

## FORUM ARTICLE

# Sociology and the climate crisis: A momentum surge and the roots run deep

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### KEYWORDS

climate change, climate crisis, Eastern Sociological Society, environmental sociology

I had the privilege of participating in the Eastern Sociological Society's (ESS) 2024 Annual Meeting in Washington, DC. The society's 2023–2024 president, Dr. Dana Fisher, selected “The Social Side of the Climate Crisis” for the conference theme. As a sociologist who has conducted research on the climate crisis for over two decades, and like so many others, I was thrilled to see a professional association in our discipline finally have a climate-oriented theme for their annual event. Other sociology conferences and workshops have occurred in recent years that are climate related, such as the 2022 virtual conference on “Navigating Uncertain Futures: Social Engagement and Transformative Change in Global Socio-Ecological Systems”, cohosted by the Research Committee on Environment and Society of the International Sociological Association and the Environmental Sociology Section of the American Sociological Association, but not association-wide conferences.

By all measures, the 2024 ESS conference was a huge success. If you attended, you know. If you did not, take a look at the program on the society's website or ask someone who went. The opening Presidential Plenary Session focused on our discipline's contributions to international and national climate assessments and syntheses, policy, and action, as well as sociologists' engagement with media focused on the climate crisis. Panelists included the Director of the Fifth National Climate Assessment of the US Global Change Research Program (Allison Crimmins), Vice President of Union of Concerned Scientists (Dr. Melissa Finucane), Climate Reporter for *The Guardian* (Dharna Noor), Executive Director of the Just Transition Alliance (José Bravo), and former Senior Advisor for Climate and Community Resilience in the Biden-Harris Administration (Dr. Marccus Hendricks). Other plenary sessions included discussions

between sociologists at different career stages who do work on climate, sociologists specializing in climate who work for various federal agencies, an incredible workshop on teaching climate within our discipline, and the Presidential Address, where Dr. Fisher discussed her brand-new book, *Saving Ourselves: From Climate Shocks to Climate Action* (Fisher, 2024).

Countless panels throughout the conference had climate-related themes, including climate justice, climate denial, climate governance, climate-related disasters, climate and health, energy transitions, and the anthropogenic drivers of greenhouse gas emissions. While most attendees and presenters live and work in the eastern parts of the United States, many had traveled great distances from across the country and abroad. Similar to the wide range of topics covered in the two recent articles on climate change in the *Annual Review of Sociology* (Dietz et al., 2020; Klinenberg et al., 2020), the climate-focused presentations at the ESS conference represent the breadth and depth of sociological contributions to understanding the causes, consequences, and solutions to the climate crisis, and the clear momentum of climate being integrated into research and scholarship across the discipline (see also Dunlap & Brulle, 2015; Harvey, 2016).

One could argue that the enormity of the climate crisis and its undeniable relevance for all aspects of the social world is the tipping point that led to environmental sociology becoming more valued and recognized within the discipline (Davidson, 2022; Lockie, 2022; Mezey, 2020; Norgaard, 2018; Stuart, 2021). And perhaps that is true since research on climate in the discipline is commonly labeled or classified as environmental sociology. Yet, at the same time, many sociologists who integrate climate into their research were not formally trained in environmental sociology

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and are approaching climate from other corners of the discipline. I most certainly fall into that category: I was trained in global political economy and encouraged by my mentors to pursue sociological research on the climate crisis and related topics through such a metatheoretical lens. But, I was also strongly encouraged to read as much as I could within environmental sociology and other subfields and think carefully about how my research can build on prior work within that tradition while also contributing to its evolution. I have met and collaborated with numerous sociologists through the years who do work on climate and have similar stories to share, and who encourage their graduate students to do the same. Perhaps these similar stories partly explain why environmental sociology and sociological work on the climate crisis have continued to evolve, becoming even more pluralistic in theory, scope, and methodology.

We are seeing increasing amounts of empirical work on climate appear in our discipline's leading generalist journals (e.g., Braswell, 2022; Elliott, 2018; Fitzgerald et al., 2018; Grant et al., 2018; Huang, *Forthcoming*; Jorgenson et al., 2023; Jorgenson & Clark, 2012; Kelly, 2020; Malin et al., 2019; Running, 2013; Wetts, 2023) and sociological work on the climate crisis in leading interdisciplinary journals (e.g., Adua et al., 2021; Davidson, 2019; Dietz et al., 2015; Farrell et al., 2019; Fisher et al., 2023; Grant et al., 2014; Greiner, 2022; Hauer et al., 2024; Jorgenson, 2014; Marquart-Pyatt et al., 2014; McCright et al., 2014; Thombs, 2022; Tindall & Piggot, 2015; York, 2012a, 2012b). There is also a surge in integrating sociological approaches to climate change with those of other social science disciplines and the natural sciences (e.g., Longo et al., 2021; Shwom et al., 2017; Stern et al., 2023; Stuart et al., 2023; Thomas et al., 2019) and a growing presence of sociology in synthesis and assessment documents, such as the IPCC synthesis reports and national climate assessments (e.g., IPCC, 2022; Marino et al., 2023).

With this momentum and expanding interest, those in our discipline who are new to doing work on the climate crisis, regardless of their career stage, will also benefit from taking time to familiarize themselves with the legacy of climate, energy, land cover change, environmental justice, and related work in sociology, in addition to reading research on climate in our sister social sciences and the natural sciences. Our field will benefit from this too, as emerging work can continue to broaden and deepen the scope of climate change sociology and environmental sociology in general while building on and acknowledging foundational work from the past. This will also help to mitigate inequality within the field, such as lessening the formation of closed networks between scholars at more elite institutions who are beginning to pursue sociological research on climate and climate-adjacent topics (Burris, 2004; Hermanowicz & Lei, 2023).

The roots run deep, going back decades and largely taking place in the halls of land grant universities and other types of public institutions throughout the world, and much of the published work appears in specialty sociology journals (e.g., *Rural Sociology*, *Journal of World-Systems Research*) and interdisciplinary journals (e.g., *Human Ecology Review*, *Society and Natural Resources*). There are multiple

*Annual Review of Sociology* articles through the years that offer crisp summaries of the evolution of environmental sociology, some of which include the discussions of climate and climate-related topics. A useful set of articles that assess and synthesize initial sociological contributions to the study of climate change and global environmental change more broadly include Buttel and Taylor (1992), Taylor and Buttel (1992), Rosa and Dietz (1998), Grimes (1999), and Roberts (2001).

Examples of early and foundational cross-national analyses conducted by sociologists on the anthropogenic drivers of climate change include Dietz and Rosa (1997), Burns et al. (1997), and Roberts and Grimes (1997). The drivers literature in sociology, which is just one of many important bodies of work on climate in our discipline, has expanded and evolved considerably through the years and is now conducted at multiple scales, including global, cross-national, national, and subnational, such as for states, provinces, cities, corporations, and power plants (for reviews, see Rosa & Dietz, 2012; Rosa et al., 2015; Jorgenson et al., *Forthcoming*). One of the most foundational and impactful pieces of early sociological research on climate is Mazur and Rosa's cross-national analysis of energy consumption and human well-being, published in *Science* in 1974, which shows that societies can achieve relatively high levels of human well-being without consuming substantial amounts of fossil fuels and other resources (Mazur and Rosa, 1974). This pioneering work has led to an enormous interdisciplinary area of research that continues to evolve a half century later, with many early- and mid-career sociologists currently at the center (for a review, see Givens et al., 2023). Other bodies of climate research, clearly influenced by sociology, examine individual concerns and actions, including actions as consumers and actions as citizens and activists (e.g., Kennedy, 2022; Nielsen et al., 2021), as well as leverage points for climate mitigation that consider social influences on decision making by individuals, organizations and the state (e.g., Dietz, 2023).

Swinging back to the highly successful ESS conference, let us not pump the brakes since an association-wide conference has now had a climate-oriented theme. Let this be a push for sociologists throughout the world to encourage other regional, national, and international professional associations within our discipline to commit to doing the same. Without question, our discipline has so much to offer to our shared understanding of the climate crisis. Given that it is common for leaders of professional associations to decide on conference themes, let's work together to make sure more sociologists conducting research on the climate crisis are on the ballots and ideally elected for such leadership positions. Let us also continue to push for more climate-oriented panels, regardless of the overall conference theme, that intersect with sociology's various subfields. And in the shared spirit of reducing climate impacts and enhancing equity and inclusion, let us also push for more hybrid and virtual events. I truly believe the momentum is in our favor.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author thanks Brett Clark, Thomas Dietz, and Jeffrey Kentor for helpful comments on a prior draft.

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