable form of social action in which actors accept some cost or commitment to benefit others under publicly or tacitly shared norms of other-regarding conduct (Bazzani, in this issue; Diekmann, in this issue; Prainsack/Buyx 2017).

Its relevance for sustainability research lies in the fact that ecological crisis unsettles inherited solidaristic boundaries. Classical sociology, especially Durkheim's distinction between mechanical and organic solidarity, treated solidarity as tied to relatively bounded collectivities defined by likeness or by functional interdependence (Durkheim 1984/[1893]). In the twentieth-century social theory, solidarity remained closely linked to classes, nations, unions, welfare-state publics or territorial communities. Sustainability transitions often do not fit that model. The costs of climate mitigation in wealthy societies may primarily benefit geographically distant populations or future generations. The beneficiaries of lower emissions, ecosystem protection, or just transition policies are frequently absent from direct reciprocal exchange. This is the basis of a distinction between more mutualistic and more outward-oriented solidarities (Bazzani, 2023; 2024; 2025). The special-issue article develops these lines through a mechanism-based account of »innovative solidarities« in Europe's sustainability transitions (Bazzani, in this issue).

What makes the framework sociologically productive is its mechanism-based account of how solidarities emerge, stabilize, and erode. Bazzani does not simply assert that broader solidarities are normatively required. He asks how they are socially generated and stabilized. The mechanisms he highlights – communicative deliberation, moral-economy orientations, shared-risk framing, supportive in-

stitutionalization and boundary-bridging networks – matter because they make solidarity an explanatory rather than merely aspirational concept. This move is consistent with wider sociological research on prosociality, which has shown that cooperation and other-regarding behavior are shaped by norms, institutions, networks, incentives and reputational dynamics rather than by internal dispositions alone (Simpson / Willer 2015). The analytical gain is significant. Solidarity becomes something that can be explained, cultivated, blocked or eroded.

The empirical cases illustrate why solidarity matters. Youth climate mobilization extends obligation across national boundaries and toward future generations. Community energy cooperatives institutionalize shared benefits around decarbonization and local participation. Just-transition coalitions seek to reconcile labor protection with ecological transformation. Disaster mutual aid turns exposure to crisis into practices of support that can at times spill beyond the immediate site of damage. These cases are heterogeneous, but they share one important feature: They attempt to organize prosocial commitment where immediate reciprocity is incomplete or uncertain (Kowasch et al. 2021; Velicu / Barca 2020).

The issue's broader significance lies in how it also refuses to romanticize such expansion. Beckert's interview offers a crucial corrective when it insists that solidarity remains socially bounded and that climate change is sociologically interesting precisely because knowledge of danger does not translate into adequate collective action. One reason is that social obligations remain much stronger where social relationships are already dense and institutionally supported than where beneficiaries are distant or abstract (Beckert 2024; Beckert, in this issue). The global scale of climate change does not by itself generate a cosmopolitan public of obligation. The challenge is therefore not simply moral but organizational and institutional.

If solidarity is necessary but not spontaneously global, then sustainable futures depend on arrangements that can carry solidaristic commitments beyond the narrow range of face-to-face reciprocity. Formal institutions, public narratives, organizations and infrastructures matter because they can stabilize commitments when immediacy fades. Sustainable futures therefore require more than the extension of moral concern in the abstract. They require institutionalized mechanisms by which broad circles of obligation become durable enough to support costly and unequal transition processes (Bazzani, in this issue).

Seen from this angle, solidarity is not a moral supplement to sustainability. It is one of the constitutive dimensions through which sustainable futures become politically credible or remain blocked. The question is not simply whether actors care. It is how care is organized across distance, difference and time. That is a core sociological question.

## 5 Capacity: Coordination Beyond the Market-State Binary

If solidarity concerns obligation, coordination concerns the organization of collective capacity. Maurer's contribution is essential here because it reformulates sustainability as a problem of collective action and asks how more adequate coordination forms can be theorized. Her point of departure is not environmental awareness as such, but the persistent difficulty of restricting the overuse of finite natural resources even when preservation would serve common interests over the long run. She argues that the relevant analytical focus is not merely the market-state divide, but the social forms, institutions and mechanisms through which collective goals become feasible in practice (Maurer, in this issue).

Maurer's theoretical strategy is deliberately cumulative rather than iconoclastic. She does not propose a wholly new theory of sustainability. Instead, she advocates starting from abstract collective-action models and then systematically extending them through insights from new economic sociology, especially social and institutional embeddedness, and through action-based explanation (Maurer 2025; Maurer, in this issue). In doing so, Maurer reconnects sustainability research with explanatory sociology rather than leaving it at the level of institutional preference or normative aspiration. The point is not only to identify desirable alternatives to capitalist coordination. It is to specify when and why such alternatives emerge, how they stabilize, and which mechanisms support or undermine them.

The intervention is directed against two flattened narratives that still structure much sustainability research. In the first, ecological failure is attributed to poor or insufficiently informed individual choices. In the second, sustainability is treated as a policy deficit to be solved by expert design, incentives or regulation. Maurer's article points beyond both. Markets and states remain indispensable, but they do not exhaust the relevant forms of coordination. Cooperative arrangements, commons, community organizations, hybrid public-civic structures and other forms of collective self-organization are not marginal curiosities. They are central empirical and theoretical sites for understanding how sustainable futures may be built.

Research on community energy and cooperative organization points in the same direction. Bauwens, Gotchev and Holstenkamp show that the emergence of wind cooperatives in Europe depends on extremely specific institutional conditions rather than on environmental concern alone (Bauwens et al. 2016). Wierling et al. similarly demonstrate that energy cooperatives have played an important role in the energy transition of several European countries, but their viability is sensitive to public frameworks, organizational capacity and regulatory support (Wierling et al. 2018). These findings support Maurer's broader point: Sustainable coordination does not arise automatically from good intentions. It depends on rules, organizations, trust, monitoring and institutional fit.

The just-transition literature points in the same direction. Velicu and Barca argue that transition discourse can itself reproduce inequality when it abstracts from labor, reproduction and the uneven distribution of costs (Velicu/Barca 2020). Gürtler, Löw Beer and Herberg show that coal phase-out processes involve intense struggles over legitimacy, representation and territorial justice rather than the simple implementation of expert consensus (Gürtler et al. 2021). These studies reinforce the central sociological lesson of Maurer's article: Coordination is not merely technical. It is organized through institutions, conflicts and moral claims.

Maurer's contribution is particularly relevant because it restores coordination as an explanatory object in its own right. Sustainability cannot be explained by obligation alone. Actors may accept wider circles of concern and still fail to coordinate durable collective action under conditions of uncertainty, path dependence and unequal incentives. Nor is coordination only a matter of choosing between market and hierarchy. Alternative forms of organizing the economy must be analyzed through the specific mechanisms that sustain them. This is why Maurer's use of action-based explanation is so important. It provides a bridge between high-level theorizing and empirically grounded accounts of how cooperative institutions actually function.

## 6 Valuation: Money, Credit and the Infrastructures of Social Reproduction

Valuation is the point at which the issue most clearly departs from standard sustainability debates. Sustainability research often focuses on production, consumption, governance or culture while leaving money in the background as a neutral medium. Barinaga and Massó both reject this assumption. Their shared claim is that money is not a transparent instrument that merely facilitates exchange. It is an institutional infrastructure that shapes value, labor, livelihood, rights and future expectations. Thus, sustainability cannot be adequately theorized without examining the organization of money itself (Ingham 2004; Braun 2016; Bazzani 2020; 2022; Barinaga, in this issue; Massó, in this issue; Diekmann, in this issue).

Barinaga's point of departure is a diagnostic claim about the displacement of responsibility in contemporary sustainability discourse. Much public and scholarly discourse assigns responsibility for ecological breakdown to corporations, consumers or workers and then asks those same actors to behave against the institutional imperatives that organize their conduct. This produces what might be called a behavioral paradox. Individuals are urged to reduce consumption, take care of nature or restrain growth-oriented behavior while they remain tied

to infrastructures of money, debt, labor and livelihood that reward the opposite. Barinaga's argument is not that actors lack agency. It is that analyses of sustainability remain incomplete when they leave money absent from the frame (Barinaga, in this issue).

Her central move is to reconnect ecological crisis to the institutional mechanics of money creation. Following post-Keynesian monetary analysis, she emphasizes that in contemporary economies most money is created by commercial banks when they extend loans. The Bank of England's clarification remains decisive here: Bank lending creates deposits; banks do not simply lend out preexisting savings; and the textbook story in which banks passively intermediate between savers and borrowers is misleading (McLeay et al. 2014). Sociologically, the point is that money becomes visible as a dynamic and selective infrastructure rather than as a neutral medium. Credit, collateral, interest and repayment obligations channel activity through specific institutions and expectations. Money is not only a medium of exchange. It is a form of organized social relation.

Barinaga's manuscript extends this point by drawing together the ›money view‹ associated with Mehrling (2011) and the sociological tradition represented by Ingham and Dodd. Money appears as a relational and sociotechnical assemblage, constituted through balance-sheet relationships, accounting practices, material devices and normative priorities (Ingham 2004; Dodd 2014; Barinaga, in this issue). This stronger relational view is important because it dislodges the familiar commodity metaphor according to which money is simply a thing. Once money is understood as an institutional arrangement, its design and governance become open sociological questions.

From here Barinaga develops a more pointed critique of unsustainability. If money is largely created through interest-bearing private bank lending, then the production of money is tied to creditworthiness, asset ownership, profitability expectations and the prioritization of creditor interests. Her claim is that this architecture contributes to inequality and extraction from nature not only because of who gets money, but because of how money comes into being in the first place (Barinaga, in this issue). One need not accept every causal link in maximal form to appreciate theoretical advance. The key point is that sustainability research remains impoverished if it focuses on behavior, carbon accounting or green finance while leaving the fundamental architecture of money creation unexamined.

Barinaga's three empirical cases – Turuta, Vilawatt and Plastic Bank – make this argument tangible. Each links the issuance and distribution of a complementary currency directly to acts of care for nature: Land renewal in the case of Turuta, energy saving in the case of Vilawatt, and the collection of plastic waste in the case of Plastic Bank (Barinaga, in this issue). Their sociological value lies less in whether they can scale seamlessly than in what they reveal about monetary design. These are not merely alternative payment systems. They are prototypes of different tra-

jectories for articulating economic action into environmental care. Each embeds different assumptions about agency, democracy, governance and territoriality.

The governance dimension of Barinaga's analysis is especially important. Turuta is organized through community assemblies and a commons logic. Vilawatt follows a state-led or municipal-civic logic. Plastic Bank follows an entrepreneurial market logic with global ambitions but limited user decision power. These differences matter because they show that the question is not only whether money can be greened, but who decides the rules through which money organizes environmental care. Monetary design is therefore inseparable from political design. In Barinaga's terms, tracing money reveals not only instability and inequality, but the possibility of reclaiming and reorganizing money around different social and ecological priorities (Barinaga, in this issue).

Massó's contribution approaches the problem from a different but complementary angle. Whereas Barinaga foregrounds the politics of money creation and the unsustainability of dominant monetary architectures, Massó foregrounds the relation between money, labor and social inclusion. Her starting point is the naturalization of money as a technical object or neutral instrument. Against this, she treats money as a core infrastructure of social reproduction. Sustainability, in her account, is an institutional question about how monetary arrangements shape what counts as value, which forms of contribution are socially recognized, and how economic coordination is organized over time (Massó, in this issue).

This shift is theoretically important because it relocates sustainability within the sociology of value and labor rather than leaving it at the level of environmental efficiency alone. Massó's article explicitly adopts a relational and regenerative understanding of sustainability, drawing on environmental sociology and socio-ecological systems research. Sustainability is defined not as a matter of impact mitigation alone, but as the capacity of societies to reproduce social and institutional arrangements over time in ways compatible with the biophysical conditions that sustain collective life (Massó, in this issue; Tàbara 2023). This formulation is crucial for her monetary argument, because it implies that value and livelihood cannot be treated as independent from their material conditions.

The centerpiece of the article is the Twin Money proposal. Twin Money is a complementary currency designed to assign value to certified forms of socially valuable labor, including care work, community activities and other non-market practices relevant to social and environmental well-being. Its importance lies less in the immediate practical question of whether an identical model could be implemented tomorrow than in the conceptual move it performs. Monetary issuance is linked not to market exchange or opaque financial operations, but to institutionally recognized contribution to the common good (Massó, in this issue). This directly challenges the conventional assumption that only wage labor or market exchange should anchor monetary recognition.

Massó's argument gains depth by linking this design to Polanyi and Simmel. From Polanyi she takes the idea that labor and money are not ordinary commodities and cannot be fully governed by self-regulating markets without generating degradation and social dislocation (Polanyi 1944). From Simmel she takes the insight that money is a form of abstraction and sociation that expands autonomy while also disconnecting coordination from concrete social relations and material foundations (Simmel 2011/[1900]). The Twin Money proposal can be read as an attempt to re-embed monetary abstraction in socially recognized contribution and collective welfare. Whether one endorses the proposal or not, its sociological significance is undeniable: It forces questions of recognition, inclusion and the organization of social reproduction into the heart of sustainability theory.

Literature both supports and disciplines these arguments. Monetary sociology has long insisted that money is a social relation rather than a neutral veil (Ingham 2004). Braun shows that trust and legitimacy are central to contemporary monetary governance, especially under unconventional central-bank policies (Braun 2016). Caliskan's work on cryptocurrencies similarly demonstrates that digital monies are socio-technical infrastructures and not merely technical instruments (Caliskan 2020). Research on community currencies, however, also warns against easy optimism. Michel and Hudon's systematic review finds that community currencies contribute most consistently to social sustainability, while environmental and economic effects are more limited and difficult to demonstrate (Michel/Hudon 2015).

These cautions are analytically productive. They show that the contribution of Barinaga and Massó is not to claim that alternative monies are sufficient solutions. It is to demonstrate that sustainability theory remains incomplete when it leaves money implicit. Once money is brought into view, the organization of value, labor, livelihood and environmental care can be analyzed at the level of infrastructure rather than only at the level of behavior or policy outputs. This is one of the special issue's strongest achievements.

## 7 Expectation: Imagination, Localism and the Politics of Scale

The fourth dimension concerns expectation: how imagined futures of social transformation become politically and institutionally relevant. Sustainable futures are never only about current institutions. They are also about how actors imagine what can and should exist. This is why the sociology of imagined futures becomes indispensable. Beckert's work remains foundational because it shows how actors orient action under conditions of uncertainty not through secure knowledge of the future, but through fictional expectations that become credible enough to organize present investment and commitment (Beckert 2016; 2020). Economic and political orders are thus future-dependent in a strong sense. They

are sustained by stories, projections and models that make action possible before outcomes are known.

Beckert's interview in this issue brings this insight into direct contact with the climate debate. He emphasizes that climate change is a social and political issue because societies know in principle what would need to change and yet fail to act adequately. He is skeptical that the ecological crisis can be fully resolved within capitalism if growth remains structurally coupled to environmental degradation and if negative externalities cannot be effectively internalized (Beckert 2024; Beckert, in this issue). At the same time, he warns against overextending the concept of imagined futures. Imagination matters for current transformation processes, but it does not substitute for the analysis of structural constraints, profitability, path dependency and institutional resistance.

The caution is well placed, since sustainability discourse often slips into one of two weak positions. In the first, future imaginaries are treated as decorative additions to serious political economy. In the second, they are treated as if sufficiently attractive images of green life could by themselves dissolve institutional inertia. Beckert refuses both moves. Imagined futures matter because actors orient themselves through them, but they matter within structured fields of power and constraint. That makes imagination neither epiphenomenal nor sovereign.

Rycombel's article provides the strongest empirical contribution to this line of analysis. Based on ethnographic research and interviews with activists in Monnaie Léman and the Brixton Pound, she examines how leaders of local currency initiatives envision sustainable futures through localism (Rycombel, in this issue). Her cases are analytically valuable because they do not simply express environmental concern. They connect ecological aspirations to community, ethical consumption, short supply chains, local identity, economic education and aestheticized alternatives to impersonal global capitalism.

A particularly useful distinction in the article is that between short-term expectations and longer-term imaginaries. In the nearer horizon, activists emphasize ethical local consumption, stronger local communities, awareness of how monetary systems drive overconsumption and support for ecological or socially grounded local businesses. At a more distant horizon, they imagine localized economies with limited international trade, small businesses, compact towns, walking and cycling infrastructures, and forms of food provisioning tied to nearby localities and community gardens (Rycombel, in this issue). This distinction helps specify what sociologists often treat too vaguely under the heading of ›imaginaries‹. Some futures are proximate, pragmatic and organizationally plausible. Others function more as aspirational horizons or moral signposts.

Rycombel's second major contribution is to show that localism is not simply an environmental doctrine. In both cases, community rather than direct pro-environmentalism forms the core of localism. The belief is that denser interpersonal and civic bonds foster responsibility, and that responsibility then extends to the

natural environment. This helps explain why localist projects can remain compelling even when their environmental effects are uncertain. Localism answers a wider moral and cultural dissatisfaction with distant ownership, opaque production chains and impersonal exchange. Environmentalism is partially derived from that larger critique rather than standing alone.

The article also makes a sharper and more critical point. These localist ecological imaginaries are classed. Rycombel explicitly interprets them through eco-habitus and the hipster economy. Local currencies are embedded in forms of ethical consumption often associated with actors possessing significant cultural capital and with nostalgic attachments to small, family-like businesses and authentic local exchange. Gerosa's recent work on the hipster economy provides a broader framework for this diagnosis by showing how authenticity, craft, locality and morally meaningful consumption have become central organizing principles of late-modern capitalism, but also sites of distinction, gentrification and unequal access (Gerosa 2024). Rycombel's intervention matters because it brings these classed dynamics into the analysis of environmental imagination itself.

This critical move is important for the issue as a whole. It prevents sustainability from being romanticized at the level of local alternatives. Rycombel shows that activists often move quickly from a critique of global industrial capitalism to an affirmation of the local as such. Yet local scale is not inherently just or ecologically superior. It is politically and morally produced. It can generate solidarity, visibility and care, but it can also reproduce exclusion, nostalgia and narrow horizons of concern. The article is therefore not simply a case study of local currencies. It is a contribution to the sociology of scale, class and environmental imagination.

Read together, Beckert and Rycombel clarify the role of expectation in sustainable futures. Futures matter because they orient current action, but they do not operate freely. Their plausibility depends on institutions, infrastructures, class positions and political economies of scale. Imagination is necessary, but insufficient. A sociology of sustainability must therefore analyze not only whether attractive futures are imagined, but who imagines them, from what position, through which institutional media, and with what capacity to generalize them beyond niche milieux.

## 8 Theory, Empirical Inquiry and the Reflexive Normativity of Sustainability

A final contribution of the special issue lies in how it organizes the relation between theory and empirical inquiry. Climate change and questions of sustainability represent the most pressing societal challenges of the 21st century. We have discussed the diversity and plurality of sustainability research before. An unin-

tended consequence of this thriving and diverse field of research is that it gives rise to epistemological and theoretical problems, as its theoretical and normative foundations are often not clearly defined. Sustainability therefore is the kind of object that easily produces two opposite failures. One is a moralizing perspective, in which sustainability appears as an unquestioned good and analysis collapses into advocacy. The other is empirical research that is detached from theory; case studies accumulate without resulting in a more comprehensive conceptual framework. This Special Issue avoids both by treating theory and empirical work as recursively related and interwoven rather than opposed.

Maurer's article uses action-based explanation to refine theory through outlining classes of coordination problems and how they can be dealt with in social interaction. Bazzani uses mechanism-based analysis to move from observed solidaristic practices toward a broader account of how obligation can be expanded under conditions of global interdependence. Barinaga and Massó deploy conceptual arguments grounded in concrete monetary arrangements and institutional design. Rycombel shows how ethnography can modify theoretical accounts of imagination, localism and class. None of these pieces treats theory as ornamental or empirics as merely illustrative. The relation is iterative. The point is consequential because sustainability is internally normative. It always implies judgments about what should endure, what should change, which costs are legitimate and what kinds of future remain worth striving for. The task is therefore not to purge normativity. It is to analyze how normative claims are built into institutions, categories and projects of transformation. This is also why the issue's engagement with theoretical sociology is so important: Sustainability becomes a valid object of general theory not because it is morally urgent, but because it condenses questions of order, value, conflict, temporal orientation and institutional design in especially visible form.

While the coexistence of empirical evidence and theory is evident in all articles, it is particularly evident and discussed in detail in the interview with Andreas Diekmann. Diekmann places particular emphasis on the link between empirical findings and theory and discusses the limitations of individualistic experiments as well as the explanatory power of grand theories. Drawing on his book »Climate Crisis« (Diekmann 2024), he describes the mitigation of climate change as a public good, which gives rise to numerous and complex coordination problems. Using a synthesis of recent studies and theoretical conclusions, Diekmann highlights the complexity and multifaceted nature of the global climate crisis. In doing so, he impressively succeeds in providing a sociological explanation for both the failures and successes of concrete climate policies. His assessment of the research landscape offers a critical reflection on the burden placed on individuals taking responsibility for climate change, as well as on overly simplified causal relationships that stem from a lack of theoretical foundation. To give just one example from the interview: Referring to the example of ›nudge research‹, Diekmann explains how

disastrous it can be to forego replication and a theoretically precise formulation of hypotheses. Accordingly, effects of nudging have been massively overestimated in relation to environmental behavior and climate policy while systemic and structural factors have been underestimated. According to Diekmann, this could have been avoided by taking the three-level model – micro, meso, and macro levels – seriously. Diekmann promotes a sociology that accurately describes macro-level events and interconnects them with individual actions. Linking people's actions to social context helps to explain intended and, above all, unintended consequences (Diekmann, in this issue).

## 9 Conclusion

The central argument of this introduction has been that sustainability should be treated as a problem of social order under ecological constraint. The value of this reframing lies in displacing two inadequate tendencies. The first is the technocratic narrowing of sustainability to policy instruments, managerial targets and efficiency gains. The second is the moral inflation of sustainability into a generic language of virtue detached from institutions, infrastructures and conflict. A stronger sociological approach begins from the fact that ecological crisis now enters directly into the terms on which collective life is reproduced. Sustainability therefore concerns obligation, coordination, valuation and expectation before it concerns any specific instrument of environmental governance.

The special issue introduced here advances that approach by bringing together contributions that illuminate each of these dimensions while remaining analytically connected. Bazzani reconstructs the solidaristic problem of ecological transition. Maurer reconstructs the problem of coordination beyond the market-state binary. Barinaga and Massó reconstruct the monetary and valuation infrastructures through which sustainable or unsustainable orders are reproduced. Rycombel reconstructs the classed and localist imaginaries through which ecological futures are envisioned. Diekmann focuses on norms as a means to enhance sustainability goals and politics. Beckert re-situates these themes in relation to capitalism, growth, legitimacy and structural constraint. The issue's distinctive contribution lies in showing that these are not separate subfields but interdependent dimensions of sustainable futures. What emerges most clearly is the need to link theory to practice and to reconnect empirical research to theory.

The framework developed here also points toward a broader research agenda. Sociology needs more comparative work on solidarities that extend beyond bounded reciprocity; more precise explanations of how cooperative coordination forms emerge and endure; deeper integration of money and monetary governance into sustainability research; stronger analysis of how imagined futures are classed, territorialized and institutionalized; and more systematic attention

to how ecological transition intersects with social reproduction, labor, care and livelihood. These priorities are not additions to existing theory from the outside. They are ways of renewing the discipline's own conceptual resources.

Sustainability should therefore no longer be treated as a secondary thematic specialization or as a policy issue external to sociology. It is one of the sites where sociology's central concepts are being tested most sharply. To theorize sustainability adequately is to theorize how collective life is organized when ecological limits, unequal vulnerability and future uncertainty can no longer be displaced outside the social order. That is the stronger claim made possible by this special issue and by the discussions from which it emerged.

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