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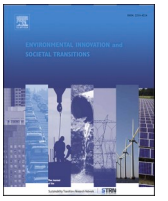

Research article

Between the 'Other' and the 'Same': The alterity of the alternative economies in sustainability transitions

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ABSTRACT

This special issue explores the role of economic alterity in sustainability transitions. It draws attention to the ways in which 'alternative' and 'mainstream' economic practices are defined, enacted, and contested. Moving beyond binary framings, the editorial presents contributions that examine alternative economic initiatives through the lens of situated, relational, and hybrid dynamics. The articles shed light on the tensions between opposition and co-optation, and between individual and systemic change. In doing so, they emphasise the significance of subaltern knowledge, community identity, and plural imaginaries. By foregrounding these dimensions, this special issue advocates for a more political and situated approach to alternative economic spaces in sustainability transitions research. It encourages greater attention to uneven geographies, ontological diversity, and the complex relationships between alternatives and the mainstream. This special issue contributes to broader efforts to rethink how economies are made, unmade and remade, whether within, against or beyond capitalist modernity.

1. Introduction

Amid deepening socio-ecological crises and increasing critiques of capitalist modernity, a growing body of scholarship has explored alternative economies as potential spaces for imagining and enacting more sustainable futures (Fickey, 2011; Fuller et al., 2010; Gritzas and Kavoulakos, 2016; Healy, 2009). However, the concepts, representations, and practices of the 'alternative' and its referent −whether labelled as the 'mainstream', the 'conventional' or the 'dominant'− are far from straightforward.

In the field of sustainability transitions, the notions of the 'alternative' and the 'mainstream' have largely been conceptualized through the niche-regime approach, where transformation is commonly driven by innovations that emerge within the protected space of a niche and potentially lead to a regime shift via various dynamics and pathways (Geels, 2014, 2021; Köhler et al., 2019; Schot and Geels, 2013; Smith and Raven, 2012). From this perspective, transition research has often interpreted alternative economies as expression of the innovative agency of niche actors driving sustainability-oriented transformations across sectors such as food, energy, or fashion (Loorbach et al., 2020). This includes a range of alternative economic agents such as social enterprises (Hörisch, 2015; Lüdeke-Freund, 2020; Witkamp et al., 2011), grassroots initiatives (Raj et al., 2022; Seyfang and Smith, 2007), or, more recently, households (Raven et al., 2025). Yet, questions regarding what it means to be 'alternative' in a world where formerly marginal

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practices are increasingly incorporated into the mainstream, what kind of otherness these actors and practices embody in relation to dominant neoliberal capitalist logics, and how we can analytically comprehend this alterity, remain largely under-represented in sustainability transitions debates.

Scholarly work in the field has increasingly acknowledged the centrality of politics and power dynamics in shaping the direction and form of sustainability transitions (Avelino et al., 2024; Binz et al., 2025; Feola, 2020; Ford and Newell, 2021; Kemp et al., 2022; Raj et al., 2022; Truffer et al., 2022). This increasing political approach has made salient critical perspectives of sustainability transitions research that problematize the naive 'pro-innovation bias' for overemphasizing the subversive potential of innovations (Feola et al., 2021; Raj et al., 2022; Turnheim and Sovacool, 2020). Related to this bias are calls for research that moves beyond the disproportionate analytical focus on the making of novelties, urging instead greater attention to issues such as: 1) the problematic makings of social innovations that may reinforce unsustainable dynamics (Markard et al., 2021; Pel et al., 2023b); 2) the potential co-optation of such innovations into the spirit of capitalism (Markard et al., 2021; Kemp et al., 2022); 3) the geographical approach to spatially uneven makings (Binz et al., 2025); and 4) the unmaking of dominant capitalist and growth-based discourses, institutions, and infrastructures that lie at the root of socio-ecological crises (Avelino et al., 2024; Feola, 2019; Feola et al., 2021; McNelly and Franz, 2024). Overlooking the visibility of these critical perspectives of sustainability transitions also poses risks to inadvertently reproduce colonial projects through mechanisms of appropriation, enclosure, and commodification (Hickel, 2021), as well as to establishing new core-periphery dependencies that may reinforce the power of the elites, as reflected in low-carbon innovations (Tirado-Herrero and Fuller, 2021). This editorial joins such conversations in sustainability transitions research on the need to problematize economic alternatives by providing a critical framing for the representation of the alternative through lenses of alterity, and by offering key insights and research directions from the collection of contributions in this special issue.

The notion of alterity has long been discussed as a philosophical and anthropological issue regarding identity formation within the exclusion-inclusion dimension (Czarniawska, 2008), or debates on the 'other' from perspectives such as postcolonial, gender, or ageing (Zimmermann, 2016). By focusing on the other, alterity invites pointing at the minority, the cultural other, or the cognitively diverse, i.e., those that society deems as different (Wulf, 2016). In this sense, Smith (2015) differentiates between alterity, diversity and pluralism: while pluralism and multiculturalism build upon an "egalitarian environment of inclusion" (p 253), diversity emphasises the under-represented other. In this conceptualisation, alterity can be defined as engaging (i.e., knowing, representing, and narrating) with other identities and categories that can emerge through enactment or talk (Jonas et al., 2010; Skovgaard-Smith et al., 2020).

When brought into the economic sphere, alterity can be mobilised as powerful conceptual lens about "being alternative by believing in the possibility of an economic and political 'other'" (Jonas et al., 2010: 4). This notion provides an entry point for thinking about alternative economies as spaces to reimagine how value is defined, produced, and measured, as well as how economic life is organized (Leyshon and Lee, 2003; Gibson-Graham, 2006). What matters is not whether an initiative is explicitly identified as 'alternative' but rather how it is enacted and represented as such within specific contexts. Scholarly conversations, particularly those led by researchers in Economic Geography, have enriched the understanding of the alternative-mainstream dialectic. Notable contributions include Gibson-Graham's influential work on diverse economies (2006, 2008), as well as conceptual developments and practices of alternative economic spaces in Fuller et al. (2010), Leyshon et al. (2003), Gritzas and Kavoulakos, (2016), or Rosol (2020).

This perspective calls for a fluid and contextual understanding of both alternative and mainstream, as Leyshon and Lee (2003) make it clear when they describe the notion of economic alternative as a "chaotic concept" (p. 17) that shifts across time, space and sector. Similarly, the mainstream should not be seen as singular or static, as research on the varieties of capitalism highlights (Loewen, 2022), showing the heterogeneous and evolving nature of capitalist systems. In this light, mainstream capitalism is perhaps best understood not as a fixed structure, but as a dynamic set of social and economic relations centered on the accumulation of capital (Harvey, 2011). Likewise, alternative responses to these relations are neither singular nor fixed, but diverse and evolving.

In sum, the overarching thread of this editorial is the need to move beyond binary understandings in sustainability transitions research, responding in turn to calls for greater theoretical pluralism and diversity in the field (Hopkins et al., 2020; Preuß et al., 2021). We start by interrogating the meanings, boundaries, and manifestations of alterity in alternative economies. This is followed by an overview of the contributions included in this Special Issue. We conclude by reflecting on the insights these contributions offer for the area of sustainability transitions and outlining potential directions for future research.

2. On the alterity of alternative economies

Economic alterity cannot be understood merely as a matter of being different from the mainstream, nor is it a fixed condition. Rather, it is a situated, fluid, and contested process that unfolds through shifting relations between dominant and non-dominant economic forms. This section explores how economic alterity emerges, evolves, and is negotiated across these relational dynamics.

2.1. Rethinking the mainstream-alternative binary

The conceptual fluidity of both the alternative and the mainstream makes the theorisation of economic alterity a debatable arena. This is due, not only to the diversity of imaginaries and practices that claim to be alternative, but also to the complex and shifting nature of capitalism itself, against which alterity is often defined. First, we must consider the interplay between discourse and practice of the alternative in shaping economic alterity. The discursive space for imagining alternatives within economic spaces is vast and diverse (Fickey, 2011; Gibson-Graham, 2008). So vast that the very discourse of 'alternatives' has arguably become mainstream itself (Hillebrand and Zademach, 2013). Yet alterity cannot rest solely on symbolic differentiation, since it is also constrained by the materiality and practice of economies that "enable people to make a living of a kind and in conditions that they might choose" (Lee, 2010:

273). This emphasis on viability foregrounds the material and practical dimensions of alterity, which are always situated, emerging relationally, and vulnerable to co-optation by dominant economies (Healy, 2009; Jonas, 2013; Leyshon and Lee, 2003).

Second, the relationship between mainstream economy and capitalism is itself contested. On the one hand, capitalism may be understood as a fixed totalising socio-economic order, particularly under the globalising force of neoliberalism, thus equating it with the mainstream (Gibson-Graham, 1996). From this lens, alternatives appear as marginal or utopian 'others', often defined in relation to, and subsumed under, the dominant capitalist identity (Hillebrand and Zademach, 2013). However, other perspectives emphasise the internal diversity and capacity for transformation of capitalism, as shown by research on varieties of capitalism and deep transitions (Kanger and Schot, 2019; Feola, 2020; Loewen, 2022). In this view, capitalism would be a broader cultural and political endeavour (Gibson-Graham, 1996), whose shifting forms open up spaces for alternatives not only *in relation to* but also *beyond* capitalism (Hillebrand and Zademach, 2013).

Third, despite its variability, capitalism arguably entails key structural and ideational features that matter when conceptualising economic alterity in its diverse manifestations. Structurally, capitalism can be defined as a process of capital accumulation, grounded in private ownership of the means of production, a division between capital and labour, and market expansion as necessary conditions, alongside the profit motive as its driving force (Harvey, 2011; Parker et al., 2014). Ideationally, the reproduction of capitalism is upheld by cultural values such as coercive competition, the pursuit of efficiency, and a belief in endless progress (Parker et al., 2014), as well as by powerful imaginaries of individual freedom, personal growth, and moral legitimacy through work and productivity (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Parker et al., 2014). These dynamics not only organise economic relations but also shape subjectivities, institutional logics, and power structures, making them key reference points for assessing the scope and depth of economic alterity.

In sum, the distinction between the economic mainstream and alternative is inherently ambiguous. Rather these terms are discursively, materially and historically constructed, and continuously negotiated in relation to the shifting forms of capitalism. Economic alterity, therefore, must be understood as an inherently unstable condition that is shaped through contestation, co-optation, and situated enactment.

2.2. Economic alterity in the (un)making

Building on the questioning of the alternative-mainstream binary thinking, this section frames economic alterity as involving the making of economic difference as well as the unmaking of institutionalised imaginaries and practices. We highlight three interrelated perspectives that shape such a dynamic process: the visibility of the plurality of practices that shape economic alterity, the political positioning of alternative economic spaces, and alternatives defined as everyday enactment of individual and collective experience.

The first perspective begins with the premise that what counts as 'economic' is itself a product of discursive and institutional selection. This non-essentialist framing of economic spaces has been well illustrated by the *diverse economies* framework developed by the economic geographers Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006). Their ground-breaking work reframes the economy as a heterogeneous space of coexisting practices, i.e., capitalist, alternative-capitalist, and non-capitalist, that differ across six interrelated dimensions: enterprise, labour, transactions, property, finance, and governance. Making visible practices that have been rendered invisible, excluded, or irrelevant by *capitalocentric*[1] narratives, enables recognition of the already-existing plurality of economic life (Gibson-Graham, 2006).

Such plurality is aligned with the argument advanced by Escobar (2018), who challenges the ontology of universality embedded in capitalist modernity and calls for nurturing the *pluriverse*, i.e., the multiplicity of possible worlds and ways of organising life grounded in principles of social justice, equality, non-hierarchy, and harmony with nature. Examples of such transformative imaginaries can be found across the globe: in the cultural ethos of *buen vivir* in South America, the *ubuntu* philosophy of mutuality in South Africa, and the emphasis on self-reliance and self-governance in *swaraj* from India (see Kothari et al., 2019 for a comprehensive collection). As Escobar (2018) expressively puts it, "[Pluriverse] is about the difference that all marginalized and subaltern groups have to live with day in and day out, and that only privileged groups can afford to overlook as they act as if the entire world were, or should be, as they see it" (p. xvi).

Furthermore, the ethical and political dimensions of alterity inherent in the concept of the pluriverse highlight a significant limitation: the visibility and celebration of difference, while important, is arguably insufficient. There is a risk of overlooking the structural conditions, power asymmetries and co-optation dynamics that determine which practices are recognised —or marginalised— as 'alternative' (Fickey, 2011; Healy, 2009). To fully grasp the political nature of economic spaces (Fuller et al., 2010), it is crucial to analyse how institutions, narratives and power relations shape economic formations. In this sense, economic alterity becomes meaningful when tied to political alterity (Jonas et al., 2010). This shift creates opportunities to challenge dominant arrangements and to recognise multiple forms of coordination, contestation and governance. Community land trusts, for instance, exemplify the interrelation between economic and political alterity: they seek not only to decommodify land, but also to contest dominant property regimes by advancing collective ownership models and reconfiguring relations between local communities, state institutions, and market actors. In this light, alternatives entail control over economic resources as well as over discourse, territory, and policymaking arenas (Hillebrand and Zademach, 2013).

A political-economic perspective of alterity also underpins the typology proposed by Fuller et al., (2010), who conceptualise the

[1] "Capitalocentrism is a dominant economic discourse that distributes positive value to those activities associated with capitalist economic activity however defined, and assigns lesser value to all other processes of producing and distributing goods and services by identifying them in relation to capitalism as the same as, the opposite of, a complement to, or contained within. A capitalocentric discourse condenses economic difference, fusing the variety of noncapitalist economic activities into a unity in which meaning is anchored to capitalist identity" (Gibson-Graham, 2006: 56).

alterity of economic spaces in terms of their transformative relationship with the mainstream (p. 57). First, *alternative-oppositional* spaces are actively and consciously constructed as alternatives. They not only offer different values and practices but also explicitly reject the identities, norms, and operational logics of the mainstream economic system; their alterity is defined by both difference and opposition. Second, *alternative-additional* spaces provide options alongside mainstream institutions but do not necessarily position themselves in opposition to them; their alterity lies more in the provision of diversity or choice than in directly challenging dominant formations. Finally, *alternative-substitute* spaces function as replacements or 'last resort' solutions for economic institutions that have disappeared or withdrawn from a particular context. Their alterity may or may not be consciously articulated as alternative, and instead emerges situationally, out of the need to fill institutional voids left by the retreat of dominant systems.

Moreover, alternatives can also be understood as existing along a spectrum of oppositionality. Here, the boundaries between the alternative and the dominant are permeable, with elements of capitalist and non-capitalist entities coexisting, and temporal shifts are common (Vincent and Feola, 2020; Holloway et al., 2016). Additionally, the oppositionality of the alternative may centre not only on innovation but also on dismantling entrenched capitalist systems in material, symbolic, and institutional terms (Feola, 2019; Feola et al., 2021). Making visible the deconstructive nature of economic alterity can lead to the reimagining of deeper economic transformations, such as the de-accumulation, de-commodification, and de-enclosure advocated by the degrowth framework (Hickel, 2021). These perspectives foreground sustainability transitions as contested processes involving both ruptures and creations, thereby broadening the analytical scope of transition studies beyond its traditional focus on scaling up niche innovations within prevailing systems (Truffer, 2022).

Finally, beyond its plural and political dimensions, economic alterity must also be understood as experiential, i.e., something that is lived, felt, and interpreted by individuals and collectives. Engagement with alternative economic practices —whether through adoption, rejection, or transformation— depends on the situated motivations and understandings of those involved (Holloway et al., 2016). These experiences are shaped by diverse ontologies of what economic life entails, including varying conceptions of time (e.g., linear, cyclical, relational), space (e.g., physical, social, symbolic), human nature (e.g., competitive, independent, cooperative, interdependent), and economic logics (e.g., efficiency, market competition, solidarity, care) (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Vincent and Feola, 2020). Recognising this ontological diversity is crucial to avoid reproducing narrow and Western definitions of what counts as 'alternative', as Čajka and Novotný (2022) highlight in their extensive review of research on alternative economies.

Taken together, the plural, political and experiential nature of the processes of making and unmaking, show that economic alterity is not a stable or singular condition, but a process in flux, Yet, how alterity is recognised, lived, or contested depends not only on these internal dynamics, but also on the specific contexts in which it unfolds. It is to these empirical configurations and tensions that we now turn.

2.3. Situating economic alterity: context and contestation

Economic alterity takes shape not in abstract opposition to the mainstream, but through context-specific negotiations that blur, stretch, or challenge dominant economic logics. Accordingly, the shifting boundaries of the mainstream-alternative divide have been empirically demonstrated across diverse contexts, sectors and institutions.

For instance, in the abundant literature on alternative food networks, actors often blend conventional logics (e.g. profit-seeking, wage labour, or private property) with practices aimed at decommodification, solidarity, or environmental stewardship (Holloway et al., 2016; Jones et al., 2010; Rosol, 2020). Simultaneously, this literature shows how elements associated with alternative food, such as concerns over food safety, organic production, local sourcing, or Fair Trade, have been absorbed by conventional producers and retailers (Rosol, 2020; Tamásy, 2013; Zwart and Wertheim-Heck, 2021).

A similar ambivalence characterises the expanding phenomenon of social enterprises, which are often described as hybrid organisations that combine a social mission with entrepreneurial practices and operate at the intersection of profit-oriented and mission-driven logics (Battilana and Dorado, 2010; Dey and Steyaert, 2018; Pache and Santos, 2013). On the one hand, these institutions may be understood as catalysts for systemic change by addressing structural injustices embedded in capitalist systems of production and exchange (Hillman et al., 2018; Hörisch, 2015), as well as questioning, reshaping, or even replacing dominant institutional arrangements, specifically the capitalist enterprise logics (Haxeltine et al., 2017; Pel et al., 2023a; Vasquez-del-Solar and Merino, 2021). On the other hand, social enterprises may be seen as projects of individual 'heroic entrepreneurs' enhancing the *entrepreneurialization* of society, thereby enforcing the neoliberal welfare logic (Amin et al., 2003; Garrow and Hasenfeld, 2014; North et al. 2020; Pel et al., 2023b), or as a paradoxical phenomenon that is prone to co-optation into mainstream economies (Pel et al., 2023a; Vasquez-del-Solar and Merino, 2021).

These tensions remind us that alternative economic initiatives, whether framed as social, solidarity-based or antagonistic, do not neatly align along a single axis of transformation. Some reproduce dominant logics, others subvert them from within, and many inhabit ambiguous spaces in between (Feola, 2019; North et al., 2020). Rather than seeking a unified countermovement, it is more fruitful to remain attentive to the situated, partial, and often unexpected ways in which economic alterity is enacted.

Hence, the contextuality of alterity is decisive, resulting in practices that may appear alternative in one setting and ordinary or even problematic in another. Informal economies, for instance, may express solidarity and survival in low-income contexts, but serve as tax avoidance strategies in affluent ones (Williams and Windebank, 2002). Moreover, not all actors identify their practices as alternative, since many forms of non-capitalist practice are not consciously positioned as oppositional or exceptional but are simply lived as everyday practices or coping strategies (e.g., unpaid work, monetised community exchanges) (White and Williams, 2016). This reflects the significance of situated knowledge, lived experience, and the politics of recognition in shaping how alterity is defined and enacted, as illustrated by *alternative milieu*, where the concentration of countercultural institutions and actors in specific locations enables

alternative imaginaries and practices (Longhurst, 2015).

Overall, these insights call into question the use of the label 'alternative' to define non-capitalist economic practices when it overlooks their embeddedness in everyday life, and reinforce the need for a relational and situated understanding of economic difference; one that takes seriously how meanings are produced through lived experience and localised practice, rather than imposed through predefined analytical categories.

3. Contributions to this special issue

This special issue brings together four articles that enrich debates on the alterity-mainstream dialogue in sustainability transitions. Each offers a distinct perspective that helps illuminate the complex processes through which capitalist regime rules are simultaneously reproduced and challenged. The selected works emphasise: 1) the struggles of alternative initiatives to destabilise the spirit of capitalism; 2) the complementarity of varying degrees of oppositionality to the mainstream; 3) alternative value creation for under-represented 'others'; and 4) the situated nature of alternative economies, shaped by historical, cultural, geographical, and political contexts.

First, the spirit of capitalism is addressed by Gajewski and Kungl (2024) through an examination of the role of capitalism in sustainability transitions, with a focus on ecopreneurs' interactions with capitalist ideologies. Drawing from the sociological notion of spirit of capitalism (see Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005), the study connects this concept with economic alterity, analysing alternative economic forms through case studies of nine German green start-ups operating in diverse sectors. The research assesses ecopreneurs' motivations, orientations, and the legitimation of their business practices, evaluating the extent to which they break from or conform to capitalist principles. Findings suggest that, despite their environmentally conscious goals, these entrepreneurs struggle to fully disengage from a capitalist mindset. Notably, market pressures and constraints inhibit genuine alternatives and, in essence, limit their transformative potential in promoting a post-capitalist economy. The research identifies specific stabilisation mechanisms that reinforce ecopreneurs' mindsets when environmental and economic goals conflict. This highlights the difficulty of achieving deeper transformations that go beyond merely integrating sustainability into existing capitalist frameworks. It illustrates the complexities of the alternative–dominant interplay, and how social innovations may end up reinforcing unsustainable dynamics.

The alterity-mainstream binary is examined by Kramer et al. (2024) in terms of growth narratives within the 'sustainable fashion industry'. They analyse the strategies that companies adopt to position themselves along a spectrum of growth narratives, between two distinct ends: 'grow when it's good' and 'less is more'. The article explores how sustainable fashion entrepreneurs are navigating the transition from traditional to more ethical production processes, based on qualitative case studies of fashion brands that integrate environmental and social sustainability into their business models. The research reveals the challenges of competing in a market driven by fast fashion, and highlights the roles of consumer education and advocacy, together with sustainable fashion entrepreneurs, in driving a broader movement towards a fashion industry underpinned by socioenvironmental principles. The study argues that the boundaries between alternative and dominant are permeable, and that oppositionality to growth can be understood as a continuum rather than through absolute categories, playing complementary roles in sustainability transitions.

The hybridity of the alternative and the mainstream in sustainability transitions is the object of study in the work by Colbourne et al. (2024), who explore the role of hybrid entrepreneurship in fostering justice and diversity-oriented responses. The study focuses on how these ventures address dilemmas faced by the under-represented 'other'. The authors examine the Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation Indigenous community in Canada and the Karachi Down Syndrome Programme in Pakistan to illustrate a dual model in which individuals pursue entrepreneurial ventures while maintaining traditional employment structures. Findings show that community identity, embeddedness, as well as spiritual, confessional, and cultural values, are essential drivers for this alternative value creation. Furthermore, it illuminates how hybrid entrepreneurship practices manage collective learning to ensure equitable transitions. Hybrid entrepreneurship is thus positioned as an alternative pathway to amplify marginalised voices to influence institutions, enabling sustainable transitions to unfold on the communities' own terms.

Finally, Sanz Abad (2025) provides an example of how alternative economies are shaped by historical and geographical embeddedness through the study of the long-standing experience of the waste-picking organisation Traperos de Emaús in Spain from lenses of social solidarity and economic alterity. By attending to the cultural, political, and material dimensions of waste, the study reveals how economic alterity is both imagined and practised at the intersection of marginalisation, care, and collective agency. Specifically, by dismissing technocratic solutions, the organisation emphasises labour-intensive methods to create a model grounded in environmental justice and sustainability. The author critiques eco-efficiency-driven solutions that rely on capitalist principles and highlights the need to include subaltern knowledge, i.e., traditionally marginalised know-how such as rag-picking, into the environmental transition. In fact, the case makes visible practices that are alternative because they have been excluded or rendered irrelevant by dominant capitalist practices, namely equal pay, reduced working hours, distribution of work, and artisanal approaches to waste management. Thus, the concept of alterity is explored across economic, environmental, and epistemological dimensions, showcasing how alternative economic actors, as portrayed in the case, challenge mainstream capitalist frameworks. The focus on subaltern knowledge directly challenges the ontology of universality embedded in capitalist modernity and contributes to nurturing the pluriverse.

4. Conclusions and research directions

This special issue sets out to use alterity in the economic domain as a lens to enrich our understanding of sustainability transitions. The studies included invite us to transcend an essentialist approach to the alternative and the mainstream, calling for a political

comprehension of economic space, one that embraces multiplicity, hybridity, and situated complexity. This, in turn, emphasises sustainability transitions not as predetermined or linear processes, but as dynamic, contested, and plural transformations.

The framing and contributions to this special issue collectively challenge fixed definitions of 'the alternative', encouraging a return to fundamental questions: *What does it mean for an economy to be alternative? To what is it an alternative? How is alterity recognised, contested, or erased?* The insights developed here demonstrate that economic difference is best understood as a situated and relational process, that is, one that unfolds at the intersection of differentiation, resistance, and resignification, always embedded in specific temporal, spatial, and socio-political contexts. Rather than assuming a unified counter-hegemonic movement, the articles highlight the fragmented, ambiguous, and often hybrid nature of alterity in relation to dominant capitalist regimes.

Taken together, the contributions gathered in this special issue open fertile ground for future inquiry into the dynamics of economic alterity within sustainability transitions. First, to advance current debates that expand the empirical terrain of economic alterity, future research should examine different sectors, such as healthcare, housing, digital platforms, energy or food, where viable alternatives to capitalist frameworks might emerge. The varying contextualities across economic fields may help identify where and how such alternatives develop, and under what conditions they are able to transform entrenched institutional structures.

Second, the studies included point to the value of methodological diversity, in coherence with the onto-epistemological plurality we have been arguing for as a way to better grasp the complexity of alterity-mainstream dynamics across time and space. While the case study method also prevails in this special issue, the use of approaches such as ethnography, participatory action research, and discourse analysis, alongside longitudinal designs, could help elucidate how alterity manifests, evolves, and interacts with dominant frameworks. Attention should be given to both exploratory studies (e.g., on the emergence of new practices) and explanatory research that uncovers, for instance, the mechanisms shaping continuity or rupture in economic imaginaries.

Third, a pressing challenge for future research lies in further theorising the relationship between individual (entrepreneurial) agency and broader systemic transformations. As several articles in this special issue show, economic actors often navigate both normative and material constraints, revealing the tensions and trade-offs involved in pursuing alternative economic pathways. While Gajewski and Kungl (2024) and Colbourne et al. (2024) focus on individual strategies, highlighting their pragmatism as well as their limitations, Kramer et al. (2024) and Sanz Abad (2025) place greater emphasis on systemic change through consumer education, institutional critique, and the mobilisation of subaltern knowledge systems. These contrasting approaches resonate with debates in sustainability transitions about how to integrate structure and agency, as recently reviewed by Dütschke, Upham, and Scherrer (2024), who argue that the field has traditionally adopted a 'pro-structural' position, often overlooking micro-level processes. The contributions to this special issue support the corresponding call for integrative frameworks that redefine the individual-system nexus by connecting micro-level narratives and social practices with meso- and macro-level institutional dynamics. They also provide evidence for the argument by scholars in sustainability transitions (see Huttunen et al., 2021) about the need for perspectives on agency that move beyond fixed actor categories and that focus on how agency emerges relationally across individuals, institutions, and even non-human actors.

Finally, as this special issue also illustrates, manifestations of economic alterity are rarely stable, as they often coexist with, adapt to, or are shaped by dominant economic rationalities. This engages with ongoing discussions in sustainability transitions that understand socio-technical regimes as highly institutionalised configurations and transitions as process of institutional change where diverse institutional logics coexist and compete for legitimacy (Fuenfschilling and Truffer, 2014; Geels, 2024). Such institutional plurality, marked by the friction and negotiation between logics, expands the space for legitimate action and increases opportunities for transformative agency. In this sense, several articles in this issue (Gajewski and Kungl, 2024; Kramer et al., 2024) highlight the contradictions embedded in attempts to break with capitalism while operating within its constraints, calling for nuanced conceptual frameworks that do not assume coherence but instead examine how contestation, compromise, and transformation interact. Specifically, Colbourne et al. (2024) show how hybrid entrepreneurship may not directly contest capitalist regimes but can still produce meaningful outcomes when embedded in collective identities and values. Meanwhile, Sanz Abad (2025) illustrates the potential of subaltern knowledge to resist deeply rooted capitalocentric imaginaries by mobilising material and symbolic alternatives grounded in solidarity and mutual aid. Taken together, these contributions support the argument that future research would benefit from a more nuanced understanding of institutional change, acknowledging both the adaptive capacity of capitalism and the thresholds beyond which it may fail to absorb difference, thus opening space for genuinely transformative alternatives to emerge.

Ultimately, these insights challenge us to resist both triumphalist narratives of green capitalism and overly romanticised views of the alternative. Believing in the possibility of an 'economic and political other' is not a utopian fantasy. Rather, it is a situated, material, and discursive project that compels us to critically reconsider how economies are made, unmade, and remade within capitalist modernity, in resistance to it, and beyond it.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Amparo Merino: Conceptualization, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Katerina Nicolopoulou:** Conceptualization, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. **Ashraf Salama:** Conceptualization, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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