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E X C H A N G E

CHALLENGING DISCIPLINARY NORMS: A RESPONSE

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In this Exchange article, we respond to the criticisms raised by Wohlgezogen, Osegowitsch, McCabe, and Mol (2022) regarding our call for management researchers to focus on the worsening climate crisis (Nyberg & Wright, 2022). We argue that incremental change of "business as usual" has failed to address the challenge of climate change—evident in escalating carbon emissions and the expansion of fossil fuel extraction—and that radical change is urgently needed to lessen suffering and avoid catastrophe. We outline how management researchers can better contribute to the social and political debate over the climate crisis by highlighting the possibilities for degrowth, alternative forms of organizations and the potential for management scholars to act as agents of change.

In their recent Exchange article, Wohlgezogen, Osegowitsch, McCabe, and Mol (2022) argue that our article "Climate-Proofing Management Research" (Nyberg & Wright, 2022) underestimated the degree to which management scholars have engaged with climate change and that our suggestions for future management scholarship are misdirected. It is pleasing that our advocacy for greater attention to climate change by management scholars has generated a response. With the planet on a trajectory of 3.5 degrees Celsius of warming by the end of the century (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2021), threatening the future viability of life on the planet, it is obvious that the climate crisis needs all the scholarly attention it can get!

Frankly, whether it is only 0.2% of articles in the elite management journals (Nyberg & Wright, 2022) or 1.1% in the top quartile of journals (Wohlgezogen et al., 2022) that discuss climate change, the fact remains that both figures show a lack of serious engagement with the issue by management researchers. Considering the existential threat that climate change poses and the still-limited engagement with the topic, the question for management scholars is then not to *what* extent or *why* they examine this issue, but *how*. Therefore, in the following brief response to the Exchange article, we focus on *how* management researchers can better engage with climate change and more meaningfully contribute to this issue in organizational, societal, and policy debates. We do this by discussing the themes of incremental versus radical change, the possibilities for degrowth, the hegemony of corporate capitalism, and the potential for management scholars as agents of change.

INCREMENTAL VERSUS RADICAL CHANGE

Wohlgezogen et al. (2022) take issue with our critique of the dominance of corporate capitalism and continued economic growth as the key drivers of the climate crisis. Instead, they promote an eco-modernist approach of "greening" business activities at the "coalface" (we doubt the fossil fuel pun was intended) by diffusing "useful practices for corporations' climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts" (Wohlgezogen et al., 2022: 958). In defense of corporate capitalism, Wohlgezogen et al. suggest that management scholars can assist corporations to "transition" by involving corporate decision-makers in participatory research. Thus, they propose engaging cooperatively with corporations in incrementally strengthening existing capitalist institutions to nudge away from the most immediate risks of climate change.

This is, of course, the position favored by most large corporations and industries, which see a range

of market, regulatory, reputational, and physical risks and opportunities emerging in a climate-changed world. This is evident in how an increasing number of large corporations are embracing commitments to net zero emissions by 2050 (including oil giants like BP and Shell), with business strategies supporting the growth of environmentally friendly products and services, increased adoption of renewable energy, and the purchasing of offsets for increasing carbon emissions (Black et al., 2021). However, this advocacy for corporate incrementalism is problematic, for several reasons. First and foremost, despite decades of corporate commitments to address climate change, there has been no significant shift away from escalating carbon emissions and the current dangerous trajectory of worsening climate change. Despite corporate sustainability pledges and ongoing international negotiation, the world continues to witness the continuous expansion of fossil fuel extraction, production, and consumption. Indeed, the growth mantra of corporate capitalism ensures that the increase of renewable energy is not replacing fossil fuels, only adding to the energy mix. An incremental approach to the climate crisis fails to address the more basic problem of an economic system predicated upon compound growth fueled by fossil energy. There is thus a need for a radical rethink of the dominant economic system, which business researchers need to be involved in.

Second, while many businesses are now engaging with climate change, these risks are not objective measures equally shared across industries, nations, or the planet. Risk constructs are performative in that corporations and industries attempt to enact them for financial benefit. This is glaringly obvious in how Exxon Mobil recognized the risks of climate change, buried the scientific data, and then spent decades funding academic researchers and think tanks to spread doubt about climate science (Supran & Oreskes, 2017). Risk constructs are thus political in that they benefit some social actors over others (Nyberg & Wright, 2016). That is why the fossil fuel industry spends millions of dollars on non-market strategies to convince politicians and the public that they share these risks. Money brings political access that less powerful industries and citizens do not have. This encourages decision-makers to accommodate fossil fuel interests, and the strategies yield results: a recent International Monetary Fund report calculated industries linked to fossil fuels worldwide benefited from public subsidies in the order of US$11 million every minute, amounting to a total of US$5.9 trillion, in 2020 (Parry, Black, & Vernon, 2021). If business researchers conduct research in collaboration with implicated industries, there is a danger of collusion rather than transformation (Oreskes & Conway, 2010).

Third, and finally, our own extensive research on business responses to climate change highlights the limits of a reliance on corporate environmentalism and demonstrates that, over time, often well-intended commitments to improved environmental sustainability are simply translated into "business as usual" (Wright & Nyberg, 2017). Continuous critique from internal and external stakeholders as well as reassessments of products and services result in compromises in favor of a narrow profit motive. It is not particularly surprising that good intentions or purpose are sidelined, considering the corporate mantra of maximizing shareholder value. We thus wholeheartedly agree with Wohlgezogen et al. (2022: 958), who somewhat contradictorily argue that "fundamental changes to global economic systems are critical to avert a climate catastrophe." Recent debates in the field of management suggest two possible radical solutions to this: rebuild corporations and/or rebuild the economic system.

THE POSSIBILITIES FOR DEGROWTH

There is no doubt that the current dominant form of corporate capitalism is attuned toward maximizing shareholder value and that the general template for this is continued compound growth (Davis, 2021). To accommodate corporate growth, there has been an ever-increasing corporatization of other spheres of society, including health, education, media, and security. The might of corporations together with their political influence (Nyberg, 2021) point toward limited assistance from the "political and corporate decision makers" that Wohlgezogen et al. (2022: 959) put their faith in. Even new forms of corporations, such as public benefit corporations, appear to be crowded out of the market to ensure the maximization of shareholder value (Davis, 2021). Thus, there is a clear planetary danger in further strengthening existing institutions that are failing to address climate change, no matter how cooperatively.

Therefore, the path to rebuild the corporation as a climate-friendly means of organizing the relations of production and exchange will arguably, like most radical changes, come from below—from the people. There are existing social movements of academics supporting the effort to create more democratic and climate-friendly workplaces, and, as we outlined in our article, there are myriads of forms of organizing and collective actions that are not dependent on

growth (Nyberg & Wright, 2022). For example, this journal has recently published productive symposia on (a) ideas for alternative forms of corporate governance to address grand challenges (Filatotchev, Aguilera, & Wright, 2020) and (b) how entrepreneurship can challenge the dogma of growth and wealth creation in addressing environmental, social, and sustainability challenges (Markman, Waldron, Gianiodis, & Espina, 2019). These symposia provide numerous ideas and examples for how management scholars can participate in building collective actions in moving away from the current dangerous trajectory.

The alternative—rebuilding the economic system—to address climate change is dependent on either (a) decoupling economic growth from greenhouse gas emissions or (b) degrowth. The former is based on innovations and technological solutions that enable the growth of production of commodities while simultaneously radically reducing greenhouse gas emissions. This possibility of "green growth" is assumed in both national and international policy, including in the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals. This radical change of the economic system requires improving technological solutions to obtain higher eco-efficiency and changing the patterns of consumption to less environmentally harmful forms. Rather than cooperation with existing dominant industries, this requires substituting whole sectors with industries with low or moderate climate impacts (e.g., knowledge production and cultural industries).

However, there is no empirical evidence on resource use and carbon emissions to support decoupling (Hickel & Kallis, 2019). While technological improvements may render resource use more efficient, these gains are offset by expansion in scale (the so-called "Jevons effect") (Nyberg & Wright, 2022). Even the reduction in greenhouse gas emissions during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 have been quickly annulled as nations have rolled out stimulus packages to kick-start economic growth (Le Quéré et al., 2021). Analysis from Vivid Economics (2020) comparing the policies and the financial contributions from governments in the G20—the twenty largest economies in the world—found that 16 of the 20 stimulus packages "will have a net negative environmental impact." Capitalism as an economic system is dependent on an ever-growing proportion of the finite ecosystem for both production inputs and as a sink to dispose of waste. This is capitalism's ecological contradiction (Wright & Nyberg, 2015).

The alternative option—degrowth—is based on reducing material throughput while sustaining some form of quality of life (Hickel, 2020). While it is easy to pinpoint the problems with overconsumption in the global North, there are vast populations in the global South that can rightfully argue for material growth to support, for example, cooking, housing, clothing, and education. The key for degrowth is then to grow goods and relations without growing value. A useful debate for management scholars is thus how to manage downscaling the value of different sectors in a controlled and democratic manner to avoid unnecessary human suffering. For most, including ourselves in the so-called "developed world," limiting consumption according to just criteria in public, rather than personal, interest seems politically unimaginable. Accordingly, while the former—decoupling—is irreconcilable with capitalism, the latter—degrowth—is discordant with existing social imaginaries. In managing a transformation of organizations and societies, the "common sense" of corporate capitalism as the only viable form of organizing society therefore needs to be challenged.

THE HEGEMONY OF CORPORATE CAPITALISM

Our call to reimagining ways of organizing was exactly this herculean task of practically managing the transition to a climate-friendlier world. We are somewhat disheartened that Wohlgezogen et al. (2022: 955) interpret this as "fetishizing a narrow set of elite journals." Our intention was the exact opposite: a broad and interdisciplinary call to arms in practically addressing climate change by "developing community-based and local forms of organizing to mitigate carbon emissions, adapt to a climate-changed world and alleviate suffering" (Nyberg & Wright, 2022: 722). Rather than willfully misinterpreting our position, we suspect that our support for alternative organizations and practices is read as "abstract" (Wohlgezogen et al., 2022: 955), since it deviates from what is still seen in management scholarship as "common sense." As we suggested in our original article, this common sense represents a form of hegemony in which a dominant alliance in society maintains the active and passive consent of social members to the status quo (see also Wright, Nyberg, & Bowden, 2021). This is the conundrum most societies now face: to address climate change, alternative forms of organizations and economic systems are needed, but, considering the grip of corporate capitalism on society, any deviation from the pursuit of profit is accused of being "insular" or "obsolete" (Wohlgezogen et al., 2022: 958).

We are not at all surprised that management scholars are riding out to defend dominant industries and corporations in promoting the participation of "corporate decision-makers" and the "cooperation of industry" (Wohlgezogen et al., 2022: 959). After all, and as we highlighted in our original article, business schools were invented and promoted for this particular task. However, dismissing alternatives is not about practicality or "real-world impact"; it is about power. Dominant institutions and industries in any society have the capacity to define what is realistic and practical. For instance, in the United States, despite the election of a new president on a platform of strong climate action and advocacy for a Green New Deal, proposals for new fossil-fuel extraction continue. In Australia, where both ourselves and Wohlgezogen et al. work, the fossil fuel lock-in is as strong as ever, with the country one of the world's largest exporters of coal and gas, and the response to the pandemic a "gas-led recovery" based on new carbon frontiers, all while the forests burn and the coral reefs bleach. Indeed, despite the growing scientific certainty of the peril the world now faces, carbon emissions continue to increase, with over two-thirds of industrial greenhouse gas emissions produced since the 1850s occurring in the last 30 years (Heede, 2014).

Given the continuous reliance on fossil fuels for consumption and economic growth, it is perhaps not surprising that our advocacy for alternative organizations and strong climate change action is interpreted by Wohlgezogen et al. (2022: 959) as "undermining the cooperation of the industry." However, we consider it naïve to assume that political and corporate leaders will participate in their own demise. There are corporate and financial interests that support action on climate change, but these are market centered and capital friendly, and, as we outlined above, we doubt that dominant forms of corporate capitalism can sufficiently address climate change. As such, our stance is foremost political, not theoretical.

MANAGEMENT SCHOLARS AS AGENTS OF CHANGE

Considering the urgency of climate change, every scholar is a political actor. With the planet already experiencing unprecedented extreme weather events and rushing toward a catastrophic near future (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2021), not taking a position on climate change is in itself a position of supporting the status quo. However, while a majority of people now accept the science of climate change, there is still political disagreement about how best to address the worsening climate crisis. While a growing counter-hegemony is evident in the emergence of new social movements such as the School Strikes for the Climate, Extinction Rebellion, and fossil fuel divestment, universities and management scholars also need to play a critical role as agents for change in their research and teaching.

Here, we endorse Wohlgezogen et al.'s (2022: 959) call for "participatory scholarship" and engagement with a broad range of stakeholders as "co-producers of research and actionable knowledge." Indeed, this is an approach we advocated in our original article and which we stress in our own research through our engagement with sustainability professionals in business, as well as climate scientists, environmental activists, NGOs, community groups, policy advisers, and consultants (Wright & Gilding, 2013; Wright & Mann, 2013). While there is much discussion about the need for more engaged research (Hoffman, 2021), we suggest that business scholarship that focuses seriously on the climate crisis provides an ideal space for such public engagement. Beyond publishing our research in academic journals, as agents of change, we can have a far greater impact through building on our research through writing in the media, engaging in social media debates, blogs, public speaking, and participation in events promoting climate action. From our experience, this public climate engagement is very much a two-way interaction and our understanding of the climate crisis has been greatly enriched and reached a far broader audience through these interactions, meetings, and discussions than traditional research approaches.

Climate change of course also needs to urgently extend into our teaching and curricula in business schools. Climate change will define our lives in coming decades and our students will demand that our teaching better meshes with this emerging reality and provides a realistic and critical understanding of the magnitude of the problem and pathways forward. From our experience of teaching climate action in business schools, this is a focus that can be readily applied across much business school teaching and is generally well received by students well aware of the growing urgency of the climate crisis. There are now numerous business schools teaching climate change courses (e.g., Trinity Business School, Dublin, and Columbia Business School), a number of business schools with sustainability as a core strategy (e.g., Exeter Business School), as well as academic communities sharing ideas and resources (e.g., OS4Future—see os4future.org). However, just like climate change and sustainability agendas in

corporations, these initiatives are often dependent on individually motivated deans and academics, and can, just like business practice, be compromised unless old and dominant dogmas are challenged and changed. After all, the vast majority of business courses rarely acknowledge climate change and are still taught with the primary goal of corporate profit and underlying assumptions of endless economic growth (Wright & Nyberg, 2016).

CONCLUSION

Management researchers have assumed a habitable climate and planet will always exist as a basis for organized society, economic exchange, and profit maximization. However, we now live in an age of consequences, a world in which two centuries of fossil fuel extraction and use has fundamentally changed the chemistry of the atmosphere and oceans. As the most recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2021) assessment report makes clear, the world is already experiencing dangerous climate change and this will worsen dramatically over coming decades. The implications for societies, economies, and businesses are profound. Our field of scholarship is only now waking up to the very different physical realities we now face as a species. If we are to have any continued relevance in public debate, it is now up to us as business scholars and teachers to confront this challenge and speak and write clearly about what is at stake and what we need to do to lessen the harm of a climate-changed world.

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