

Researching topic #1 SOCIAL CAUSES OF CLIMATE CHANGE – “green” updatings of Classical Theory
[last revised 3/3/2021]

This prompt offers two kinds of help:

- A brief overview of the kinds of questions you might wish to explore as you study how climate change might be explained by classical social theory and various attempts to do a “green” update of classical theory;
- A suggested strategy for how to search the literature as you prepare to write your paper.

OVERVIEW – SOCIAL CAUSES OF CLIMATE CHANGE – Classical social theory; “green” updating of Classical Theory

The “classical” theories of the first generation of sociological thinkers – Marx, Durkheim, Weber – were all concerned with understanding the uniqueness of “modernity,” and also deeply worried about the problems (or pathologies) of modernity.

One can find occasional discussions of environmental impacts, such as soil erosion, air pollution, the bodies of factory workers, but at that time the emphasis was much more on *social* impacts, not on *environmental* ones. In the past two decades or so, though, there have been efforts to “green” those classical authors, to “bring nature back into” narratives about the transition from the premodern era to the modern, the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Several authors have articulated, for example, the connections between Marx’s critique of capital and the rise of the environmental crisis.

What unites these writings is the argument that there is something specific about the dynamics of modern society that necessarily and inevitably drive an increasingly serious degradation of non-human nature.

You (or your team, if you are doing group research) should:

- (1) read and summarize some core works in this tradition, works that attempt a general explanation of the dynamics of modernity and how that differs from previous types of societies;
- (2) see if you can either find references to environmental impacts in these works
- (3) or see if you can, yourself, logically extrapolate some ideas about environment that are not explicitly written in these works but may be inferred by them;
- (4) and, finally, look for works that explicitly attempt to give classical theory a green updating (for example, “greening” Marxism).

SEARCH SUGGESTIONS for research on Topic #1. SOCIAL CAUSES – Classical social theory; “green” updating of Classical Theory

1 Search **academic articles** using Google Scholar (scholar.google.com)

(NOTE: Narrow and focus your search by using several phrases in quotes – such as “climate change”. For example, if you are searching for how climate change will increase the frequency of extreme weather events, don’t just enter “climate change,” search, instead for” “climate change” AND “extreme weather events”)

Search terms to use (you may certainly choose others):

“climate change” AND x, where x can be:

social theory

classical sociological theory

green social theory

(NOTE: For some citations you find on Google Scholar, you can directly download the PDF. For other citations, you may be able to find and download PDFs if your University library offers on line access to academic journals.)

2 Do a **more general search** using Google or another search engine

Use the same search terms to do a general search on Google or another search engine.

This will bring up information more recent than you find on scholar.google.com (it takes several years for research to be published in academic journals).

Finally, some more specific suggestions:

(Some prominent authors associated with efforts to “green” classical theory: John Bellamy Foster, James O’Connor, Brett Clark and Richard York. Here are some of those papers.)

Fred Magdoff and John Bellamy Foster, “What Every Environmentalist Needs to Know About Capitalism,” *Monthly Review*, Volume 61, Issue 10, March, 2010.

John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark, “The Planetary Emergency,” *Monthly Review*, Volume 64, Issue 07, December, 2012.

John Bellamy Foster, “The Epochal Crisis,” *Monthly Review*, Volume 65, Issue 05, October, 2013.

Nerilie J. Abram, *et al*, “Early onset of industrial-era warming across the oceans and continents,” *Nature*, vol. 536, Aug 25, 2016, pp. 411-432.

John Bellamy Foster and Hannah Holleman, “Weber and the Environment: Classical Foundations for a Post-exemptionalist Sociology,” *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 117, No. 6 (May 2012), pp. 1625-1673.