Organizing Sustainably: Introduction to the Special Issue

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Abstract

To confront the climate crisis requires fundamental system change in order to break the convention of relentless economic exploitation of nature. In this Special Issue we extend understanding of the opportunities for an organizing perspective on sustainability in order that organization studies might contribute more effectively to the challenges of organizing sustainably. This organizing perspective is particularly sensitive to (1) a variety of forms and practices of sustainable organizing in different societal spheres and on different levels, (2) the social institutions, logics and value systems in which these forms and practices are embedded, (3) the power and politics of promoting (or blocking) sustainable organization, and (4) the ways in which work, voice, participation, and inclusion are organized and contribute to developing societal capabilities. These features formed the basis of our original call for papers and we review selected literature on sustainability, including the contribution of organization studies and the articles in this Special Issue, through this organizing perspective. In so doing we identify four key themes of a future research agenda that builds from the foundations of existing research and addresses key current limitations in both theory and practice: sustainability requires social justice; connecting local and global scale shifts; democratizing governance; and

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acting collectively. We conclude with some implications for our own scholarship in organization studies if we are to meet the twin challenges of the need for new theorizing in combination with devising practically relevant support for change.

> Revolutions are the locomotives of history? Or are passengers trying to activate the emergency brake on the train of humankind?

> Walter Benjamin

> It's real. It's us. Experts agree. It's bad. There's hope.

> Anthony Leiserowitz

Introduction

On 30 June 2023, Zac Goldsmith resigned his position as a minister in the United Kingdom government. Goldsmith, a long-term environmental campaigner who had previously held ministerial positions with responsibility for energy, climate and environment, complained that the Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, 'was simply uninterested' in the environment and commented that 'I will never understand how, with all the knowledge we now have about our fundamental reliance on the natural world and the speed with which we are destroying it, anyone can be uninterested.' He concluded his resignation letter with the complaint that 'this government's apathy in the face of the greatest challenge we have faced makes continuing in my current role untenable' (Goldsmith, 2023).

On the same day, Reuters reported the departure of Thomas Brostrom, Shell's head of renewable generation. Brostrom's resignation came just six months after the appointment of Shell's new chief executive officer, Wael Sawan, and followed the announcement that Shell was to scale back its energy transition plans, returning to oil and gas production while cutting back on investments in renewables, apparently due to investor pressure to focus on the most profitable businesses. Sawan had also restructured the company's top leadership, eliminating Brostrom's role.

The following week was the world's hottest since records began in the 1850s.

This news coming from the UK exemplifies what might be considered the 'melting iceberg' of current climate politics. Governments in Germany, the United States, France and many other countries are running into roadblocks on the route necessary to meet the ambitions of the Paris agreement. Meanwhile, climate science continues to report alarming findings (Richardson et al., 2023). The warnings released by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in the spring of 2023 were dire: planetary climate boundaries have been crossed in certain areas which leave the earth's biosphere probably unliveable for hundreds of millions; among the further consequences is that achieved standards of living would erode for the rest of the global population.

The implication for organizations and society is that we must change fundamentally and quickly, breaking the convention of the relentless economic exploitation of nature. Due to decades of ignorance, hesitation and passivity, we are out of time to ponder, debate, dilly dally, take the slow road,

or whatever might be thought of as being more convenient in the present than taking bold decisions for the future. As the climate crisis turns into catastrophe(s), there is strong public sentiment that time is running out. And there is no doubt: we are all in this together, albeit some from a seemingly more comfortable position than others. As North Americans breathe in the smoke from Canadian wildfires, continental Europeans cope with severe droughts and climate-related migration from Africa and the Middle East, the Indian sub-continent prepares for new record temperatures in the next heat waves caused by global greenhouse gas emissions, and Chinese citizens endure the smog produced in manufacturing goods consumed throughout the world, we are reminded that climate change effects do not respect borders or other social constructions, although their consequences are distributed unequally.

When we began to prepare for this Special Issue some time ago, the situation was already dire. The climate crisis has heightened alarmingly since then. Initially, the Covid-19 pandemic seemed to present a chance for humanity to practise working together to solve planetary crises, an opportunity to (re)learn the interdependence and reciprocity we humans have with each other and also with the natural environment. Unfortunately, the response was in many ways disappointing. The glimmers of hope for a more united society ready to tackle the world's grand challenges have already faded, and societies are more polarized today than they were before the pandemic began in 2020. Thus the central question that we initially commenced this undertaking with is yet more apposite: What role can and should organization studies and organization theorists play in such a bleak situation?

While sustainability has been studied fairly extensively from the perspectives of sustainability management (e.g. Williams, Kennedy, Philipp, & Whiteman, 2017), sustainability transitions (e.g. Geels, 2011), or sustainable development (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), as well as in the natural sciences, our aim in this Special Issue was to carve out a specific *organizing* perspective that, in the tradition of organization research, is particularly sensitive to (1) a variety of forms and practices of sustainable organizing in different societal spheres and on different levels, (2) the social institutions, logics and value systems in which these forms and practices are embedded, (3) the power and politics of promoting (or blocking) sustainable organization, and (4) the ways in which work, voice, participation and inclusion are organized and contribute to developing societal capabilities. These key themes provided the basis for our initial call for papers and speak to key questions of our time such as why unsustainable forms of organizing persist, how established organizations can be restructured sustainably, and what makes alternative forms of organization (un)sustainable in the context of the wider economic system.

We called on scholars to explore ways of organizing sustainably. For us, organizing sustainably means seeking organizational forms and practices of coordination in and between organizations that shape the economic production process so that it contributes to social and ecological thriving – preserving and developing rather than depleting and destroying human and environmental resources. Organizing sustainably hereby deals with tensions and conflicts through social dialogue with internal and external stakeholders, acknowledging the need to define and continuously negotiate complex organizational values and goals in relation to societal expectations, internal capabilities, local contexts, and broader socio-economic embeddedness. In other words, organizing becomes sustainable if it ensures the regeneration and reproduction of resources rather than the extractive exploitation of these resources for strategic gains, thus orienting towards the long-term economic viability of value creation within a broader socio-ecological context. This definition reflects the recent shift in focus of sustainability as a long-term orientation on future generations' needs towards acting within planetary boundaries, i.e. a more serious consideration of the interplay between nature's boundaries with social ones (Whiteman, Walker, & Perego, 2013). It also incorporates more specifically the questions of 'sustainable for whom' and 'how' as central issues that

need to be negotiated between different stakeholder groups, including the question of how nature can be assigned appropriately a stakeholder role and organizational representation in decision-making (e.g. Bell & Morse, 2008; Starik, 1995).

In what follows, we highlight what we see as the most pertinent contribution of organization studies to the research and practice of making organizations and organizing more sustainable. In mapping the opportunities and challenges for organization studies, we start by briefly delineating what has already been discussed in prior literature in the field of organization studies. We then present the contribution of this Special Issue in the context of key areas for making further progress in advancing our organizing perspective.

Sustainability as an Opportunity and Challenge for Organization Studies

While organizational scholarship has long been concerned with questions of corporate accountability, responsibility, and governance, with few exceptions (e.g. Banerjee, 2003; Bansal & Roth, 2000; Hoffman, 1999), an explicit focus on sustainability became more widespread only from about 2010 onwards. The broadening from responsibility to sustainability marked a shift away from concerns with the societal effects of corporate (ir-)responsibility toward a stronger focus on 'the harms of economic development on natural systems' (Bansal & Song, 2017, p. 107). Since this time, a growing number of studies have explicitly addressed questions concerning the natural environment, corporate environmentalism, and environmental governance within organization studies (e.g. Ansari, Wijen, & Gray, 2013; Hardy & Maguire, 2010; Levy & Egan, 2003; Schüssler, Rüling, & Wittneben, 2014; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). In *Organization Studies*, the Special Issue by Wittneben, Okereke, Banerjee, and Levy (2012) clearly marked a milestone in the engagement of the field with sustainability. While management journals in general have been slower to embrace and debate sustainability issues, journals dedicated to the topic like *Business & Society*, *Organization & Environment* or *Business Strategy and the Environment* have become significant outlets for research on sustainability management.

Despite many overlapping areas of interest and shared theoretical frameworks (see e.g. Hörisch, Schaltegger, Weissbrod, & Schreck, 2023), the exchange between organization studies and sustainability management research has been fairly limited. Whereas research on sustainability management often uses organization theories such as institutional theory or agency theory to understand what incentivizes organizations to become more sustainable (e.g. Schaltegger & Hörisch, 2017), organization scholars often continue to use 'sustainability' as a 'case' or 'metaphor' to understand a more traditional set of phenomena, such as organizational legitimacy or the endurance of organizational practice and strategy (e.g. Reihlen, Schlapfner, Seeger, & Trittin-Ulbrich, 2022). Important exceptions reflecting deeper engagement include the research on corporate social responsibility (CSR) or corporate citizenship (e.g. Crane, Matten, & Moon, 2004; Matten & Moon, 2008), especially in the multinational corporation (e.g. Scherer & Palazzo, 2011), the paradoxes and tensions of implementing sustainability strategies (e.g. Hahn, Preuss, Pinkse, & Figge, 2014; Slawinski & Bansal, 2015), or the complexities of managing multi-stakeholder relationships and transnational standards (e.g. Gray & Purdy, 2018; Reinecke, Manning, & von Hagen, 2012). Here, organization scholarship has already made recognized contributions to the sustainability debate.

Sustainability management researchers and organization scholars researching sustainability alike are confronted with a double challenge: (1) the need to move toward new and original theories of organization and management; (2) devising practically relevant suggestions for finding a way forward. The first challenge comes from the proven and often-stated deficiencies of extant and still dominant organization and management theories which assume (more often implicitly) the

enduring availability of natural resources, thereby neglecting the biospheric embeddedness of all social organization. These persistent deficiencies in existing theories present a profound obstacle for developing new theory to frame and interpret an emerging landscape of organizational sustainability: on what thought heritage can a new understanding be built, and what old ideas need to be abandoned? As for the second challenge, any theoretical development needs to be accompanied by practical tools. Such tools must systematically account for humans' embeddedness in nature and the foreseeable consequences of the environmental collapse we are likely to face in more fundamental ways than environmental, social and governance (ESG) or sustainable development goals (SDG) metrics which leave the financialization of corporate management practices largely untouched (Figge & Hahn, 2005).

To effect a meaningful response to the nature of the climate emergency, building from Starik and Kanashiro (2013), scholarship will need to engage with environmental, organizational and socio-economic issues across multiple interrelated levels of activity, and do so across a wide variety of different contexts. This need for inclusivity must embrace the multiple forms of life that make up our planet, engaging directly and persistently with the natural world. Such scholarship must embrace both explanation and an agenda for change which necessarily reflects these elements, thereby seeking 'solutions that are multilevel, systematically integrated (including their inputs, processes, outputs, and feedbacks), and multi-stakeholder-oriented, rather than incremental, single media-focused, and narrowly (human) elite-dominated' (Starik & Kanashiro, 2013, p. 17).

When it comes to the 'systems thinking' approach that many sustainability authors across disciplines call for, organization theory has a long tradition to build on, with many theories conceiving organizations variously as rational, natural, or open systems. A systems perspective emphasizes interconnections among and across elements in a system rather than focusing on individual constituent parts (Bansal & Song, 2017), as well as the relationship between an organization's internal system and the external environment in which it is embedded (Schneider, Wickert, & Marti, 2017). To date, this external environment has predominantly been conceptualized in social (rather than natural) terms: organizations are seen as embedded in wider organizational fields – industries, networks, or discursive issue fields, even ecosystems – that resemble complex adaptive systems and often change in non-linear, hyperturbulent ways (Meyer, Gaba, & Colwell, 2005). More recently, organization scholarship has paid renewed attention to the political economy and organized interests as additional facets of this environment. De Bakker, Matten, Spence and Wickert (2020), for instance, speak of the constraints of contemporary capitalism as the 'elephant in the room' limiting corporate and voluntary forms of private sustainability regulation. This can be seen as a reaction to decades of framing CSR as an organizational, voluntary and functionalist business case (e.g. Lohmeyer & Jackson, 2023) rather than as a systemic challenge (Beal & Neesham, 2016). Several scholars pinpoint the fossil fuel hegemony as a source of climate disinformation (Bowden, Gond, Nyberg, & Wright, 2021), exclusion (Irwin, Bowden, Nyberg, & Wright, 2022) and lobbying (Nyberg, Wright, & Bowden, 2022). Adler (2022) makes the case for shifting the political economy towards democratic socialism as a way of limiting competition while strengthening state and collective agency towards reaching shared environmental, social, and economic goals. Organization scholars have also developed models for paying more attention to time, space, and scale of the organizational environment (e.g. Bansal & DesJardine, 2014; Grewatsch, Kennedy, & Bansal, 2023) and to socio-ecological systems (e.g. Hahn & Tampe, 2021).

Nonetheless, while we might identify some key theoretical foundations and exemplar contributions that indicate organization studies has huge potential to advance our knowledge about how to progress sustainability, the field as a whole still needs to carve out its contribution(s) to these debates, including in ways that engage with and build from interdisciplinary exchange. When we

called for scholarship addressing 'organizing sustainably', we explicitly opened with the systems-level challenge of the disproportional exploitation of human and natural resources that goes hand in hand with current capitalist economic systems, endangering life on our planet in a way that is inherently unsustainable for societies. We wanted to draw on, bring together, and consolidate existing and emerging organizational research to understand the system-level challenges of today.

Advancing Understanding of Organizing Sustainably

First, we asked what *alternative organizational forms and practices of organizing* could contribute to the sustainable usage of environmental, social and economic resources. Of course, alternative models for organizing sustainably exist that deviate from the archetypical business corporation that dominates much of the organizational literature. But, these alternatives typically emerge in niches (e.g. ethical fashion, fair phones), on a local or smaller scale (e.g. food or financial cooperatives, 'no waste' and repair shops), or in pockets of municipal public procurement of utilities (e.g. public transport) and the circular economy (e.g. Barin Cruz, Alves, & Delbridge, 2017). While multiple jurisdictions around the world are enabling stakeholder-serving organizational forms such as B-Corps (e.g. Marquis, 2020) and community interest companies (Nicholls, 2010), these remain marginal and fragile. Several articles in our Special Issue directly speak to the question of how alternative organizational models can be sustained in the light of dominant market forces. 'Strategy Performation to Avoid Degeneration: How producer cooperatives can achieve social and economic goals' by Frank Siedlok, Lisa Callagher, Ziad Elsahn and Stefan Korber (2024, this issue) provides an account of how alternative organizational forms may sustain themselves over time and through periods of internal contestation. Based on a detailed longitudinal study of a New Zealand producer cooperative, the study analyses the ongoing negotiation of the relationships between the individual growers and the cooperative's management. The authors use a translation framework and performativity lens to theorize the organizing involved in regenerating cooperative principles while introducing new competitive strategies. Their analyses reveal three types of performativity and show how different modes of organizing are used to (temporarily) resolve performative struggles and hereby provide valuable insight into the organizing work required to reconcile heterogeneous interests while preserving cooperative ideas.

'Prefiguring Alternative Organizing: Confronting marginalization through projective cultural adjustment and tempered autonomy' by Babita Bhatt, Israr Qureshi, Dhirendra Shukla and Pradeep Hota (2024, this issue) also sheds light on the struggles encompassing prefigurative organizing efforts to enact an alternative, more inclusive form of economic organizing to escape the growth imperative of the dominant economic system and thereby overcome marginalization. The article provides a detailed account of two place-based community collectives in India that not only faced external constraints exerted by the capitalist system (e.g. turning land ownership and access to water into a commons), but were also confronted with entrenched inequalities internally, resulting in the marginalization of certain social groups (especially women and marginalized castes). The authors suggest that prefigurative organizing against these existing power structures is based on selective and strategic engagement involving two 'softer' practices of prefiguring: projective cultural adjustment – carefully leveraging or breaking away from traditional culture depending on whether egalitarian practices are already available – and tempered autonomy – negotiating autonomy without overtly challenging dominant groups, and exercising self-imposed restraints to make independent decisions. Thus, prefigurative organizing is heavily constrained by societal and economic institutions.

Whereas these market structures are not value-neutral in the first two studies, the article 'How do Incumbents Affect the Founding of Cooperatives? Evidence from the German electricity

industry' by Min Liu and Christina Guenther (2024, this issue) takes a different approach and draws on the population ecology framework to highlight how struggles between incumbent organizational forms and challenging forms are played out. In this contribution, competing orientations are already embodied in the organizational form, or in populations of organizations that compete over the respective resources in a common niche (here, the German electricity market as the single largest European energy market between 2003 and 2010). Using a quantitative empirical study, the article reveals how incumbent organizations influence the emergence of alternative organizational forms, in this case energy cooperatives. The major finding is that the presence of older incumbents as well as more diverse incumbents (as measured through a higher concentration of market shares) increases the number of cooperatives that are founded when other factors are controlled for. The authors suggest that this is because age-related inertia and the lack of competition between incumbents of diverse size limit those incumbents' adaptability in meeting the new market demand for renewable energy. The interesting, if perhaps inconvenient, finding is that size heterogeneity gives more room for alternative forms to flourish when market shares are more unequally distributed. This finding raises some interesting points for considering how incumbents and challengers interact in the strategic action fields around climate change and sustainability. These three articles all provide novel insight into aspects of how alternative organizational forms may emerge and the varying but persistent nature of struggle, contest and competition in sustaining these.

These studies also directly link to and address the *second* theme of our call: *engaging with the ideational bases of dominant and alternative forms of organizing and their consequences*. As noted above, a strength of organizational scholarship is its attention to the link between organizational forms and practices and wider organizational fields, norms, ideas and convention**s**. While, on the one hand, ideas and their accompanying organizational and institutional embodiments shape substantive efforts to organize sustainably (e.g. Kok, de Bakker, & Groenewegen, 2019), dominant conventions, ideas and logics often push back emerging or alternative organizational forms and practices (e.g. Augustine, 2021). This means that substantive institutional work efforts are required to create, maintain, or disrupt institutional arrangements to foster sustainability (e.g. Levy, Reinecke, & Manning, 2016; Zietsma, Ruebottom, & Slade Shantz, 2018). The articles in our Special Issue confirm that the transition to a sustainable economy and society involves social, political and emotional struggles (e.g. Delmestri & Goodrick, 2016; Lefsrud, Graves, & Phillips, 2020), as it challenges what is conventionally valued.

The collision of multiple value systems has long been acknowledged as a key part of grand challenges and wicked problems (e.g. Ferraro, Etzion, & Gehman, 2015). However, we still have limited understanding of how it can be addressed through practices of organizing. Here, 'From Catch-and-Harvest to Catch-and-Release: Trout Unlimited and repair-focused deinstitutionalization' by Brett Crawford, Madeline Toubiana and Erica Coslor (2024, this issue) is instructive. The authors analysed magazine covers and other archival documents over 62 years to show how a nonprofit custodian (Trout Unlimited) used visual and discursive tactics to gradually replace unsustainable catch-and-harvest recreational fly-fishing practices with more sustainable (and fish-friendly) catch-and-release practices. Their model of institutional repair shows simultaneously deinstitutionalizing and reinstitutionalizing practices of mending (shifting away from problematic aspects), caring (connecting practice changes to core institutional values that members cared about), and restoring (encouraging members to fix the damage done by the old practice). Together, these repairing practices gradually and gently changed the behaviour of anglers over time, while maintaining members' normative and cognitive attachments to the core institution (fly fishing), most notably, and exceptionally, from within an organization.

The embeddedness of organizations in their wider institutional and societal contexts – and the challenges this presents to moving towards more sustainable organization – is also highlighted in

the article 'Field Disasters, Routine Shifts, and Adaptation Performance: Evidence from the Chernobyl disaster' by Jungwon Min (2024, this issue) which takes an intra-organizational perspective and examines changes in organizational routines in response to the Chernobyl disaster in 1986 in the former USSR (Northern Ukraine). The article's starting point is the widespread idea of catastrophic events as a driver of change, in organizations as well as in wider organizational fields. Presenting data from 33 countries between 1976 and 2004, the study examines whether nuclear power plants attributed the Chernobyl disaster to human errors, leading to a deep adaptation of organizational routines, or whether they attributed it to situational factors to avoid negative attention from stakeholders, thereby maintaining the status quo. The authors find evidence of attribution to human factors as a basis for routine adaptation, and also that a dominant efficiency orientation in the field prevented such attribution. If we assume, in line with climate scientists, that catastrophic events will become more and more widespread, the findings point to the importance of macro-economic contexts and dominant stakeholder orientations in shaping the adaptive response towards either adaptation or business as usual. Thus, this article addresses the theme of ideational embeddedness of organizing and the influence of wider norms, while taking us more directly towards the behavioural tradition of organizational theory (Cyert & March, 1963) that emphasizes attention, internal and external attribution and routine development as key aspects of organizational change in an open systems tradition (see e.g. Hoffman & Ocasio, 2001). When it comes to organizing sustainably, a better understanding of these behavioural dynamics in and between organizations – more recently echoed in an 'organizations as polities' perspective (Weber & Waeger, 2017) – can contribute strongly to wider debates on sustainability transitions, which often neglect the specific characteristics of organizations as social systems in tension.

The conflict between different value systems is also at the core of research on alternative, 'hybrid' organizations that have to balance the multiple goals embedded in differing institutional spheres (e.g. Pache, Battilana, & Spencer, 2023). Given the dominance of (unsustainable) commercial practices, there are widespread expectations of the 'inevitable degeneration' of organizations seeking to operate commercially while retaining social and cooperative goals, because they are unable to reconcile conflicting values and practices. The study of the New Zealand producer cooperative by Siedlok et al. (2024) provides a valuable counter to these expectations. The authors' detailing of the non-linear and multiple processes of translation to respectively 'interessés' (as in interessement), enrol and mobilize cooperative members offers insights into how other alternative organizational forms may sustain themselves over time and through periods of internal contestation.

Resilience is a key element in organizing sustainably. Several of the articles in this Special Issue show the continuous efforts that are required to keep sustainable organizing alive, involving persistent and slow changes of social norms and conventions. Moreover, they also pinpoint the limitations of societal values alone when confronted with enshrined market structures and modes of competition (e.g. Liu & Guenther, 2024) as well as with deeply seated structural inequalities (e.g. Bhatt et al., 2024). These studies hereby highlight a core dilemma of the deep cultural and behavioural changes that are required to shift values away from relentlessly producing, consuming and valorizing nature: social change is slow, whereas environmental destruction and the accompanying collapse of infrastructure is progressing ever more quickly. Thus, in addition to the day-to-day practices of organizing and institutional work on an organizational or community level, we also need to pay attention to the macro-level interests and power structures that are behind the dominant economic logics and that need to be mobilized to provide alternative incentives.

This was the *third* theme of our call: the *politics of sustainable organizing*. While organization studies has already provided many important contributions in understanding the origins of climate disinformation (e.g. Lefsrud & Meyer, 2012) or social movement activism targeting unsustainable

business practices (e.g. Bertels, Hoffman, & DeJordy, 2014; Gahan & Pekarek, 2013), the role of organized interests deserves deeper consideration; not only as a repeated source of continued unsustainability, but also as a potential driver of change. For instance, several studies have highlighted the role of trade unions in supporting social movements in collective action targeting dominant market logics (e.g. Schuessler, Lohmeyer, & Ashwin, 2023). '"Rather Than Follow Change, Business Must Lead This Transformation": Global business's institutional project to privatize global environmental governance, 1990–2010' by Rami Kaplan (2024, this issue) sheds light directly onto the more hidden or disguised power structures that prevent the development of effective policies for addressing the climate emergency. This article focuses on how the transnational environmental governance system has been shaped to adhere to the capitalist market logic. It traces the structure, discourse, and activities of the transnational business association the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) since the 1990s and shows how this organization mobilized the CEOs of some of the largest transnational corporations to participate in a large-scale institutional creation project focused on 'capturing' environmental politics with a pro-business voluntary governance agenda. While Kaplan's article is primarily a story of the agency of powerful vested interests, the study by Bhatt et al. (2024) shows how power also plays out in more indirect ways through entrenched social hierarchies and structurally exploitative socio-economic arrangements.

The articles in our Special Issue give some indication as to how these power structures can be contested. On a macro level, Kaplan's (2024) study indicates the collective effort that is needed to counter the influence of what he, drawing on sociology and political economy research, calls 'power elites'. These are powerful actors engaging not just in institutional work, but large-scale institutional projects, defined as 'a compound of mutually supportive work efforts that are deployed enduringly in order to secure a certain general institutional goal' (p. 13). Counteracting these elites' financial, structural, and discursive power thus requires a collective and concerted transnational effort. By contrast, the trout fishing case by Crawford et al. (2024) shows the need to involve multiple actors at various levels to break up entrenched systems. Trout Unlimited, as a central, field-level actor, worked with and through local chapters to influence anglers, and pushed for regulatory change with policymakers. But the paper also highlights the use of gentle repairing practices which preserved the core values of the original institution. These repair practices may be more effective than typical deinstitutionalization practices which often trigger virulent defensive responses, especially in our polarized times. Finally, the study by Bhatt et al. (2024) sensitizes us to the difficulties of breaking away from established norms and traditions on a community level, especially if these impact the privileges of certain social groups. Such work reminds us of previous organization scholarship that has examined how actors 'inhabit institutions' (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006) and in particular that some actors have the capacity for greater agency than others (Delbridge & Edwards, 2013). Understanding the prospects for systemic change must embrace both the qualities of the system across multiple interconnected levels and the actions that actors are capable of performing, with some engaging in more careful practices of repair and cultural adjustment and others engaging in more open and forceful contestation of the status quo.

These articles bring questions of inequality, participation, and representation to the fore as key issues that need to be addressed and thus link to the *fourth* theme of our call: *the rejuvenation of participatory and democratic ways of organizing at both organizational and societal levels*. A number of the contributions in this Special Issue touch on relevant aspects of this question with, for example, the studies by Crawford et al. (2024) and Bhatt et al. (2024) both engaging with the complexities of change towards organizing sustainably within different societal communities. However, there is a relative paucity of organization scholarship that addresses a key aspect of our organizing perspective on sustainability: the ways in which work, voice, participation, and inclusion are

organized or disorganized, thereby contributing to developing or reducing societal capabilities. This has been an area that is less commonly the direct focus of organization studies.

Although the exploration of the labour dimensions of sustainable organizations is still neglected in the dominant discourse on sustainability and the business organization (see Pfeffer, 2010), there are contributions to build on. For example, Kossek and Lautsch (2017) show how firms' human resource management practices allowing for a better balance of work and life through employee-driven working time flexibility are directed more or less exclusively to upper-level segments of the workforce. Similarly, Berthod, Helfen and Wirth (2021) illuminate 'organizational expulsion' as a management strategy to exclude vulnerable workforces from exactly what would be needed for sustainable work arrangements: recognition of their work, participation, and representative voice as well as collective bargaining. And, Soundararajan, Wilhelm and Crane (2021) explicitly develop a 'humanization' approach to sustainable work also extending into global supply chains in the Global South.

As long as businesses merely continue to manage 'human resources' to generate profits for shareholders, aspirations for more sustainable forms of work will remain unmet (Osterman, 2018). Rather, in order to reinstate workers as resourceful and inherently valuable human beings within organizations and beyond, working sustainably implies scope for voice in organizations (e.g. Wilkinson, Gollan, Kalfa, & Xu, 2018) and an active management for industrial citizenship along global supply chains (e.g. Helfen, Schüßler, & Sydow, 2018). We also need to recognize the significance of the organization of work and the economy in our current predicament; see, for example, Schor and colleagues' research on the impact of working hours and income inequalities on carbon dioxide emissions (Fitzgerald, Schor, & Jorgenson, 2018; Jorgenson, Schor, & Huang, 2017).

Taken together, the articles in this Special Issue make a significant contribution to advancing our understanding of organizing sustainably and establishing an organizing perspective on sustainability, both in terms of theorizing and interpreting empirical evidence and with regard to comprehending *how* change might take place. They show how organization studies as a field of research can make a specific contribution to the sustainability debate by drawing on its existing theoretical and methodological toolkit. At the same time, these articles also point to theoretical and practical issues to which organization studies needs to pay more attention in the future. We will outline these issues in the next section.

Organizing Sustainably: A Research Agenda

We now turn our attention to how the field of organization studies takes forward a research agenda that contributes to the understanding and practice of organizing sustainably. We present these in the form of key issues – building from our identification of an organizing perspective on sustainability and the above review of existing work – that organization research has the potential to address.

Sustainability requires social justice

A transformation towards a more sustainable economy must involve change in and between organizations, inevitably creating tensions and conflict that will need to be managed. Thus, ultimately, reflection on what 'organizing sustainably' means must deal with the insight that sustainability as a concept is inherently contested. There is a need to be specific on what, for whom, and to which ends organizations and organizing can become 'sustainable', something that gets obscured by concepts such as CSR and related reporting practices that erase conflicts and value multiplicity (Ehrnström-Fuentes & Böhm, 2023). Apart from goal conflicts, say between various UN agencies

that may themselves pursue divergent outcomes, this also entails the organized conflicts within organizations such as between owners and managers who want to sustain their business models versus those organizational members who want to change them (as reflected in the study by Siedlok et al., 2024).

But conflicts have a larger scope and dimension as well: while countries in the West have historically been the chief emitters of greenhouse gases, the effects have disproportionately been borne by poorer countries, and by poorer citizens within all countries (e.g. Banerjee, 2012; Whiteman, 2009). That won't last. We are all already being affected by climate change, and some in dramatic ways. The UN refugee agency, UNHCR, announced that there were over 100 million people in the world that have been displaced from their homes in 2022 by violence and protracted conflicts that are often in significant part attributable to climate change (Creed, Gray, Höllerer, Karam, & Reay, 2022). Diamond (2005), in his analysis of collapsed civilizations over time, pointed to the conflicts that are associated with environmental collapse, and described how wars in the 20th and 21st centuries can be attributed to environmental degradation. A recent cross-disciplinary review of societal responses to climate changes, published in *Nature* (Degroot et al., 2021), found that it is not environmental collapse alone that leads to collapsed civilizations; collective innovations and renewed institutions to address inequality and promote communal action are pathways for societal adaptation. The conclusion must be that there is no sustainability without social justice, since we all depend on each other, and yet the neoliberal, polarized, inequitable world in which we live is not well positioned to deliver either sustainability or justice (Djelic & Etchanchu, 2017).

As the recent actions of the climate resistance movement have shown, passive resistance is very effective in bringing issues to public attention, but in the public discourse this may be divisive whereas cooperation and collaboration is vital if change is to be effected. To deliver system change we must engage the notion of just transitions in which the tensions and conflicts emanating from making organizations, and the work within them, more sustainable are resolved in social dialogue with internal and external stakeholders (Stevis, 2023). Of course, this entails boundary work in decisions over the inclusivity of organizing sustainably. Hence, adequate forms of interest representation need to be found for various societal groups, as well as for the natural environment, concerning business decisions. On the consumption side, an adequate response to the climate crisis requires consideration of a post-growth economy (e.g. Carruthers, 2023; Ehrnström-Fuentes & Biese, 2023), including a reconsideration of value and of climate inequality which deals with the large gap between historical emitters and those countries and populations that suffer most of the effects of climate change (e.g. Böhm, Misoczky, & Moog, 2012). Organization studies has the capacity to engage with the complex multi-level questions of social justice that are central to organizing sustainably.

Connecting local and global scale shifts

While the effects of climate change are global, the systemic and grounded nature of wicked problems means that local action, which takes into account local conditions, power structures, values and cultures, is essential (as evidenced in the article by Bhatt et al., 2024). The organizing dilemma is this: while many organizational solutions to sustainability problems are local, to make global impact they need to be scaled both up and across various domains, which typically involves collaborations with multiple heterogeneous local actors alongside working with intermediate, national and international agencies. At the same time, knowledge about new solutions emerges in a contextualized way from diverse and heterogeneous life worlds, but needs to be decontextualized to allow transfer and enable translation. We cannot afford to ignore the local, and that makes it difficult to

scale up interventions quickly and easily across multiple geographies. Yet, we can learn from place-based successes, extract key insights and transfer them to other places where we will have to localize them again. How to achieve, and speed up, this single loop and double loop learning dynamic across levels is worth studying more closely (Bansal, Kim, & Wood, 2018; Mair & Seelos, 2021). For example, Porter, Tuertscher and Huysman (2020) described a crowdsourcing platform that enabled people to share their experiments and insights into environmental sustainability so others could adopt and adapt them. This idea resonates with the distributed experimentation aspect of robust action described by Ferraro et al. (2015), as does the idea of building 'scaffolding' over time in addressing problems that can be used to build better solutions (Casasnovas & Ferraro, 2022; Mair, Wolf, & Seelos, 2016).

Humans are capable of imagination, i.e. envisioning a different future, and organizational scholarship should build on that capability to innovate organizational structures and practices towards more sustainable alternatives (Augustine, Soderstrom, Milner, & Weber, 2019; Wright, Nyberg, De Cock, & Whiteman, 2013). Future visioning can loosen institutional constraints on innovative behaviour by surfacing current and potential future contradictions. Fighting for a better future, like the Fridays for Future movement, can creatively animate new and compelling forms of activism. The implication of this for humanity is that to really gain the benefits of distributed experimentation – to be able to learn from local solutions in order to address global effects – we need mechanisms for coordination, not only to pass insights through multiple channels, but also to ensure that we are sensitized to the unintended effects that often arise from such experiments. Scholars, particularly organizational scholars, are well placed to help with this coordination. By critically studying, writing, and talking about local experiments and their effects, intended and otherwise, researchers can become instrumental in facilitating coordination and collaboration. Of course, bearing in mind the urgency of our predicament, we will have to get a lot faster at doing this if we are going to provide value to humanity.

Democratizing governance

The acknowledgement of the complexity of the issues reinforces what has become widely understood: we face a system-level problem. Given current trajectories, our situation is only going to further deteriorate if the existing economic system of globalized financial and fossil fuel hegemony is allowed to persist. Despite evidence of superior capital market as well as accounting performance by sustainable corporations (Eccles, Ioannou, & Serafeim, 2014), other findings suggest that businesses vary a lot in whether and how much they change their strategies towards sustainability, the largest group of extant firms continuing with their strategies as is (e.g. Dahlmann & Brammer, 2011) or changing too slowly (Hoffman & Jennings, 2021). What is worse, in many areas of business a 'winner takes all' situation has developed in which platform enterprises heavily invest in hyper-growth to achieve market dominance – a position from which they can extract maximum value (e.g. Breznitz, Kenney, Rouvinen, Zysman, & Ylä-Anttila, 2011; United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2019). While organizational scholars are neither the first nor the only ones searching for alternatives (e.g. Chen & Chen, 2021; Ostrom, 2017), there is the potential to make a contribution through an organizing perspective on novel economic framings. For example, the recent proliferation of progressive economic frameworks that range from top-down, state-driven policy for a green new deal (Mazzucato, 2021) to eco-socialist visions (Saito, 2022) and the bottom-up foundational economy (Froud, Johal, Moran, Salento, & Williams, 2018) to the 'donut economy' and its emphasis on the regenerative and distributive parameters for socio-economic prosperity (Raworth, 2017) would benefit from further organizational research on the power, politics, and pragmatics of progressive governance.

More broadly, organization theory can help in the endeavour of progressive governance by moving beyond firms and industries as the main units of analysis (Davis & DeWitt, 2022) and promoting an approach that goes beyond returns to shareholders by creating a framework for corporate governance that considers ecological and social boundaries and orients businesses towards developing transformational business models that create societal rather than shareholder value (Martí, 2018). While the 'business case' for voluntary corporate responsibility is insufficient to tackle societal concerns, businesses and governments need an integrated framework to consider the needs of all stakeholders and not just a privileged few (Busch et al., 2023). An important element of such governance is the development of adequate measures for sustainability accounting that not only recognize nature as a stakeholder but also consider value plurality (Arjaliès, Laurel-Fois, & Mottis, 2023; Quattrone, 2022). Here we also need to keep paying attention to variations in political economy institutions. Despite the worldwide spread of the American, shareholder form of capitalism (e.g. Djelic, 2001; Meyer & Höllerer, 2010), national polities continue to show important divergence (e.g. Meyer, Leixnering, & Veldman, 2022) and, as a result, reflect varying degrees of dynamism regarding public and legal action towards climate change, and also towards considering human rights and labour standards (Behrens & Pekarek, 2023).

As anticipated in our organizing perspective on sustainability, it follows that the question of whether and how organizing sustainably becomes possible touches not only upon important questions about how firms can strategize towards sustainable performance and economic success. It also implies profound questions about how societies of the future arrange the ways in which people will live, work, and organize economic exchange to survive under the constraints of a looming ecological crisis. This holds in particular with respect to research on work and employment, as the transition to a sustainable economy involves structural changes in the labour market, welfare policies, and the working and social life of individuals.

Seen from this angle, there still is a huge gap in current organization studies on linking organizing responses to the climate crisis with democratic decision-making in organizations and the social issues involved in giving workers (and more broadly 'organizational members') a voice. A profound engagement with the labour dimensions of arranging for responses to the climate crisis is – in our view – a good example of where organization scholars can make a major contribution. For example, a fundamental insight from social reproduction theory is that human labour is at the heart of reproducing society in all its parts: 'social reproduction theorists perceive the relation between labor dispensed to produce commodities and labor dispensed to produce people as part of the systemic totality of capitalism' (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 2). Substantive change in governance requires a change in how people decide how their lifetime is spent in work and beyond. This may appear a rather prosaic point, but the persistent obstacles and barriers for giving workers a say over their work both resemble and contribute to the stumbling blocks to achieving a 'just transition' (e.g. Stevis & Felli, 2020). Alongside the issue of living wages (e.g. Dobbins & Prowse, 2021), themes for further organizational research include sustainable working time arrangements that allow workers a life beyond work (e.g. Kossek & Lautsch, 2017) and sustainable work organization and job designs that preserve the health and dignity of workers (e.g. Parker & Grote, 2022).

At the heart of such matters lie the old (and new) conflicts around participatory or democratic governance of organizations, including the business corporation and how decision-making power is distributed between owners, managers, and workers (Aguilera & Jackson, 2003). Regarding corporations' social responsibility, Kang and Moon (2012) extensively discussed the persistent impacts of three archetypical corporate governance modes. Shareholder value-oriented governance dominating the Anglo-Saxon types of capitalism tends to come along with explicit forms of corporate social responsibility to fill the voids of businesses' societal responsiveness in societies, marked by transactional approaches to social issues, whereas in the coordinated varieties of capitalism

prevailing in continental Western Europe and Scandinavia, stakeholder governance models reflective of societal requirements provide for implicit forms of corporate social responsibility. As a third type, state-led market economies bring in the authority of the state to link corporations' conduct back to societal demands. In the latter two cases, workers' influence is either built in to the supervisory bodies of corporations through direct representation or mediated through state interventions (for empirical plausibility see Jackson & Rathert, 2016). Recognizing the role of labour as a relevant stakeholding group in modern capitalism has also inspired authors from an Anglo-Saxon background to discuss a need for democratizing enterprise governance and steering the economy 'democratically, collectively, and strategically towards our shared environmental, social, and economic goals' (Adler, 2022, p. 1). Davis (2021) likewise points to a need to democratize corporate governance both from the bottom up (through worker control) and the top down (through state regulation) to ensure corporations act in the interest of the public good. These areas of concern also illustrate the potential for organization scholars to engage more concertedly with researchers in employment relations, political economy, and the sociology of work, among others.

Acting collectively

Questions of social justice, of organizing and building across the levels of a system and of mobilizing to deliver participation and democratic outcomes all highlight the need for collective and public solutions (Ostrom, 2017). The decisive tool of humans for a lasting response to crisis has always been and will continue to be acting collectively, in the true sense of collaborating through social organizing – the focus of a forthcoming special issue of *Organization Studies* (Kornberger, Meyer, Gatzweiler, Martí, & Cornelissen, forthcoming). In collective action, there is the need to pool resources and capabilities to achieve goals each individual could not achieve alone; this is one of the central tenets (if not the raison d'être) of organizations and organizing (Kornberger, 2022). Unfortunately, we face our current crises at a time when acting collectively is being undermined. Decades of neoliberal policies, preceded by turns toward modernity and methodological individualism, have seen utilitarian individualism permeate into all spheres of social life, including in public organizations and universities. In some ways, (post-)modern humans may have forgotten how to act as a collective because they may also have lost their sense for collectivity, or at least their awareness of personal and direct responsibility for such action. Some may say 'with good reason', since collectivity can be exploited and abused. Others may say it is just human nature and solidarity does not reach very far beyond small groups. Here, the roles of the state and public sector are clearly important.

   The spontaneous order among atomistic individuals, the market, has remained a dangerous myth in today's global political economy (Polanyi, 2001). Regardless, the structural relations and the emotional processes that are needed to enable people to sense urgency, recognize their interdependence, and develop a shared agenda – while still respecting their differences – are still discussed too rarely in organization studies (see, for example, Fan & Zietsma, 2017; Lefsrud et al., 2020, Lohmeyer, Schüßler, & Helfen, 2018). And yet, knowing more about these organizational issues may yield significant insights for policymakers and practitioners in various public domains from labour market policy and public welfare to technology policy and economic policy. And, organization theorists are well placed to develop practicable solutions to the obstacles to coordinating local social action in ways that build to meaningful action at scale (van Wijk, Zietsma, Dorado, de Bakker, & Martí, 2019), at least in principle. Consideration is needed across the range of single private and large-scale public alternatives and how the small wins on individual and community scale may be supported by and translated into bold public initiatives, including infrastructure expenditures. This involves examining more closely the mechanisms combining community

organizing, city planning, field governance, and state law making. This question of collective action across levels that leads to sustained outcomes is crucial for those addressing the challenges of organizing sustainably and is a key feature across the collection of papers in this Special Issue.

Implications for Scholarship

Taking 'organizing sustainably' seriously runs into a number of essential issues for humanity. And it also confronts organizational scholars with a number of challenges if they are to deliver more fully on the potential of an organizing perspective on sustainability. These include a requirement to leave their theoretical comfort zones and to explore new empirical territories, to engage more widely with other disciplines grappling with the existential nature of the climate crisis, and to reflect on their own role as part of a world that is dying. In this concluding section we briefly comment on each of these three: the role of theory, crossing disciplinary silos, and academic activism.

Role of theory

Most fundamentally, we need to build organizational theories that extend insight and explanation in ways that inform action for reducing emissions, extinctions, and inequality all at the same time. Such theories should shape action in order that it embraces the variety of actors and levels required to address the systemic nature of the threats confronting us. The value of theory has multiple meanings to scholars, and we are not inclined to denounce 'purely' theoretical work as useless; understanding and explanation are central to social science. There is no value in losing one's theoretical grip in the face of threatening crises. Yet, we are reaching and breaching planetary boundaries and tipping points, and the institutions and infrastructures that our modern societies are built on are becoming increasingly unstable and unreliable. Fundamental assumptions about resources, growth, predictability and value are challenged, causing us to rethink how we make sense of the world and act within it and with what consequences. If today is unlike the past, then our theories, and our norms about evaluating theoretical contributions (which often tend to be narrow, discipline-focused and incremental), need to be put to the test to see whether they are outdated when it comes to organizing sustainably. We need to revisit existing theories and develop new ones to address our new realities and explicitly embrace values of social justice and democracy.

   To achieve this will require us as researchers to take a more critical view, making power structures visible, challenging their hegemony (Ergene, Banerjee, & Hoffman, 2021). This starts with ourselves. Like all action, theorizing is not neutral and we need to reflexively engage with our inherent positions and assumptions. Neither should theorization be passive. Imagining the possibilities of future utopias must be accompanied by commitments to action and outcomes, 'renewing our methodological toolkit and rethinking the purpose of theorizing in terms of performing desirable futures' (Gümüsay & Reinecke, 2022, p. 241). This speaks to the second challenge for sustainability researchers of all disciplines outlined above.

Crossing silos

An action orientation to our theorizing also entails asking the questions of for whom *and with whom* we theorize, where are there theoretical and practical insights of value beyond organization studies, and which and whose practices will be influenced by our findings (Janssens & Zanoni, 2021). Our collective contribution to organizing sustainably in a wider sense appears to be limited by an implicit (or explicit) preoccupation with corporate sustainability. These are not insignificant considerations given the importance of businesses in causing, but also potentially alleviating,

sustainability concerns, but this preoccupation contributes to the marginalization of insights from other disciplines and stifles examination of the wider system and its hegemonic aspects which make change so difficult. In a nutshell, we need to ask ourselves: are we looking in the right places, with the right instruments, and seeking the deepest and most appropriate explanations for organizing sustainably?

Indeed, it has been recognized for some time that the complex multi-dimensional societal challenges of our times require answers to be developed from the interactions of multiple knowledge bases. Thus putting the scholarship of organizing sustainably into practice includes a challenge to leave the comfort zone of superficial 'doing multidisciplinarity' in order to engage deeply and critically with the assumptions of other disciplines in constructive and productive ways. In seeking to do justice to the complexity of the problems at hand, we can also benefit from the varying emphases in empirical settings and methodological approaches across disciplines. For example, more empirical research is needed that engages with variegated, i.e. multiplex, and polyvalent organizing across levels and domains (e.g. Degroot et al., 2021). We will not be able to address the very substantial nature of the four themes we have highlighted without the benefit of the theoretical toolkits and accumulated expertise of other disciplines, and these are not limited to proximate disciplines in the social sciences; to contribute to the alleviation of the threats to our natural world we must work more closely with the natural sciences.

Academic activism

This same action orientation for meaningful change holds for organizational researchers' own activities. Our means of engagement with the problem has been inadequate. As scholars, we have a privileged view into seeing multiple aspects of the problems, and we have a platform from which to speak and act that – though under increasing threat from populism and the right-wing media – still has some credibility and influence with our publics. Lest we be accused of fiddling while Rome burns, we need to engage our citizens and contribute to public debate, following examples like the Alliance of World Scientists 'Scientists' Warning' initiative (https://www.scientistswarning.org/) and Project Drawdown (https://drawdown.org/), as well as joining others like the actors and filmmakers that made *Don't Look Up*, *Extrapolations* and other art-based warnings of climate change (Delmestri, 2023).

In particular, as organizational scholars often working at business schools, we need to energize (and challenge!) the business community, which has the power and the tools to both accelerate and block climate solutions. For example, we have to be more critical of 'doing less bad' approaches to business sustainability and instead call for harnessing the capabilities of business to fight for a liveable planet and more just societies – not only through our research, but also through our teaching and outreach activities. Elsewhere in the academic community, a considerable number of climate scientists came to the conclusion that they need to leave their laboratories and go to the streets. Is that possible at business schools where the bulk of organization scholars have their occupational home? If the time for addressing climate change and other sustainability challenges is short, is collective academic activism now needed to accelerate system transformation?

In the context of this call for action and new forms of organizational scholarship, we should acknowledge our own limitations and the constraints of the established conventions on our own professional praxis; in reflecting upon our role as editors, we feel first-hand the dilemma of implicitly reinforcing the taken-for-granted rules of our field and realizing that these very rules contribute to prolonging an extant system in need of change. The challenge of organizing sustainably starts with ourselves.

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