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Central Banking Research Is Increasingly Directed to Environment, Inequality, Gender, and Race[1]

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Link to Abstract

In this article we employ bibliometric methods to show how the study areas of central banking research have creeped increasingly into environment, inequality, gender, and race/inclusivity-related topics. Before turning to our investigation, we review the nature, privileges, and mandates of central banks, along with current trends, to explain why the investigation was undertaken.

Creeping to inequality, the environment, and beyond

Central banks exercise delegated powers and privileges derived through political and legal processes rather than from voluntary market mechanisms (Tucker 2018). These powers and privileges distinguish central banks from private actors subject to competitive discipline. The powers include the exclusive right to issue legal tender, the ability to regulate and supervise commercial banks, and the mandate to conduct monetary policy. These powers enable central banks to exert influence

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well beyond the confines of financial markets. It is important to safeguard against mission creep, as an unchecked concentration of public power risks the same dangers of overreach and inefficiency traditionally associated with monopolistic power (Boulding 1969).

The rationale for this delegation of authority is grounded in the argument that central bank officials, operating within a technocratic framework, are better positioned to adopt a longer-term policy perspective, in contrast to elected policymakers whose decisions may be influenced by short-term electoral incentives. The political authority tasks the central bank with primary objectives, chiefly price stability, but it is worth recalling that "price stability" is a relatively recent way of formulating this mandate. For much of modern monetary history, central banks operated under regimes in which their core responsibility was to maintain the currency's external value—through convertibility into gold or by defending a fixed exchange rate against a key foreign currency—rather than to target a domestic price index. In any case, the central bank is granted operational autonomy in the selection and use of policy instruments to achieve its goal. Therefore, central banks are characterized by instrumental independence while remaining subject to goal dependence (Blinder 1999). Such is the broadly accepted institutional framework for central banking that has emerged.

Price stability remains inherently difficult to define with precision, as standard inflation metrics rely on indices that suffer from notable methodological shortcomings. Moreover, the theoretical case for achieving absolute price stability is contentious: price fluctuations are normal, reflecting adjustments in supply and demand. Price variability carries valuable informational content, and efforts to suppress it—whether through direct control or indirect monetary interventions—risk distorting market signals and undermining allocative efficiency. The question of central bank independence further complicates the picture. As Mădălina Doroftei and Alexandru Pătruți (2018) argue, the separation of central banks from broader political influence and policy agendas—particularly fiscal policy—is at best partial and remains a source of tension in practice.

A defining feature of the institutional design of central banks has been the emphasis on the clarity, singularity, and stability of their mandate (Şimandan and Păun 2021). As such, instances of mandate overreach ought to be promptly identified and corrected. Moreover, the objective should be clear and singular to reduce the problem of conflicting goals that could undermine policy coherence and open the door to greater discretionary behavior.

Stability in the mandate is also crucial, as frequent changes risk undermining the predictability of the institutional framework and eroding legitimacy. By mandating that central banks pursue a clearly defined set of priorities aligned with the public interest, while safeguarding them from short-term political interference, this institutional framework functions as a mechanism of democratic accountability. It ensures that central banks operate within a constitutionally established and legally articulated set of rules.

By placing the rules that govern the conduct of monetary authorities within the highest legal framework, the constitutionalization of money (Buchanan 2010) establishes a principled institutional arrangement that constrains discretionary policy interventions. This framework helps ensure that the short-term adjustments sometimes required for macroeconomic stabilization do not erode the long-term orientation, including stability and predictability. Constitutionalizing monetary rules acts as a commitment device: it limits the temptation of policymakers to exploit short-run trade-offs, reduces the scope for politically motivated manipulation of monetary instruments, and preserves the integrity of a monetary regime intended to serve the general and enduring interests of society, rather than the transient goals of particular governments.

But central banking has frequently departed from such ideals. A prominent example is the adoption of so-called dual mandates in certain legal frameworks, requiring central banks to pursue not only the traditional goal of price stability, but also an additional objective. This shift—most notably introduced with the Federal Reserve's dual mandate in 1945 and later adopted by other central banks—typically incorporated full employment as a secondary objective. The way central banks have balanced these objectives in practice has largely mirrored the intellectual climate of their respective eras. During the 1950s, central banks often maintained that price stability would naturally lead to full employment. By contrast, under the influence of Keynesian ideas in the 1960s, greater emphasis was frequently placed on full employment, sometimes at the expense of the primacy of the price stability goal (Bordo and Siklos 2017).

In more recent years, calls to broaden central bank mandates by incorporating additional objectives have gained momentum. Echoing the intellectual trends of the time, income and wealth inequality has emerged as a leading candidate for such expansion, particularly in the aftermath of the extraordinary central bank interventions following the global financial crisis of 2008-09. Proponents of this view start from the observation that these interventions have produced substantial distributional effects, albeit as an unintended by-product. For instance, quantitative easing (QE) interventions—rather than channeling resources toward productive investments, as initially hoped—have largely been directed toward existing financial assets, driving up their prices. As a result, wealth has disproportionately accrued to individuals who already own such assets, typically those in higher income brackets. Moreover, the composition of assets acquired through QE programs has tended to favor holders with substantial wealth and political connections, while giving little consideration to broader consequences, such as the environmental impact of the industries receiving support (Dietsch, Claveau and Fontan 2018).

One proposed remedy is that central banks should, at a minimum, refrain from adopting policies with major redistributive effects while recognizing that the complete avoidance of redistribution is an unrealistic goal. The argument for excluding redistribution from the mandate is bolstered by a constitutional consideration: central banks, as unelected agencies entrusted with delegated authority, risk overstepping their remit when engaging in resource redistribution—a sphere traditionally reserved for democratically elected officials, who, unlike central bankers, are expected to answer to the electorate on a recurring basis (Tucker 2018).

Moreover, academic research has increasingly promoted a more assertive role for central banks in addressing inequality, advocating for its formal inclusion among central banking objectives. The traditional orthodoxy—once skeptical of central banks engaging in overt redistribution—appears to have been quietly sidelined. Under certain conditions, the argument now goes, central banks should actively pursue policies with explicit distributional effects. Some scholars contend that if appropriate mechanisms of public participation are established—allowing those affected by central bank actions to influence decision-making—the legitimacy of redistributive interventions is enhanced (Hassoun 2025).

Another line of argument frames the focus on inequality as an intermediary step to help central banks better achieve their primary goals. The transmission mechanisms of monetary policy can be dampened in societies where wealth is highly concentrated, since wealthier households tend to have a lower marginal propensity to consume and thus are less responsive to changes in policy rates (Carstens 2021). From this perspective, a more equal distribution of income could enhance the responsiveness of the broader economy to central bank actions. Moreover, proponents of this view often contend that it is only natural for central banks, as public institutions, to adapt their focus in line with the evolving concerns of society. At the same time, a more principled engagement from central banks on reducing inequality is needed, one that moves beyond instrumental justifications and acknowledges the intrinsic value of greater equality (Fontan, Claveau and Dietsch 2016). Recently, the intellectual momentum behind calls for central bank involvement in addressing inequality has been tempered by evidence suggesting that, when carefully assessed, the post-COVID-19 recovery measures resulted in relatively modest distributional effects (Bonifacio et al. 2022). In addition, it has been argued that monetary policy—operating primarily through interest rate adjustments—is ill-equipped to address the structural drivers of inequality, such as market concentration and monopoly power. In these areas, fiscal policy remains the more appropriate and effective tool (Pressman 2024).

When it comes to environmental objectives, there is a widespread opinion in the central banking literature that central banks should participate in efforts to promote environmental objectives. The opinion typically begins with the premise that humanity faces an acute and unprecedented environmental crisis. The buildup of environmental risks stemming from outdated, carbon-intensive production methods is seen as a recipe for catastrophe—hence the growing calls for a low carbon financial revolution (Gunningham 2020). Central banks, as public institutions operating under mandates to promote the general welfare through monetary and prudential policies, are increasingly called upon to support decarbonization and "greening" efforts.

Proponents of an expanded role argue that the absence of an explicit mandate on environmental objectives should not prevent central banks from pursuing what is perceived as the moral and economically prudent course of action. The case of Japan is frequently invoked—alongside examples such as Australia and China—as an illustration of this approach, with the Bank of Japan engaging in climate-related initiatives despite no direct legal provision to that effect (DiLeo 2024; Vyshnevskyi and Sohn 2025). Supporters point to the bank's statutory objective of "achieving price stability, thereby contributing to the sound development of the national economy" (Dikau and Volz 2021, 11), arguing that sustainable development, by definition, includes environmental considerations. In this view, central banks are portrayed as operating well within their legal mandate, since it requires them to promote the sound development of the economy—an objective now frequently interpreted, with no apparent hesitation, to include environmental sustainability. In line with this reasoning, the Bank of Japan introduced in 2021 a lending facility offering low- or zero-interest loans to financial institutions, conditional on their financing or investing in projects aimed at climate mitigation or adaptation. The Bank of Japan has likewise encouraged—indeed, effectively pressed—financial institutions to adopt climate-risk disclosure standards (Positive Money 2024).

The case is even more straightforward for those central banks, like the European Central Bank, whose mandates explicitly require them to support the broader policy objectives of their respective governments (Dikau and Volz 2021). The ECB is tasked not only with maintaining price stability but also with supporting the general economic policies of the European Union. The Bank of England operates under a similar dual obligation. This is not the case with the Federal Reserve (Skinner 2021a; 2021b). Some central banks, such as those of the Czech Republic, Hungary, the Philippines, and South Africa, have mandates that expressly include the promotion of sustainability as a distinct objective.

The argument is frequently made that the greening of the economy is a necessary stepping-stone for central banks to pursue financial stability. With financial stability having risen to near-universal prominence among central banks post-2008, the pathway to environmental engagement has been presented as a logical, even inevitable, extension of their core responsibilities. In this framing, the once-contentious debates over mandate limitations are rendered somewhat quaint.

The growing academic focus on the allocative effects of central bank decisions has expanded into racial and gender disparities. Research suggests that expansionary monetary policy may disproportionately benefit wealthier white households, who are more likely to own appreciating financial assets, with this wealth effect often outweighing the positive employment gains experienced by other groups (Bartscher et al. 2022).

As public institutions, central banks are expected to comply with gender and race-based affirmative action policies. The degree to which such gender and racial initiatives have been implemented within central banks has attracted scholarly attention (on gender see Central Bank of Ireland 2023; Comunale et al. 2023; Kern, Reinsberg and Romelli 2025; on race see McDowell and Steinberg 2024). Spurred in part by political rhetoric during U.S. election campaigns (Politi 2020) and by the introduction of the Federal Reserve Racial and Economic Equity Act—a proposed but ultimately unsuccessful piece of legislation aimed at revising the Fed's statutory goals (Dorn 2022)—academic and policy discussions have explored whether central banks might embed objectives such as reducing gender and racial inequalities into their outward-facing, mandate-driven policy actions.

The justification for these gender- and race-based objectives is typically presented in broad strokes, tied to the overarching mission of safeguarding the health and stability of the economy. As Raphael Bostic, former President and CEO of the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, puts it, the Federal Reserve "can play an important role in helping to reduce racial inequities and bring about a more inclusive economy. We can do this, first, by fulfilling the mission given to us, which is to promote the health of the U.S. economy and the stability of the U.S. financial system" (Bostic 2020). One wonders whether there remains any social objective that central banks could not frame as contributing to a sound and stable economy.

A literature has emerged examining the activism of central banks. While the term *activism* has been used before in this context, it traditionally referred to central banks actively pursuing their conventional mandates—particularly full employment that can also be framed as broader macroeconomic stabilization (e.g., Mafi-Kreft and Sobel 2006). On a conceptual spectrum, activism has been contrasted with minimalism: a passive, wait-and-see stance that prioritizes price stability even in the face of economic fluctuations. At a minimum, activism in this earlier usage implied a commitment to supporting economic growth (Costabile and Epstein 2017). In contrast, the nascent literature discussed here extends the notion of activism to encompass a novel and more expansive agenda. It explores the growing expectation that central banks address high-profile social concerns—such as environmental degradation, gender equity, and racial justice—objectives that traditionally fell outside their purview but now appear prominently in public discourse (Binder and

Skinner 2021; Rouanet and Salter 2025; Skinner 2021b).

In the domain of environmental protection, central banks have increasingly come to resemble climate activists, building internal expertise, generating interest within and beyond their institutions, and cultivating networks of support (Siderius 2023). This repertoire of actions bears a striking resemblance to the strategies used by private actors engaged in social activism, often in pursuit of causes over which they have limited formal authority. In what is perhaps the most analytically rigorous account of this phenomenon, Christina P. Skinner (2021b) argues that the defining feature of central bank activism lies not in the novelty of the goals pursued, nor in the internal processes that led to their adoption, but rather in the assumption or evolution of new powers outside of a formal legal process. Such activism requires central banks to move beyond their legally granted remit without democratic authorization. Such extralegal expansion entangles central banks in partisan disputes and jeopardizes their ability to carry out core functions. As a safeguard, John Crawford (2024) proposes a simple rule of thumb: central banks should refrain from taking on issues that are politically contentious or better addressed by institutions with clearer democratic mandates.

This article uses bibliographic databases to examine trends in the banking literature of increased attention toward environmental concern, inequality, gender, and race/inclusivity themes. Because "activism" is inapt, since literature can be activist within the traditional central banking remits, we dub the four themes studied here "SJ themes"—SJ for "social justice."

Our research methods

Launched in 2004, Scopus is a leading bibliographic database. Its capabilities make it valuable for mapping research trends, assessing scholarly impact, and conducting systematic reviews (Pranckutė 2021; Baas et al. 2020).

Again, we define a research paper as SJ themed if it engages significantly with at least one of the following thematic areas: environmental concern, inequality, gender, and race/inclusivity. The initial search strategy combined terms related to central banking (i.e., "central bank*" OR "monetary policy") with keywords corresponding to the identified SJ themes. These terms were queried within the title and author-keywords fields as indexed in the Scopus database.[2] Scopus may also assign additional indexing keywords—such as those related to the Sustainable Development Goals defined in the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (adopted in 2015)—independent of any explicit user input. While this automated classification may broaden the scope of the search beyond the authors' original intent, it is designed to more accurately reflect the thematic content

[2] https://www.scopus.com/, accessed on February 4, 2026.

and research area of each publication. The comprehensive query string employed was:

> (TITLE ("central bank*") OR TITLE ("monetary policy") OR KEY ("central bank*") OR KEY ("monetary policy")) AND (TITLE (inequality) OR TITLE ("income distribution") OR TITLE (redistribution) OR TITLE (climate) OR TITLE (green) OR TITLE ("global warming") OR TITLE (sustainab*) OR TITLE (gender) OR TITLE (women) OR TITLE (female) OR TITLE (race) OR TITLE (racism) OR TITLE (racial) OR TITLE (minorit*) OR TITLE (inclusiv*) OR KEY (inequality) OR KEY ("income distribution") OR KEY (redistribution) OR KEY (climate) OR KEY (green) OR KEY ("global warming") OR KEY (sustainab*) OR KEY (gender) OR KEY (women) OR KEY (female) OR KEY (race) OR KEY (racism) OR KEY (racial) OR KEY (minorit*) OR KEY (inclusiv*)).

To ensure specificity and thematic relevance, we limited the search parameters to terms appearing in titles and keywords only, excluding abstracts. This decision followed an initial exploratory search that included abstracts, which returned an unmanageably large volume of results, many of which were tangential or unrelated to the core focus of our study. For instance, several articles examining the determinants of public adoption of central bank digital currencies appeared in the broader search because they included gender as one of the explanatory variables. However, the discussion in these sources did not engage with any of the SJ themes considered in our analysis, thus constituting false positives.

The initial search yielded 1,349 documents. Following a manual screening process, we excluded items containing the term "variational inequality" and "minority government." Documents featuring the keywords "debt sustainability" or "fiscal sustainability" were excluded unless they also included separate keywords directly aligned with the thematic areas under investigation. A small number of other irrelevant documents were also removed. Finally, all records classified as Erratum or Retracted were excluded from the dataset. The final curated dataset comprised 1,308 unique documents, including 1,032 research articles, 140 book chapters, 70 conference papers, 30 books, and 38 various other documents. Notably, only twelve documents predate the year 2000, with the earliest publication dated 1984. The metadata file (RIS format) containing detailed information on these documents is available at this link.

To assess the distribution of research across the four SJ domains, we conducted four additional targeted searches within the Scopus database. Each query combined general central banking terminology with keywords specific to one area of activism. For example, the search string used to identify publications related to inequality was: (TITLE ("central bank*") OR TITLE ("monetary policy") OR KEY ("central bank*") OR KEY ("monetary policy")) AND (TITLE (inequality)

OR TITLE ("income distribution") OR TITLE (redistribution) OR KEY (inequality) OR KEY ("income distribution") OR KEY (redistribution)). Applying this methodology yielded 414 documents related to inequality, 819 to the environment, 80 to gender, and 43 to race and inclusivity, after excluding documents based on the filtering criteria outlined in the preceding paragraph. It is important to note that individual documents may fall under multiple categories, and, therefore, the sum of these results exceeds the total number of unique documents identified in the initial search. This method helps pinpoint the primary drivers behind the rise in SJ research, revealing the relative influence of different thematic areas over time.

Additionally, to contextualize our investigation into specific SJ themes within central banking, we sought to assess the overall scope of research activity in this domain. For this purpose, we retrieved data from the Scopus database using the following advanced search query: (TITLE ("central bank*") OR TITLE ("monetary policy") OR KEY ("central bank*") OR KEY ("monetary policy") AND (PUBYEAR > 1999)). The year 2000 was selected as the starting point, given the negligible number of SJ-oriented publications prior to that date. This search strategy resulted in a total of 24,153 research documents, following the exclusion of records classified as Erratum or Retracted. The annual distribution of these publications was subsequently recorded to facilitate time series analysis.

Finally, to complement our broader analysis, we also considered it essential to examine the representation of the SJ thematic areas—inequality, the environment, gender, and race/inclusivity—within publications with "central banking" or closely related terms in their titles. A targeted search within these journals, books, and book chapters offers a more specific lens for assessing the shifting research priorities and thematic concerns of the scholarly community dedicated to central banking. We employed the following search query to extract the relevant data from the Scopus database:

> (SRCTITLE ("central bank*") OR SRCTITLE ("monetary policy")) AND (SRCTITLE (inequality) OR SRCTITLE ("income distribution") OR SRCTITLE (redistribution) OR SRCTITLE (climate) OR SRCTITLE (green) OR SRCTITLE ("global warming") OR SRCTITLE (sustainab*) OR SRCTITLE (gender) OR SRCTITLE (women) OR SRCTITLE (female) OR SRCTITLE (race) OR SRCTITLE (racism) OR SRCTITLE (racial) OR SRCTITLE (minorit*) OR SRCTITLE (inclusiv*) OR KEY (inequality) OR KEY ("income distribution") OR KEY (redistribution) OR KEY (climate) OR KEY (green) OR KEY ("global warming") OR KEY (sustainab*) OR KEY (gender) OR KEY (women) OR KEY (female) OR KEY (race) OR KEY (racism) OR KEY (racial) OR KEY (minorit*) OR KEY (inclusiv*)).

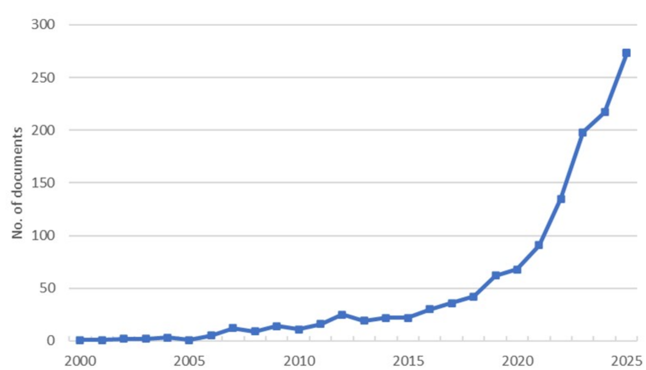
It is important to note that Scopus does not capture every publication on a given topic but rather those deemed most relevant within the field. Our study does not encompass the full universe of SJ-themed central banking publications. Also, our analysis does not differentiate between pro-SJ studies and those that oppose SJ or question the SJ turn in central bank research.

Findings

Unless otherwise specified, the subsequent analysis adopts the year 2000 as the baseline, given the insignificant presence of SJ-oriented publications prior to this point. In total, 1,308 unique research papers were identified as exhibiting an SJ orientation—defined as those engaging with issues of environment, inequality, gender, and race/inclusivity in the context of central banking—representing 5.5 percent of all publications addressing central banking-related issues published since 2000. Of that 5.5 percent, 1.7 percent of the total papers on central banking focused on inequality, 3.3 percent on environmental concerns, 0.3 percent on gender, and 0.2 percent on race-related topics.

Notably, a time series analysis reveals a pronounced increase in scholarly engagement with SJ themes, particularly in recent years. As shown in Figure 1, the number of SJ-classified publications rose from 12 in 2007 to 25 in 2012, 68 in 2020, and reached 273 by 2025. This upward trajectory reflects an exponential growth pattern ($R^2 = 0.965$) emerging from 2000 onward—one that outpaces the similarly strong exponential trend observed in general central banking publications ($R^2 = 0.954$).

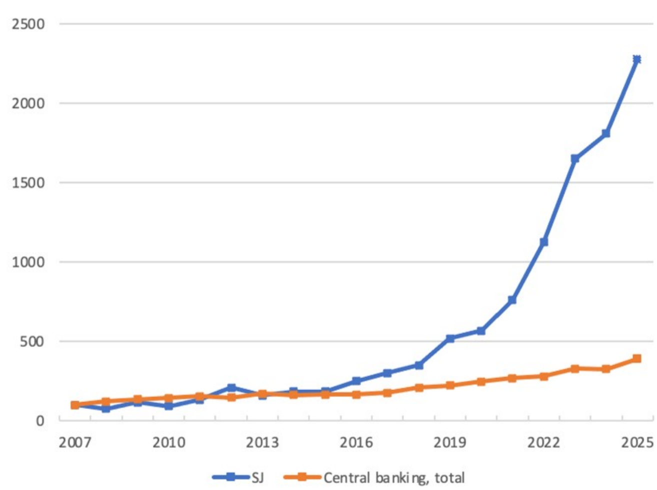
Figure 1: SJ documents, 2000–2025



Source: authors' own calculations based on Scopus data.

Figure 2 highlights a pronounced divergence in the growth trajectories of general central banking research and SJ-oriented scholarship within the field. Using 2007 as the reference year—the first with a non-negligible number of SJ publications (12 papers)—the total volume of central banking-related research grew by 66.0 percent by 2016 and by 178.6 percent by 2022. In contrast, SJ publications grew by 150.0 percent and 1,025.0 percent over the same respective years. By 2025, the volume of general central banking research was 3.9 times its 2007 level, while SJ publications had expanded by a factor of 22.8. These figures highlight a disproportionately rapid acceleration in SJ discourse, suggesting a shifting research agenda within the central banking literature.

Figure 2: Cumulative percentage growth in total vs. SJ documents, 2007–2025

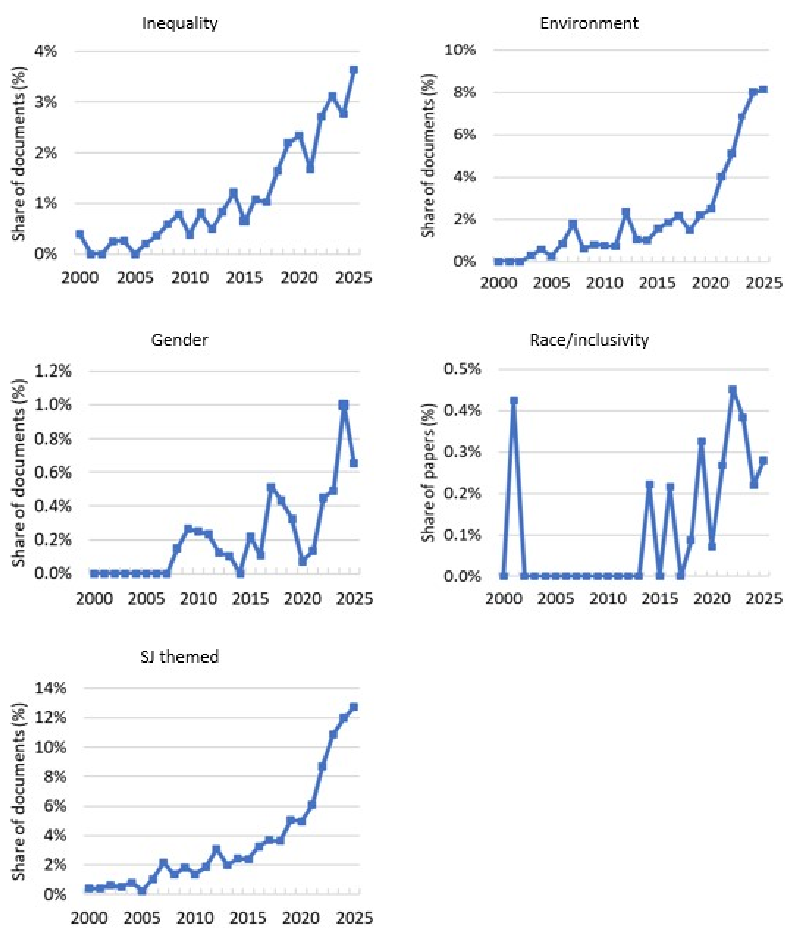


Source: authors' own calculations based on Scopus data.

Figure 3 presents time series graphs depicting the proportion of publications in each area of activism as a percentage of the total number of papers related to central banking. The data reveal clear upward trends in the inequality and environment categories. Similarly, the gender subcategory exhibits a sharper increase beginning in 2016, while the race/inclusivity area first appeared in 2014 (excluding 2001) and reached a share of 0.5 percent by 2022. In 2014, the shares of inequality- and environment-related papers stood at 1.2 percent and 1.0 percent, respectively; by 2025, these figures had risen to 3.6 percent and 8.1 percent. Consequently, in 2025, 12.7 out of every 100 central banking research papers addressed at least one of the SJ themes.

The data indicate that environment-related concerns have been the primary catalyst for the rise in SJ research within the field of central banking, followed by growing attention to issues of inequality. Between 2010 and 2025, the average annual growth rate (CAGR) of publications in the environment category reached 25.2 percent, while the inequality-related literature grew at a CAGR of 24.3 percent. In comparison, the overall SJ literature expanded at an average annual rate of 23.9 percent over the same period. By contrast, the corresponding growth rate for general central banking publications was significantly lower, at 6.9 percent, highlighting the disproportionate acceleration of SJ themes relative to the broader field.

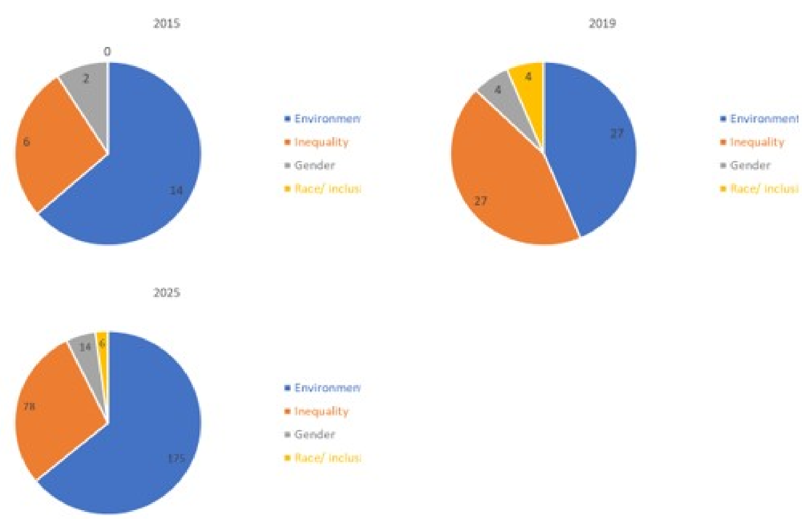
Figure 3: Proportions of SJ documents by topics



Source: authors' own calculations based on Scopus data.

In absolute terms, 22 SJ documents were published in 2015, consisting of six on inequality, 14 on the environment, and two on gender issues. This number increased to 62 in 2019 and further rose to 273 by 2025. The distribution of these documents across the four thematic areas of activism is illustrated in Figure 4. By identifying and tracking publications across the four key thematic areas—inequality, environment, gender, and race/inclusivity—it becomes possible to assess both the absolute growth of SJ scholarship and its evolving internal composition. The data point to a notable reorientation of research priorities within the field of central banking. In proportional terms, environment-related topics have consistently constituted the dominant focus within SJ-oriented central banking literature, representing 63.6 percent of such publications in 2015 and 64.1 percent in 2025. In contrast, the share of inequality-related contributions has shown greater fluctuation—comprising 27.3 percent in 2015 and rising to a peak of 28.6 percent in 2025. In the same year, gender and race/inclusivity themes accounted for 5.1 percent and 2.2 percent of SJ publications, respectively, suggesting a still modest, though gradually expanding, presence within the field.

Figure 4: Pie charts of SJ documents by topic



Source: authors' own calculations based on Scopus data.

Focusing exclusively on sources dedicated to central banking—namely, publications that include "central banking" or closely related terms in their titles—a total of 255 SJ-oriented documents have been identified to date, with the earliest published in 2018. By document type, the sample includes 197 book chapters, 47 journal articles, and eight monographs. A substantial share of the book chapters (143 of 197) are entries in the *Encyclopedia of Monetary Policy, Financial Markets and Banking* published by Academic Press (Apergis 2025). Among journal outlets, the *Journal of Central Banking Theory and Practice* accounts for the largest number of articles (16), followed by the *Latin American Journal of Central Banking* (14 articles) and the *Journal of Central Banking Law and Institutions* (11 articles). Excluding 2025—an outlier year driven by the publication of the above Encyclopedia—annual publication activity reached its peak in 2021 with 27 documents and remained comparatively high in 2023 and 2024, with 26 and 17 publications, respectively. The remaining 54 book chapters engaging with SJ themes were published across several volumes, with three edited collections making especially significant contributions: Andreas Dombret and Patrick S. Kenadjian (2021) with 24 chapters, Sandrin Kappes, Louis-Philippe Rochon, and Guillaume Vallet (2023) with 13 chapters, and Louis-Philippe Rochon, Sylvio Kappes, and Guillaume Vallet (2024) with 11 chapters.

We also examined the presence of SJ themes within two of the most prestigious outlets in monetary economics—the *Journal of Monetary Economics* (JME) and the *Journal of Money, Credit, and Banking* (JMCB). These journals are central references in the field and serve as gatekeepers for research that is supposed to represent the frontier of monetary theory, policy evaluation, and macro-financial analysis. Their influence makes them a testing ground for assessing whether SJ-oriented research has diffused into the core of monetary economics, rather than remaining concentrated in general or policy-oriented journals.

Across both the JME and the JMCB, we identified 27 articles that incorporate at least one of the SJ themes. Until 2021, SJ-themed publications appeared only sporadically—typically one or two per year, with the earliest instance in 2008. Beginning in 2022, however, the number rose to four articles and reached a peak in 2024 with six articles (four in JME and two in JMCB), suggesting a modest but noticeable increase in the visibility of SJ-related topics within the top tier of monetary economics research.

The analysis of author affiliations can shed light on how deeply this research direction has taken root within the broader field of central banking studies. Because many central banks have publicly advanced or endorsed elements of the SJ turn, one might expect a substantial share of the literature to originate from researchers employed by central banks or international financial institutions (IFIs). Conversely, if authors without such institutional ties constitute the bulk of contributors, this would suggest that the SJ turn reflects a wider intellectual shift rather than simply an internal policy agenda diffusing outward.

To explore this question, we examined the affiliations of all authors represented in our dataset. The 1,308 unique research papers were written by 2,515 unique authors who collectively reported 2,678 institutional affiliations (one author can declare multiple affiliations). Of these 1,308 papers, 205 (15.7%) have at least one author affiliated with a central bank or an IFI. For the purposes of classification, we counted as "central bank or IFI affiliations" the following: national and supra-national central banks, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the Bank for International Settlements, and national or regional development banks. Among affiliations, the most frequently represented institutions were the European Central Bank (23 mentions), the Bank of Italy (19), the Federal Reserve System (including regional Reserve Banks) (15), the International Monetary Fund (13), and the Bank of France and the Central Bank of the Netherlands, each with 10 mentions.

For additional depth, we examined the publications dated 2024 and 2025. The 2024 subset contains 209 unique articles that address at least one of the SJ themes considered here, authored by 499 unique individuals who collectively reported 470 institutional affiliations. Among these 209 articles, 29 (13.9%) include at least one author affiliated with a central bank or an IFI. The most frequently represented institutions are the ECB (5 articles), followed by the Bank of Italy and the World Bank (3 articles each). Notably, none of the 2024 publications involve authors affiliated with the Federal Reserve. The analysis of 2025 publications yields broadly similar patterns, with one notable exception. In 2025, both the ECB and the Federal Reserve are the most represented institutions, each appearing in six articles. Moreover, the share of articles including at least one author affiliated with a central bank or an IFI rose to 16.8%.

Does the literature show scruples over legitimacy and mandates?

As discussed above, there are political and bureaucratic pressures to stretch existing legal mandates. Yet, despite the importance of this legal dimension, it appears only marginally in the literature captured by our database. A keyword search reveals minimal engagement with legality-specific terms: *legal framework*, *legal system*, *legislation*, and *legislative norms* each appear only once in our database, while *legal structure* occurs twice. Similarly, terms referencing legal considerations are rare—*laws and legislation* appear only four times, while *legitimacy* is mentioned just four times as a keyword—either on its own or in expressions such as *democratic legitimacy*—and once more in a document title.

In contrast, scholars have shown comparatively greater interest in questions surrounding the mandate, such as whether and how the existing mandate can accommodate new roles without the need for legal changes, or what kinds of mandate modifications might be pursued to legitimize those expanded responsibilities. References to this theme are somewhat more frequent, with 21 documents including keywords such as *mandate*, *central bank mandate(s)*, *primary mandate*, *secondary mandate*, *dual mandate*, or featuring the word *mandate* in the title. Similarly, the implications of new roles for central bank independence are relatively well represented in our database: the term *central bank independence* appears in 26 documents, with several others referencing related concepts such as *independent body*, *de jure and de facto independence*, and *independent agency*.

Perhaps more striking is the near absence from the literature of a systematic cost-benefit analysis underpinning the SJ turn in central banking. While one might expect such a significant expansion of central bank responsibilities to be supported by rigorous assessments weighing potential benefits against associated costs or risks, this dimension appears underexplored. A keyword search reveals limited engagement: *cost analysis* appears just eight times, while *cost-benefit analysis*—including both hyphenated and non-hyphenated forms—also appears just eight times across the database.

This absence is particularly noteworthy given that cost-benefit analysis remains one of the most fundamental tools economists use to assess the merits of proposed policies (Bennett 2024). If the recent SJ turn in central banking does indeed represent a genuine paradigm shift—as argued by Radu Şimandan, Cristian Păun, and Bogdan Glăvan (2023) regarding central banks' increasing engagement with environmental issues, though challenged by Monica DiLeo (2023)—then one would reasonably expect such a departure from established practice to be justified through a careful, systematic evaluation of both its expected benefits and potential costs. The lack of such analysis may reflect the assumption that SJ issues are so existential in nature that any effort to mitigate them is self-justifying. In such a framing, the ordinary standards of economic scrutiny are suspended, despite the far-reaching institutional implications of expanding central bank mandates.

Conclusions

The main finding of this study supports the hypothesis that SJ themes—defined as those addressing inequality, environmental concerns, gender, and race/inclusivity—have grown markedly in recent years, exhibiting exponential increases both in absolute research output and as a proportion of the broader central banking literature. Little attention has been devoted to the legal and institutional dimensions—such as adherence to the principles of delegation, the rule of law, and the constitutionality of the evolving central banking framework. Questions surrounding the legitimacy of these expanded roles remain notably underexamined in the academic discourse.

The author-affiliation data suggest that while central banks and IFIs are present in this line of research, they are not its dominant producers. A nontrivial share of the literature clearly reflects the interests and perspectives of central bank economists, yet the majority of contributions come from scholars without such institutional affiliations. This pattern is consistent with the view that the SJ turn is not merely the product of internal policy advocacy within central banks, but is part of an intellectual trend within the broader research community. At the same time, the visible involvement of major central banks—most notably the ECB, the Bank of Italy, and the Federal Reserve—suggests that institutional agendas and academic currents may be reinforcing one another rather than developing independently. The ECB's position as the most frequently represented institution is consistent with its prominent role in advancing the SJ turn—particularly on environmental issues—and with its extensive public communications on these issues.

The expansion of central bank objectives should be a matter of serious concern for the ruled as well as the rulers. As global challenges evolve and public attention shifts, new calls may emerge for central banks to take on these issues as part of their remit. Fundamental principles such as legality, constitutionality, the rule of law, and institutional legitimacy must not be neglected.

Given the general neglect of rule-of-law considerations in monetary analysis, as emphasized by Peter J. Boettke, Alexander William Salter, and Daniel J. Smith (2021), and in light of what we might term the contemporary "romantic" phase of monetary thinking, we call for a more sober assessment—one that looks beyond the proclaimed nobility of the new ends proposed for monetary policy. The classical twin problem of *knowledge and incentives* should be no less central—indeed, it arguably becomes more acute in the new framework. Monetary policymakers' knowledge about the newly assigned objectives is inherently limited, since the matters involved in SJ themes such as environmental sustainability, inequality, and gender and racial disparities are complex, multi-causal, and extend over long horizons.

The incentive structure facing monetary policymakers deserves scrutiny. Within the expansive framework, central bankers may come to feel largely powerless to deliver measurable progress on SJ-related issues, while simultaneously facing political and public pressure to be seen as "doing something." The combination risks diverting attention away from the primary objective of monetary policy, especially when that objective is less visible or less politically salient than the newly adopted social goals. Without such rule-of-law discipline, the new SJ romanticism in monetary research and practice risks turning into little more than vanity and fecklessness dressed up as technical expertise.

Appendix

The dataset on which this study is based, including updated visualizations and additional details, is regularly maintained and can be accessed at the following link.

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