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The sociological imagination in a time of climate change

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## The Sociological Imagination in a Time of Climate Change

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*Kari Marie Norgaard*

### Abstract

Despite rising calls for social science knowledge in the face of climate change, too few sociologists have been engaged in the conversations about how we have arrived at such perilous climatic circumstances, or how society can change course. With its attention to the interactive dimensions of social order between individuals, social norms, cultural systems and political economy, the discipline of sociology is uniquely positioned to be an important leader in this conversation. In this paper I suggest that in order to understand and respond to climate change we need two kinds of imagination: 1) to see the relationships between human actions and their impacts on earth's biophysical system (ecological imagination) and 2) to see the relationships within society that make up this environmentally damaging social structure (sociological imagination). The scientific community has made good progress in developing our ecological imagination but still need to develop a sociological imagination. The application of a sociological imagination allows for a powerfully reframing of four key problems in the current interdisciplinary conversation on climate change: *why climate change is happening, how we are being impacted, why we have failed to successfully respond so far, and how we might be able to effectively do so*. I visit each of these four questions describing the current understanding and show the importance of the sociological imagination and other insights from the field of sociology. I close with reflections on current limitations in sociology's potential to engage climate change and the Anthropocene.

*Keywords: climate change, sociological imagination, ecological imagination, Anthropocene, sociological approaches, interdisciplinarity, social organization of denial.*

The changing climate poses an unprecedented challenge to the human imagination. It seems impossible to imagine the reality of what is happening to the natural world, impossible to visualize the social, political and economic consequences of these changes, and impossible to envision truly changing course. Imagination is power especially in a time of crisis. Right now in the face of climate change and the

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