

Theorizing the climate crisis in capitalist societies

Plenary session at the ÖGS Congress 2025 by the Sociological Theory & Economic Sociology Sections

The climate crisis threatens our current economic order on an unprecedented scale. While fossil fuel industries are facing write-offs due to decarbonization efforts, climate-vulnerable industries experience increasingly instability in the way in which they grow through extreme weather events, natural disasters and rising sea levels. Droughts, heat waves, wild fires and flood events challenge everyday lives in many regions and induce exorbitant costs that the insurance industry can no longer cover and states struggle to manage. As climate change accelerates, these challenges continue to unsettle the dominant capitalist market economy.

A myriad of accounts sought to illustrate how the capitalist market economy gave rise to anthropogenic climate change. Often these accounts come from the long-standing critical tradition within sociological theory that was born out of a capitalist critique. Sociology as an academic discipline emerged in the 19th century describing and critically reflecting upon the societal changes that accompanied the rise of capitalism. Linking this critique to environmental issues, Schnaiberg's 'treadmill of production' theory developed a Marxist criticism of extractivist capitalism further to address the unsustainable relationship between capitalist economies and environmental wellbeing. While criticized for oversimplifying the complexities of global capitalism in the 21st century, Schnaiberg's theory is often seen as a starting point for environmental sociology and its rich analysis of how capitalist (re)production follows an inherently exploitative fashion.

Only recently scholarship started to acknowledge the reverse effect too: how climate change threatens the foundation of the capitalist market economy. Especially the sub-field of economic sociology has shifted its attention towards 'Ecologizing economic sociology' as the latest *Economic Sociology* newsletter proposes. While empirically rich, this young field of inquiry has not yet seen a thorough theorization. This poses the question of whether existing sociological theory continues to be useful for theorizing novel climate realities and the unprecedented challenges and consequences the climate crisis poses. What insights do sociological theories provide into central aspects of the climate crisis, such as the inertia of social systems, organizations and practices; conflicts between short- and long-term political or economic objectives and strategies; the intensification of regressive, denying or concealing politics of knowledge; the mediation of socio-structural inequalities and the implementation and acceptance of effective climate protection policies?

This plenary session seeks to bring together experts that discuss the potential and limits of existing sociological theory as well as possible new and innovative theoretical approaches building on the strength of the sociological discipline: reflecting on-going societal change in its knowledge production. We welcome submissions that are based on the interaction between theory and empirical data, or on a critical assessment of the link between theory and data. For example, this critical assessment may address the following question: How can data inform and generate innovative theoretical perspectives on economic issues in the context of the climate crisis beyond the use of data as a mere illustration of theoretical thinking?

How do theoretical considerations influence the interpretation of empirical data? And finally: Which theories or theorems are particularly suited to guide future empirical analyses of climate change? Thereby, this plenary session directly speaks to the broader theme of the 28th congress on 'the climate in society' and hopes to advance sociological theory so that it can account for the climate crisis and its consequences. Please send us your proposals of no more than one page/4,000 characters (including spaces) by March 15, 2025, to: frithjof.nungesser@uni-graz.at, valentina.ausserladscheider@univie.ac.at, and dominik.von.gehlen@univie.ac.at.