Sustainable Consumption and Production
searching beyond commodity chains

Dr. Sylvia Lorek
Intention of the presentation

Throwing spotlight on dominant SCP research and policy to identify substantial blind spots

1) From a home economics perspective

2) From a political economy perspective

Elaborating on work in progress
Expanding SCP research: State of the art perspectives

Approach of mainstream economics
increasing productivity, eg. through the economies of scale

Mainstream interventions for sustainability
increasing efficient production or products

Production

Consumption
maximisation of utility often translated as fulfillment of unlimited needs
fair trade and the use of efficient, labeled products

Approaches on both sides are overridden by growth of throughput at the level of the wider system
Expanding SCP research:

1) From a home economics perspective

Care taking is a crucial component to achieve wellbeing for humans and their environment

Most of it does take place outside formal economies

- self-care
- care in the ‘home’ context (friends and family, household resources, materials and garden, etc)
- care for community and the public good (voluntary and unpaid social and environmental engagement)
- care as professional activity (paid)
Expanding SCP research: 1) From a home economics perspective

Underexplored issues of care in relation to (sustainable) consumption research:

- How is consumption as embedded in care practice?

- Can an ethos of care serve as a pathway towards more sustainable forms of consumption?

- How does the commercialisation and outsourcing of care in the global economy impact the sustainability of the field?
Expanding SCP research:
2) From a political economy perspective

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Approaches on both sides are overridden by growth of throughput at the level of the wider system.
Expanding SCP research:
2) From a political economy perspective

Starting point for the KAN WG on Political Economy

Recognising that the politics of productivity are depoliticizing the processes of social and ecological change

Paying attention to the power, justice and political and social contestations behind the dynamics of un-sustainable consumption production systems
Expanding SCP research:

2) From a political economy perspective

Four dimensions analysed for change serving as entry-points to map interactions between agency and structure in production-consumption systems

1) Justice
2) Governance
3) Inequality and Financialization
4) Knowledge and Action
Expanding SCP research:
2) From a political economy perspective

Justice: Beyond the Symptom of Inequality

State of the Art: Expanding production-consumption systems is regarded as an enabler of justice

- for economic liberals: produce more for everyone, to achieve a “fair share” for all and political stability
- For social liberals: economic growth an important means to enhance valuable freedoms for all
- For some further worldview: expanding production-consumption systems addresses inequality and thereby legitimize the market or the state (depending on the worldview)

This, however, often results in normalized violation of individual and community rights for the sake of productivity and efficiency
Expanding SCP research: 2) From a political economy perspective

Justice: Beyond the Symptom of Inequality

Research questions resulting from here

- How does violence became and still becomes normalized within production-consumption systems?
- How can we deepen the understanding of individual and community rights and norms in their intersection with production-consumption systems from local to the global?
- How can we differentiate between proposals addressing only symptoms of inequality from those envisioning structural changes and promoting justice through normative and institutional innovation and reform?
Expanding SCP research:
2) From a political economy perspective

Governance:

Enabling Sustainable Production-Consumption

State of the Art:

- Conceptualization of international relations and global governance in terms of countries or nation-states interactions competing for enabling an attractive destination for private capital investment

This misses out the complex dynamics of global and local value chains and production networks governed by a combination of public and private actors.

- E.g. Harmonisation of policies on property rights, commercial secrets and repatriation of profits to attract foreign investment
Expanding SCP research:
2) From a political economy perspective

Governance:
Enabling Sustainable Production-Consumption

Research questions resulting from here

- Can rich countries scale down their production-consumption systems to allow ecological space for fulfilling the unmet needs of developing countries?
- Can poorer countries craft alternative development paths that advance socio-ecological goals rather than reproduce failures of miss-development?
- Can governance promote the common good – in this case sustainable production-consumption systems?
- How to differentiate forms of governance that manage the impacts of unsustainable production-consumption systems, from those that aim at structural changes of those systems?
Global Inequality:
Financialization and Acceleration of Production-Consumption Systems

State of the Art:

- The process of financialization has shifted power by accelerating and expanding the commodification of society and nature with deep impacts on production-consumption systems.
- In addition a massive expansion of debt as money translates into creation of goods and services which necessarily has an energy and materials basis.

Thus efforts are on the way to formulate a radical monetary theory alternative to neoclassical monetary theory and its concepts related to money supply.
Expanding SCP research: 2) From a political economy perspective

Global Inequality:
Financialization and Acceleration of Production-Consumption Systems

Research questions resulting from here

- Can the absence of interest on debt, for instance, dilute the expansionary impulse of production-consumption systems?
- What is the status of alternate approaches to finance like Islamic banking, or Buddhist economics or the theory of endogenous money for a finite planet?
Expanding SCP research: 
Summing up

• Within SCP research the system boundaries are hardly explored so far.

• Some direction where to search for them are actually on the radar of SCP scholars

• So far there are more research questions than answers

I hope some of questions and considerations are thought provoking enough that you like to join in!
SSCP KAN Seminar
February 20, 2020, Research Institute for Humanity and Nature, Kyoto

Thank you for your attention

Dr. Sylvia Lorek

with support from
KAN SCP Working Group
on Political Economy
and SCORAI Europe

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