

Sociology 149E: THE SOCIOLOGY OF SAVING THE EARTH

Winter 2026
COA B23
Mon/Wed/Fri 2:00-2:50 PM

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Office Hours: Monday and Wednesday, 11-12 AM or
by appointment

This course uses sociology to explain why “saving the earth” is so hard—and what kinds of collective solutions have a chance of working. We will study how power, institutions, misinformation, coordination problems, populism, and culture shape environmental outcomes. The course is designed as a studio-style seminar: you will spend much class time doing structured analysis and building solutions in teams.

COURSE FORMAT: LECTURE + STRUCTURED ACTIVITIES

This course is not a traditional lecture-only class. Class meetings will combine short lectures, structured discussion, and team-based activities (small-group problem-solving, case analysis, and brief in-class exercises). Starting week 2 classes will end with “studio receipt” (about 5 minutes)—a brief individual reflection or synthesis written on paper collected at the end of class. This hybrid format is meant to increase engagement and learning while developing skills useful in almost any career and throughout adult life.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of the quarter, students should be able to:

- Use sociological concepts (power, institutions, organizations, culture, collective action, and inequality) to explain why environmental problems persist.
- Build and critique causal explanations (mechanisms and conditions) for environmental outcomes.
- Evaluate evidence and recognize common forms of misinformation and misdirection in environmental debates.
- Develop policy-relevant arguments that anticipate political constraints, implementation challenges, and public opinion.
- Write a clear, evidence-based policy brief for a nonacademic audience.
- Work professionally in teams: role rotation, collaboration, respectful disagreement, and constructive feedback.

THE BASIS OF THE COURSE GRADE

Structured activity worksheets (group): 25%

Studio receipts (individual): 15%

Final policy brief (individual): 60%

Structured activity worksheets (25%)

Many class meetings include a guided worksheet completed in small teams (3 to 4 students). These worksheets are graded Complete/Incomplete (complete = submitted on time, all parts done meaningfully). Expect about one of these a week. NOTE: During the first two weeks, groups may change as enrollment stabilizes. Starting Week 3, groups will stabilize to improve coordination, but I reserve the right to adjust group composition if enrollment changes or if a group becomes unworkable. While groups work, I will circulate to answer questions, challenge reasoning, and help connect group work to course concepts. To reduce stress from life disruptions, you can miss two worksheets without any penalty.

Studio receipts (15%)

A studio receipt is a short individual submission completed in the last few minutes of each class, starting week 2 (usually 3–6 sentences). Receipts are graded Complete/Incomplete. You have three free misses (no documentation needed).

Final policy brief (60%)

The final assignment is a policy brief that argues for a specific legislative or administrative action related to an environmental issue. Your brief must include (1) a sociological diagnosis of a problem, (2) evidence, (3) a clear policy recommendation or set of recommendations, and (4) a politics/public opinion section that anticipates supporters, opponents, and implementation barriers to the policies.

Length: approximately 15 pages (double-spaced, 12-point font). Team projects are encouraged (up to four people) but each team member will receive the same grade. Please tell me if you wish to work in a team. Late papers will

receive a letter grade off for each day late. Finally, depending on the size of the class, each student or team will make a short presentation on their policy brief in the last week of the course, and will participate by asking questions of the other presenters. The presentation days will be part of the policy brief grade.

There will be two required checkpoints to ensure progress on the paper graded Complete/Incomplete: Topic pitch (1 page); brief outline or annotated bibliography.

OTHER DETAILS

Laptops and phone use: This is a small class, and students using their laptops or phones for reasons not related to the class can take the energy out of the room. This is the case because they have mentally left the class. It will be noticed. If off-task device use becomes a pattern, it will affect your studio receipt credit.

Classroom ethics: Sociology examines society, including issues that can be sensitive or unpleasant. I encourage you to challenge yourself in engaging difficult topics. In discussion, disagreement is expected, but it must be handled with evidence and logic rather than personal attacks. A lack of courtesy may result in dismissal from the day's class or more serious action.

Academic integrity: Students must submit only their own work or in collaboration with a team. Using AI is acceptable for brainstorming, outlining, and editing but must be disclosed.

Class texts:

All readings are available as free electronic copies available through the course site on Canvas. *Note: Readings may change somewhat from the list below.*

January 5, 7, 9: Introduction; course logistics; sociology toolkit; how to read and research efficiently; threats to Earth

January 12, 14, 16: Path dependence: How do institutions make change difficult, and how can institutions create a better path?

Key concepts: Paul Pierson, "The New Politics of the Welfare State," *World Politics* 48(1996): 143-79; read only pp. 143-156

James Mahoney, "Path Dependence in Historical Sociology," *Theory and Society* 29(2000); read only pp. 507-517

Michael Phllis, "Trump EPA says it will defend tough lead pipe rule from Biden, but details to come," *Associated Press*, August 5, 2025

Madeleine Speed, "UN Plastics Treaty Talks Fail After US Joins Petrostates in Blocking Action," August 15, 2025, *Financial Times*

Solutions: Eric Lipton, "With Federal Aid on the Table, Utilities Shift to Embrace Climate Goals," *New York Times* November 29, 2022

January 21, 23, 26: Business power: How do businesses use politics to imperil the earth, and how can businesses help?

Key concepts: Edward T. Walker and Christopher M. Rea, "The Political Mobilization of Firms and Industries," *Annual Review of Sociology* 40(2014):281-304

Miranda Green, "Leaked: US power companies secretly spending millions to protect profits and fight clean energy," *The Guardian*, July 27, 2022

Solutions: Michael Maslansky and Will Howard, "Despite Anti-ESG Attacks, New Study Shows Investors See Climate as Critical to Business Performance," *Harvard Business Review* [sponsored! Approach with caution], August 7, 2024

Allison Alsup, "Companies ignoring climate risks get punished by markets, new study reveals," *Warrington College of Business Press Release*, March 29, 2024

January 28, 30, Feb. 2: Mis/disinformation: How does it confuse the public about the dangers facing the earth?

Key concepts: Edson C. Tandoc, "The Facts of Fake News: A Research Review," *Sociology Compass* 13(2019): 1-9

Hiroko Tabuchi, "Inside the Plastic Industry's Battle to Win Over Hearts and Minds," *New York Times* Nov. 27, 2024

Sophie Austin, "California lawsuit says makers of plastic bags lied about products being recyclable," *Associated Press*, October 17, 2025

Solutions: Robert J. Brulle and J. Timmons Roberts, "Climate Misinformation Campaigns and Public Sociology," *Contexts* 16(2017): 78-79

Feb. 4, 6, 9: Collective action problems: How can we get the nations of the world to cooperate?

Key concepts: Brian Obach, "Barriers to Collective Action: A Classroom Simulation," *Teaching Sociology* 31(2003): 312-18

Malcolm Fairbrother, "Externalities: why environmental sociology should bring them in," *Environmental Sociology* 2(2016): 376-84

Solutions: Penn State Department of Geography, "Solving Collective Action Problems"

Feb. 11: Writing the policy brief

will go over expectations and details on the policy brief

Feb. 13, 18, 20: Culture: How does culture create problems for the earth, and how can it solve the problems?

Key concepts: Wendy Griswold, "The Sociology of Culture," *SAGE Handbook of Sociology* (London: Sage, 2009)

Sabrian Arias and Christopher Blair, "In the Eye of the Storm: Hurricanes, Climate Migration, and Climate Attitudes," *American Political Science Review* 2024;118(4):1593-1613.

Claire Elise Thompson, "The Climate Impact of Owning a Dog," *Wired*, November 22, 2025

Solutions: Wulf Wilde, "Fact check: How bad is eating meat for the climate?" *DW.com*, October 30, 2022
<https://www.dw.com/en/fact-check-is-eating-meat-bad-for-the-environment/a-63595148>

Feb. 23, 25, 27: Populism and culture wars: How does anti-elitism/science in politics affect the planet?

Policy brief topics due Feb. 18

Key concepts: Lawrence C. Hamilton, "Trumpism, climate and COVID: Social bases of the new science rejection," *PLoS ONE* 19(2023)

Malcolm Fairbrother, "Environmental attitudes and the politics of distrust," *Sociology Compass* 11(2017):1-10

Seth Borenstein and Michael Phillis, "Scientists give harsh grades to Trump administration work aimed at undoing a key climate finding," *Associated Press*, August 26, 2025

Solutions: Eric Krebs, “How Can I Convince You?” *We Are Not Divided* September 2020
<https://wearenotdivided.reasonstobecherful.world/how-can-i-convince-you/>

March 2, 4, 6: Social movements: How do social movements develop and affect the fate of the earth?

Policy brief outlines due March 2

Key concepts: James M. Jasper, “Social Movements,” *The New Handbook of Political Sociology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020)

Clara Vandeweerd, “The effect of disruptive protests on public opinion” (working paper)

Oscar Berglund, “The Growing Criminalization of Climate and Environmental Protests,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, August 13, 2025

Emma Marris, “Why young climate activists have captured the world’s attention,” *Nature* September 18, 2019
<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-02696-0>

March 9, 11, 13: Student presentations

NO FINAL EXAM; FINAL PAPER DUE MARCH 19 AT 11:59 PM