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COMMENTARY

Organizational psychology's contribution to the evolution of work and its environmental impact

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In his focal article, Mumby (2019) traces a rather disconcerting history regarding the development of capitalism, largely focused on the last 100 years, and a transition from what he describes as a Fordist to a post-Fordist relationship between capital and labor. Although not the primary point of his article, Mumby (2019) makes a rather damning critique of organizational psychology and management scholarship when he writes, "... from a critical perspective, the field of management—broadly construed—can be viewed as deploying increasingly sophisticated efforts to more efficiently extract surplus value from alienated, expropriated labor" (p. 430). We doubt most researchers in areas such as work–life balance and justice would feel they are to such an extent a part of the cogs of capitalism, but we would like to entertain this critique for a moment and discuss how we believe it should force us to examine our larger role in society as organizational scholars more critically.

A deafening alarm has been raised from the greater scientific community in the face of a great existential threat to our society: climate change. Organizational psychology as a field, however, has been largely silent on how we can address this issue (for exceptions see Campbell & Campbell, 2005; Härtel & Pearman, 2010; Howard-Grenville, Buckle, Hoskins, & George, 2014). Our relative silence is particularly damning because, as we will briefly explain, it is possible that we have exacerbated this problem over the last century due to the role our field has played in the economy described by Mumby (2019).

In comparison to our relative silence, there has been concern in the broader psychological literature regarding the role of psychological science in climate change, as evidenced by a special issue of *American Psychologist* in 2011 on the contribution of psychology to climate science. This special issue was headlined by Swim et al. (2011), who outlined the primary contributions of psychology to climate science, particularly in understanding the likely psychological effects climate change would have on the population, ideas on how to manage the likely stress to come from climate change, and insights on how to change behaviors to mitigate the effects of climate change. However, any comprehensive effort to tackle climate change is going to necessitate critical changes to the way our economy, and the organizations within it, operate. We contend that this will require organizational psychology and management scholars to take a proactive view on how to support this change. However, doing so will require coming to terms with our role in the development of our current socioeconomic system as outlined by Mumby (2019).

Economics and climate change

Dr. Peter A. Victor (2019) recently published a book, *Managing Without Growth: Slower by Design, not Disaster*, on the need and potential for establishing an economy that is sustainable in the long term by decoupling economic progress from environmental effects. Victor traces

the history of economic development showing the connection between economic growth and environmental impact. He contends the primary goal of advanced economies since the mid-1900s, at least, has been growth as measured by gross domestic product (GDP), which is a measure of the total economic output of the nation. The problem for the environment has been that GDP has been inextricably linked to environmental effects, such that economic gains have invariably led to increased negative environmental impacts.

Organizational psychology and climate change

It has been shown that economic growth as measured by GDP generally increases the production of CO_2, and GDP itself is a direct function of the number of hours worked by employed individuals in the economy and their productivity (which is real GDP per employee per hour; Victor, 2019). Thus, mathematically, there is a relationship such that, all else being equal, increases in employee productivity are likely to increase their environmental impact through increasing GDP, and thereby leading to an increase in CO_2 emissions. Given these relationships, the proposition of Mumby (2019) that organizational psychology has historically been preoccupied with increasing the efficiency of employees would mean that we have, unintentionally, had a substantially negative impact on the environment though our contribution to increases in employee productivity. As individuals who identify with the field of organizational psychology and are deeply concerned with the impending climate crisis, this is a sobering realization.

We would like to be clear that we do not think our field's attempts to improve organizations and the lives of their members over the last century has been misguided, and we believe our field has done much in these domains. However, the nobleness of the pursuit does not excuse its implications, even if unintended. We do think it behooves us to examine our place in the broader socio-economic system and potentially shoulder our share of the blame for how we have arrived at this moment as a species. Once we confront our complicity in the system that, as currently structured, is driving our species toward the abyss, we can more adequately help address those systemic issues and both do our part to address the threat of climate change and place our field as a leader in those efforts.

So, what *do* we do as a field? In their discussion of things psychologists can do to combat climate change, Swim et al. (2011) argue that psychologists must focus efforts "on changes that have large potential effects on emissions" (p. 247). We believe the fields of organizational psychology and management are uniquely positioned to be drivers of change in areas that have those potentially large effects to which Swim et al. (2011) refer. As examples, we can use organizational development to shift companies toward a more sustainable path and reskill employees for the green jobs of tomorrow; study the impact of sustainability on organizational metrics or climate change-induced anxiety on the performance and health of workers; and help provide evidence-based guidance in an era of environmental change and uncertainty, while illuminating a path forward to mitigate negative environmental impact for generations to come. In this end, we think we must promote a more sustainable view of what work life means. Despite the insights we have to offer, research has found that our science has rarely been used in this domain (Daddi, Todaro, De Giacomo, & Frey, 2018). The time has come for us as a field to not only reflect on our possible role in this crisis, but claim our spot at the table in coming up with solutions and sharing the insights we have to address this great threat.

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