How we sold our future

Interview with Jens Beckert

Conducted by Andrea Maurer[1]

Andrea Maurer: Thank you for taking time for this interview. The occasion is a special issue on the topic of ›Theorizing Sustainability in Sociology‹, which has emerged from several conferences of the European Network of Economic Sociology on Sustainability. Last year, you presented a much-acclaimed book on realistic climate policy. What was the reason for this book?

Jens Beckert: Two points are important. First, climate change is a social and a political issue, not only an ecological problem. Second, it is also a topic of keen sociological interest. This follows from a simple observation. We see dramatic consequences of climate change worldwide and know, in principle, what changes would be needed to counter it effectively, yet far too little is actually done. This opens up an interesting sociological question. Why are societies so hesitant to take action, despite knowing about the dangers? This question is also the starting point of my book.

Andrea Maurer: That's an exciting point. We are also observing intensified debates on sustainability are currently unfolding in sociology. In this context, the discussion centres on whether more sustainability requires a fundamental transformation of the economic system or whether capitalism can release immanent forces for this. So, is green capitalism possible?

Jens Beckert: In principle, the transformation of energy systems could take place within the capitalist economic order. We are talking about the introduction of new technologies and the transformation of large infrastructures, and the history of capitalism offers many examples of such transformations. To be sure, this would not be an easy task, neither technologically nor economically or politically. At present, the energy sector and downstream industries generate high profits from business models based on the emission of greenhouse gases. These industries defend such models and often resist transformation. Still, one can imagine a capitalist economy that runs on renewable energy in the future.

1 This interview was conducted in November 2025.

What makes me sceptical about the notion of green capitalism lies elsewhere. Protecting nature would require economic activities to generate far fewer negative externalities for ecological systems. If we assume that the ecological crisis can be resolved within the capitalist economic order, this presupposes that environmental costs that have been externalized so far, can be effectively internalized.

This, however, comes into tension with the growth logic inherent in capitalism. Global warming is only one dimension of a broader ecological crisis, which also includes environmental pollution, ocean acidification, and biodiversity loss. This broader constellation is captured by the concept of planetary boundaries, which points to natural limits in the use of the planet's resources. These limits imply ecological constraints on economic growth, at least as long as growth remains structurally linked to environmental degradation.

Historically, economic growth has been associated with increasing resource use, despite efficiency gains and ideas such as the circular economy. As long as this connection persists, the fundamental question arises of whether growth can be effectively limited within a capitalist economic order. Can capitalism function under conditions of stagnating or declining economic output? I am sceptical. If this assessment is correct, addressing the ecological crisis would require transforming key elements of the current economic system —most importantly, the regime of property rights. Unfortunately, there is no painless path toward a sustainable economy.

Andrea Maurer: Are there typical ideas within the capitalist economic system that shape the handling of natural resources? You have developed the concept of imagined futures in other works, and so, I ask you whether the currently dominant ideas about the economy, growth and prosperity, promote or hinder sustainability. Can such visions of the future be changed in the course of structural or institutional transformations?

Jens Beckert: The book I have written on climate change does not deal extensively with imagined futures. This is no coincidence. Imagination naturally plays an important role in current processes of economic transformation. For example, it matters greatly to producers and consumers, whether they imagine themselves still buying or selling cars with combustion engines ten years from now. If electric cars are seen as the future of mobility, very different decisions will be made. These are precisely the kinds of imagined futures I describe in *Imagined Futures*. We can also observe the effects of such imagined futures in the financial industry. Investments in energy infrastructures are long-term commitments. Does it still make sense for banks to finance fossil energy projects, or will these become stranded assets in twenty years? The answer to this question depends on what I have called *fictional expectations*.

In another respect, however, I believe the concept of imagined futures is less helpful for understanding the green transition. Sometimes it is used with the as-

sumption that if we only developed better images of sustainable ways of living, we could accelerate the transition. According to this view, we are stuck because we lack convincing imaginaries of what a sustainable world could look like and how attractive it might be. This idea appears in books lamenting a "loss of the future" or in colourful visualizations of green cities.

I am sceptical of this use of the concept of imagined futures. If we want to understand the forces shaping the transition, we need to take into account the institutional and structural constraints faced by actors. Consider the power of energy companies, the automotive industry, or the chemical industry. Entire countries depend on these sectors. As long as no viable alternative business models exist, these industries will do everything they can to protect their sources of profitability and the state will often support them. We must also consider the path dependencies of large infrastructures and the lock-ins, familiar from many processes of organizational change.

Imaginaries can still play a role. Images of future environmental devastation may motivate people to engage in social movements fighting climate change, while positive images of sustainable lifestyles may reduce resistance to change. In this case, their influence operates through civil society and becomes relevant via attitudes and mobilization. But all of this must be understood in the context of powerful economic interests and the existing incentive structures that shape the behaviour of companies, politicians, and consumers.

Andrea Maurer: If I understand you correctly, your core argument is that institutional and structural changes should go hand in hand with ideas about what constitutes business and a good life, and that change can only occur through the interlocking of these processes?

Jens Beckert: Yes, but these two aspects do not operate on the same level. Sustainability depends on institutional change. Therefore, the first question concerns the prerequisites for such change. Above all, this depends on political decisions. Political decisions, in turn, require political power, and as is well known in sociology, political domination ultimately depends on legitimacy. This means that if an ecologically harmful economy is increasingly delegitimized by civil society, this would constitute an important prerequisite for political decisions that promote sustainability.

Andrea Maurer: We know in sociology that transformative social movements only occur from time to time. We have seen, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, movements that demand alternative forms of organizing the economy and explicitly speak out against the market and private enterprise as well as private property. In the context of the climate crisis, such movements have intensified in the last 20 years. This is how energy cooperatives but also newer forms of public-private-state cooperation have emerged, which combine sustainability goals with the concern of doing business differently. In your opinion, would these

be important pieces of the mosaic of the upcoming transformation process or are they rather fleeting and not really relevant phenomena? To put it another way, can such environmental and social movements promote and establish new business models and more sustainable economic institutions?

Jens Beckert: I do think they are important because —this ties in with what I said earlier —they open up new perspectives that citizens may find attractive. One example is pilot projects supported by climate movements, such as models of the green city. If alternative ways of living can be experienced in practice, this creates learning fields with the potential to change attitudes. They can help open up new horizons. At the same time, such models and the experiences they offer are limited. They often provide few options for scaling up. They tend to remain confined to local contexts and frequently function only because they are embedded in an environment that is itself not sustainable.

With regard to the effectiveness of today's environmental social movements, I have another concern. Let us briefly consider the most successful social movement of the twentieth century: the labour movement. This movement was successful because it was highly organized. Trade unions and workers' parties structured everyday life and created stable social milieus. This facilitated solidarity and made it easier to overcome collective action problems. Such a stable organization of lifeforms is largely absent in today's ecological movements. *Fridays for Future*, for example, is largely organized through smartphones and spontaneous actions. While these can be very effective in the short term, they lack a comparable organizational structure.

From a sociological perspective, comparing contemporary environmental movements with earlier social movements is highly instructive. Sociologists can ask about the social and organizational prerequisites for the success of environmental movements. Such analyses could also generate ideas about how climate movements might need to develop in order to increase their long-term impact.

Andrea Maurer: This is a very exciting and important parallel. The workers' movement was directly linked to material subsistence requirements, which is often not the case with social movements. You have already indicated that this is an interesting topic for sociology. A key word here would certainly be solidarity and its social foundations. In your earlier work, you also dealt with solidarity. In the context of a realistic climate policy and the challenges of our time, would it be an option to expand solidarity or to connect solidarity with sustainability? Do you think that sociology has the necessary theoretical-conceptual foundations to grasp solidarity-based forms of action as an option for a realistic climate policy?

Jens Beckert: I think so, and I also believe that the concept of solidarity is highly relevant here. A central sociological insight is that solidarity is a particularistic concept, that is, it cannot be extended at will, unlike, for example, the Christian

concept of mercy. Solidarity is not universalist; it is particularistic in the sense that we are always in solidarity with others with whom we share social relationships. Ultimately, solidarity emerges within communities.

This is relevant because climate policy is, on the one hand, a global challenge that requires global action, while on the other hand it also has important local dimensions. Solidarity probably has limited influence at the global level. Climate change can be understood as a massive collective action problem, and solving such problems would require a moral economy that reduces free-riding. The absence of such a moral economy becomes evident when we look at climate damages in the Global South, regions that bear little responsibility for climate change and often lack the economic resources to protect themselves. Although there are calls to support poorer countries in coping with the consequences of climate change, actual support remains far too limited. This demonstrates the particularistic nature of solidarity: countries in the Global South are simply not part of the community of solidarity toward which countries in the Global North feel a strong moral obligation.

At the same time, solidarity can be a powerful concept when it comes to understanding responses to climate-related damages at the national or regional level. Consider, for example, the reaction to the flooding of the Ahr region in Germany in 2021, which caused damages of around 30 billion euros. There was an immediate and substantial response, both from the state and from civil society. It was the moral economy of the community that enabled this solidarity.

From this, we can draw more general lessons. If societies are to be better protected against the increasing damages caused by climate change in the future, it is crucial to strengthen social relationships that go beyond mere utility maximization. This aspect will become increasingly important as climate-related damages rise. Just consider the fires in California in 2025, or the floods in North Carolina and the region of Valencia, Spain, the year before. If societies fail to mobilize solidarity, the growing impact of climate change may lead to increasing social divisions. Those with sufficient resources may seek to evade exposure by moving away from high-risk areas, such as flood-prone regions, while others are left behind. This makes one question particularly urgent: how can solidarity within our societies be strengthened?

Andrea Maurer: I would like to follow up on this point. The special issue asks about the potential of sociological theories regarding sustainability. How would you assess the possibilities of sociological theories in dealing with sustainability in relation to solidarity?

Jens Beckert: I think sociology has strong theoretical foundations that are highly relevant for analysing issues of sustainability. Take sociological theories of action, for example, which emphasize that action cannot be reduced to individual utility maximization. This insight can be found in virtually all of the classical sociological

traditions. It also appears, in ways that are particularly fruitful for understanding climate-related issues, in the work of Elinor Ostrom.

Ostrom asks how social groups are able to overcome free-rider problems and investigates the moral economies that sustain collective action. She shows that small groups can successfully address free-rider problems because they are able to enforce norms as well as sanction deviant behaviour. These are powerful insights with a strong and well-established theoretical foundation.

Andrea Maurer: At this point, I would like to address the global inequalities you mentioned. This is associated with new global conflicts, which may combine with old, local ones. Do you currently see new or special problems and counter-movements reacting to them, to use Karl Polanyi's term? Do you see specific counter-movements in our society that are expected to emerge in the context of climate change or sustainability policy?

Jens Beckert: I will begin by responding to the first part of the question. From a sociological perspective, the climate crisis is not simply an ecological crisis; it is a crisis of prevailing structures of social order. What I mean by this is that societies' inability to respond adequately to emerging ecological problems is a social issue, not a problem of nature itself. We can clearly see that current responses fall short, as we are on a trajectory that will lead to temperature increases with devastating consequences for the lives of billions of people. It would be naïve to assume that this will not have severe repercussions for the stability of societies.

One extreme example discussed in my book concerns the southern Sahel, Africa, where severe conflicts have emerged as a result of the Sahara spreading southwards. Pastoral communities are forced to migrate further south in search of grazing land for their herds. There, they come into conflict with farmers whose fields are trampled and destroyed. These tensions have escalated into armed clashes, resulting in several thousand deaths.

In less extreme forms, climate-related conflicts are also emerging in the Global North. Floods in the region of Valencia (Spain), for example, led to protests by citizens who felt insufficiently protected by public authorities. At the same time, conflicts also arise from climate protection measures themselves. Consider the reactions to the heating law in Germany, or the protests by farmers in many European countries against climate-related political measures.

Andrea Maurer: And do you see any counter-movements?

Jens Beckert: Yes, for instance, *Fridays for Future* or *The Last Generation*. These are certainly counter movements in the sense of Karl Polanyi, because they challenge the commodification of nature. At the same time, however, these movements are weak when compared to the profit interests of firms, the interest of states in main-

taining strong economic growth, and the interests of consumers in sustaining high levels of consumption.

Often, attention focuses primarily on companies and their interests. I think we need to bring the role of consumers more strongly into the analysis, but not in a moralizing way. Overall, consumers are not willing to change their ways of life in the name of sustainability. When economists or psychologists demonstrate this, they often blame the individuals for moral weakness. I think this is misleading. From a sociological perspective, we can understand how deeply consumption is embedded in the organization of modern social orders. Class conflicts were largely pacified in the second half of the twentieth century through rising standards of living that reached unprecedented levels. An individual's position within the stratification order is now strongly defined by their capacity to consume.

If we want to understand the failure to adequately address climate change, we need to analyse how the interests of companies, states, and consumers work together. In this sense, we are dealing with a well-lubricated system. Business, consumers, citizens, the state, and politics act in concert, largely at the expense of nature. For a long time, this compromise worked remarkably well. But it reaches its limits when the ecological foundations of society begin to erode.

The German sociologist Uwe Schimank has described this development in a very insightful way by expanding the classical distinction between system integration and social integration. While social conflicts in the twentieth century were largely fought between these two dimensions, the requirement of ecological integration has now emerged as a third dimension. Nature can no longer be taken for granted; it enters the social world as an active constraint. This dramatically increases the complexity of societal organization and so far, we have not succeeded in dealing adequately with this added complexity.

Andrea Maurer: Finally, I would like to ask you whether you see the necessity or the possibility of a research program of sustainability within sociological theory and especially in economic sociology. Which topics would then be at the top of your to-do list?

Jens Beckert: Yes, absolutely. I think sociology should engage much more intensively with this topic. This is already evident from the existential importance of sustainability. I am also convinced that sociology possesses a set of analytical tools that can help illuminate many of the key questions involved.

There are several promising entry points within the sociological tradition. Economic sociology is certainly one of them. It analyses how markets operate and has produced substantial insights that can be productively transferred to research on climate change. In addition, sociology can contribute by examining questions of power and political decision-making, the role of institutions and incentive structures, and the social conditions under which collective action and legitimacy for sustainability policies can emerge. But other areas of sociology can also contribute

to a better understanding of social responses to the climate crisis and help develop ideas for dealing more effectively with the challenges it creates.

References

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