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A political-economic theory of relevance: Explaining climate change inaction

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Abstract

Why have societies failed to effectively respond to climate change? We address the question of climate change inaction by (1) examining how an unambiguously ominous report about climate change (IPCC 2018) was made palatable by news media and (2) explaining why climate change is typically unthematized in everyday life. Drawing on Adorno and Schutz, we develop a political-economic theory of relevance. The imperative to accumulate capital is not only a social-structural reality but also shapes why particular facts are regarded as relevant in experience (topical relevance) as well as how relevant material is interpreted (interpretative relevance) and acted toward (motivational relevance). Applying this framework, we (1) argue that media popularizations of the IPCC's dire *Global Warming of 1.5°C* (2018) are constituted by relevance systems conditioned by a capitalist social context and (2) strengthen Ollinaho's, (2016) Schutzian explanation for climate change inaction by examining how productive relations and the culture industry perpetuate climate change irrelevance in everyday life. Schutz's framework helps conceptualize the intricacies of ideology and, when revised with Adorno's sociology, shines new light on an old question: the relations between social conditions and knowledge.

KEYWORDS

Adorno, cognitive sociology, critical theory, Global Warming of 1.5°C; Schutz, social phenomenology

1 | INTRODUCTION

Capitalism has an in-built expansionary mechanism, what Schnaiberg (1980) calls the “treadmill of production,” which requires more material and energy throughput to expand commodity production, and this treadmill is a central driver of global environmental problems, notably climate change (for review, see Antonio & Clark, 2015). What remains unclear is why the treadmill of production continues to expand in speed and scale despite the obviousness of its negative impacts, with the prospect of catastrophic climate change (IPCC, 2018) being the preeminent example today. In a landmark article on the problem of climate change inaction, Ulrich Beck (2010, p. 254) forcefully poses the question as follows: “[w]hy is there no storming of the Bastille because of the environmental destruction facing mankind, why no Red October of ecology?”

Some sociological explanations for climate change inaction emphasize the structural and macro-level phenomena that present barriers to undertaking actions that would effectively mitigate greenhouse gas emissions, driven by the need to perpetually expand production in a capitalist economy (Foster, Clark, & York, 2011), including the neoliberalization of global climate governance (Ciplet & Roberts, 2017) and a well-organized climate change denial campaign (McCright & Dunlap, 2010). Others point to a variety of ideational, practice-based, and cultural culprits, from interpersonal relations to the cultural dimensions of institutions: the ideological assumptions of mainstream climate change policy that mask the contradiction between capitalism's dual requirements to expand, on the one hand, and maintain a stable climate system on the other (Gunderson, Stuart, & Petersen, 2018), norms and emotions that divorce knowledge about climate change from taking action about climate change (Norgaard, 2011), the non-identity of objective and subjective dimensions of the “environment-society problematic” due to reification (Stoner, 2014), and “post-ecologist” norms underlying depoliticized climate politics (Blühdorn, 2011; for extended review of different levels of explanation and an integrated model, see Brulle & Norgaard, 2019). In an article that has not yet received due attention that we engage in detail below, Ollinaho (2016), in a deceptively simple line of argument, makes the case that the climate change is experienced as an intellectual problem in the Global North, a “relevance structure” that does not supersede the pragmatic practices and concerns of everyday life. In other words, the drivers of climate change are reproduced in everyday life because climate change is *irrelevant*.

Little attention has been devoted to investigating how macro- and micro-level realms of influence interact to instill and prolong climate change inaction, with exceptions (Horshchild, 2016; Lucas & Davison, 2019; Norgaard, 2011; Brulle & Norgaard, 2019). For example, Norgaard's *Living in Denial* (2011) concludes that inaction is ubiquitous, just as likely among skeptics and believers, and is reflected in our collective persistence in normal cultural practices in spite of climate change. She discusses this as a result of the limits of our practical, cognitive, and emotional capacities, capacities formed in social context, to truly engage with the enormity of both the threat posed by climate change and the societal shifts needed to mitigate climate change. Australians whom Lucas and Davison (2019) interviewed similarly express that focal matters drove unconcern about climate change. Addressing climate change was positioned as a far less significant or pertinent matter to individuals than achieving career and personal goals. These studies suggest the importance of considering inaction as an active process, driven by cultural and political-economic contexts as well as individual-level social-psychological processes. Given the limited state of theoretical and empirical attention in this vein, more work is needed.

To better understand the interaction of macro-structural forces as well as practice and consciousness in the context of climate change inaction, we develop a novel theoretical framework that

integrates the Marxist theory of social conditions and ideology via Theodor W. Adorno and a phenomenological sociology of cognition, experience, and meaning via Alfred Schutz. We bring a “political economy of relevance” framework to bear on explanations for climate change inaction. By “political economy of relevance” we mean a framework that theorizes how political-economic context influences what people regard as relevant in experience (i.e., the selectivity of consciousness), how relevant material is interpreted, and how people act toward relevant aspects of experience. While he does not focus on political-economic conditions, we echo Eviatar Zerubavel's (2015) contention that relevance and irrelevance, or noticing and ignoring, and the selectivity of consciousness are *social* phenomena.

Although a number of thinkers have sought positive and integrative discussions between phenomenology and Marxism (for overview, see Piccone, 1971), these two traditions have had a relatively unhappy relationship. Critical theory has been suspicious of a number of phenomenology's claims, especially its claim to achieve presuppositionlessness, and inability to theorize the material conditions of consciousness (e.g., Habermas, 1988; for summary, see Wolff, 1978: 506–509, 522). Adorno is one of the most persistent critics, devoting a good deal of his career to a damning critique of classical phenomenology and its existentialist offshoots (Adorno, 1940, 1973a, 1973b, 1982). Despite his criticisms of phenomenology, there is an overlooked fruitful and affirmative dimension of Adorno's critique, which sought to rectify phenomenology's “unrealized promises,” as emphasized by Gordon (2016). Indeed, “Adorno's thought maintained a phenomenological tenor to the end” (Schnell, 1997, p. 118).

One goal of this project is to highlight the positive opening Adorno left for a critical phenomenology of capitalism and to bring Adorno into conversation with Schutz, a figure he never deeply engaged (Benzer, 2011, p. 41). This is unfortunate as Adorno briefly but favorably mentions Schutz and Thomas Luckmann, a colleague of both Schutz and Adorno, during the closing of a lecture touching on the limits of positivist methodology. In an ambiguous statement, Adorno, (2000, p. 52) says that social phenomenology, like critical theory, “validates living experience,” though from “a quite different standpoint” (Adorno, 2000, p. 52). This article brings these “quite different standpoints” into conversation. Unlike Adorno, his student Jürgen Habermas, (1987, pp. 126ff, 1988, pp. 106ff) engages Schutz. Our project is related to Habermas' framework, which also takes Schutz to task for remaining one-sidedly devoted to inner experience and revises the Schutzian conception of the lifeworld. Most importantly for the political economy of relevance, Habermas, (1987, p. 325) details the pathologies created by “the instrumentalization of the lifeworld by systemic constraints.” Our contributions are incorporating Schutz's theory of relevance and affirming the continued applicability of the concept of ideology.

This project affirms neither the antimonies nor parallels between critical theory and phenomenology. Instead, it engages the concepts afforded by Schutz's phenomenology that, when revised in light of Adorno's critique of phenomenology, can contribute to the analysis of climate change inaction, specifically the reproduction of social conditions that drive climate change in everyday life. In other words, we critically appropriate Schutz's social phenomenology as a fruitful supplement to the Marxist analysis of ideology via Adorno. As explained in Section 4, this framework also supplements neo-Marxist structural analyses of climate change drivers, which tend to ignore the ideational variables necessary for explaining social reproduction (Gunderson, 2015, p. 229).

Four comments on the boundaries of the theoretical integration of Adorno and Schutz are worth mentioning up front. First, the political economy of relevance framework is not an attempt to resolve the central sociological puzzle about the interaction between social structure and consciousness, though it does contribute to this longstanding question (see Section 4). Second, although we think

the political-economic theory of relevance has wider applicability than climate change inaction, we are specifically interested in how social-structural conditions influence (in)attention, interpretation, and motivation in the context of climate change. Third, Schutz's theory of relevance and Adorno's sociology are integrated to investigate the latter issue in particular. Both Schutz's social phenomenology and Adorno's critical theory may be independently better suited to address other questions without cross-fertilization. In the case of climate change inaction, however, integration is fruitful. Finally, while there are other theorists in the Western Marxist tradition who could be drawn upon to explain how capitalism influences consciousness (see Section 4), Adorno is helpful due to his argument that capitalism's "exchange principle" becomes a lived reality through capitalist social relations and the culture industry, a social reality conducive to "identity thinking" (for discussion of the latter term, see Section 2.2).

Schutz's and Adorno's ideas have already entered the discussion surrounding climate change inaction. Stoner and Melathopoulos (2015) draw from Adorno's critique of identity thinking to analyze how early modern environmentalism was formulated in a way that was easily coopted by state capitalist machinery. We continue the argument that identity thinking makes for easily coopted and ineffective climate politics and contribute to this insight by sharpening Adorno's framework with a revised version of Schutz's theory of relevance. As mentioned above, Ollinaho (2016) draws from Schutz to explain how collective environmental problems are reproduced or accelerated, rather than addressed, at the level of social practice among citizens of the Global North. Another goal of this paper is to deepen Ollinaho's explanation for climate change inaction, discussed in detail in Section 3.2, through our revision of Schutz's assumptions about social action via Adorno's political-economic approach.

In what follows, we first develop a critical phenomenology of experience, cognition, and action embedded in social structure by bringing Adorno into conversation with Schutz (Section 2). Then we apply our "political economy of relevance" framework to the problem of climate change inaction through two illustrations: (1) examining popular media representations of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC's) dire special report *Global Warming of 1.5°C* (2018) (Section 3.1), and (2) strengthening Ollinaho's (2016) Schutzian take on climate change inaction (Section 3.2). We conclude by discussing how our framework can contribute to the climate change inaction and views literature (McCright et al., 2016) and the long-discussed problem of the relationship between social-structural conditions, on the one hand, and cognition, experience, meaning, and knowledge on the other (Section 4).

2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To understand relevance in political-economic context, we provide an overview of Schutz's theory of relevance (Section 2.1); summarize Adorno's sociology and his opening for a critical phenomenological sociology (Section 2.2); and summarize how Adorno's emphasis on the political-economic conditioning of consciousness can elevate Schutz's relatively astructural theory of relevance (Section 2.3).

2.1 | Schutz's theory of relevance

Schutz, (1967c, p. 250) defines the problem of relevance as "the question of why these facts and precisely these are selected by thought from the totality of lived experience and regarded as relevant." This question concerned Schutz throughout his entire corpus (e.g., Schutz, 1964a, pp. 248ff, 1964b, pp. 123ff, 1966a, pp. 121ff, 1967a, pp. 9f, 1967d, pp. 283ff; Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, Ch. 3. Part B) and his most important discussion of relevance, *Reflections on the Problem of Relevance* (1970),

was left unfinished and published posthumously (Cox, 1978, p. ix). This subsection summarizes his theory of relevance, focusing on his tripartite theory of kinds or forms of relevance: (1) *topical* (or thematic) relevance, (2) *interpretative* (or interpretational) relevance, and (3) *motivational* relevance. We discuss each relevance form in turn and detail their interrelations (see especially Schutz, 1970, Ch. 1; Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, Ch. 3, Part B; for overviews of Schutz's social phenomenology, see Dreher, 2011; Heiskala, 2011, pp. 232ff).

Topical relevance refers to an object becoming "thematized," made the "topic at hand," or made problematic "in the midst of the unstructuralized field of unproblematic familiarity" (Schutz, 1970, p. 26). Topically relevant objects are often those that were perceived as unfamiliar in the process of carrying out a given purpose at hand. Topical relevances may be *imposed* on consciousness (e.g., a person "plac[ing] themes before the individual to which he must turn himself") or *voluntarily* turned to ("intrinsic" relevance) (Schutz, 1970, pp. 28ff; Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 190, see pp. 186ff). For example, stopping a passer-by on the street to ask for directions has an intrinsic relevance for the direction-asker whereas the response or silence of the passer-by has an imposed relevance for her (Wagner, 1983, p. 69). All three kinds of relevance may be intrinsic (i.e., "the outcome of our chosen interests, established by our spontaneous decision to solve a problem by our thinking, to attain a goal by our action etc.") or imposed (when "we have to take them just as they are") (Dreher, 2011, pp. 498–499).

When a topic or theme becomes relevant it is interpreted by the actor as a *type*, i.e., it is subsumed under a *typification*. The selection and use of typifications is called "interpretative relevance." According to Schutz, (1967a, pp. 7ff), we make sense of everyday life with a "stock of knowledge at hand" afforded by our own experiences and the experiences of intimate others (e.g., family) and anonymous others (e.g., mass media). Our stock of knowledge at hand is a collection of typifications, or, we experience objects through "pre-familiar" and "general" types (Schutz, 1966b). Typifications are selected or ruled out based on the similarity or difference to past experiences with objects in our stock of knowledge at hand (Schutz, 1970, p. 42). In response to the question how it is possible that any object can be subsumed under a number of typifications, Schutz, (1964a, p. 234) answers that our "purpose at hand" and the given context determine what traits of the object are "equalized" under a type (those that are *relevant* to our purpose at hand) and those "particularizing traits" of the object which are disregarded or ignored as *irrelevant* to our purpose at hand. In addition to similarities and differences with past experiences and our purpose at hand, interpretation is influenced by the social context and situation. For example, someone tripping and falling down may become topically relevant, and one will interpret this thematized object differently if one is at work ("A co-worker tripped and fell") or at a bar ("A drunk person tripped and fell").

The third form of relevance, motivational relevance, has to do with action related to the relevant object (for overview of Schutz's action theory, see Castellani, 2013, pp. 385ff) and, at times, explaining why objects become topically relevant and why they are interpreted as they are (see Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 209). Motivational relevances have a "dual aspect" (Wagner, 1983, p. 71), being composed of "in-order-to motives" and "because-motives." In-order-to motives are the "reasons that persons give themselves to explain their conduct" (Wagner, 1983, p. 60) whereas because-motives are the background conditions and experiences that cause action, causes that the actor often has no knowledge of (Schutz, 1967c, pp. 130f). In-order-to motives and because-motives make up "links" in "chains" of motivational relevances (Schutz, 1970, p. 51; Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, pp. 212f). Motivational relevances are related to the concept of "interest." Interest, in Schutz, (1970, pp. 64–65, emphasis removed), refers to "the set of motivational relevances which guide the selective activity of the mind" (for clarification, see Houser et al., forthcoming).

Schutz does not indicate that any kind of relevance is primary (in terms of causality) and kinds of relevance are understood as *interdependent* moments in an “undivided unity” (Cox, 1978, p. 90; see Schutz, 1970, pp. 68ff) in the sense that changes in one kind will modify the others (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, pp. 223ff). Schutz's focal example in *Reflections on the Problem of Relevance* (1970), adopted from the Greek skeptic Carneades, is helpful for understanding the interdependence of kinds of relevance. An unfamiliar coiled lump of rope-like material on the floor catches one's attention (is made *topically relevant*) because it fits the typification “snake” (*interpretative relevance*) and one is afraid of snakes (the interplay of topical and motivation relevances in *interest*). Two different typifications, rope and snake, may be employed to make sense of the situation (*interpretative relevances*). I poke the object with a stick *in order to* gain more information about the object *because* I am afraid of snakes (*motivational relevances*). The following subsection summarizes Adorno's sociology and one of his objections to phenomenology in order to bring the latter into conversation with Schutz's theory of relevance.

2.2 | Adorno's sociology and the prospect for a critical phenomenology

During a lecture, Adorno, (2000, pp. 141ff) protests the academic division of labor between sociology and economics. He encourages an overcoming of this “area of indifference” through a return to *political economy*, a term that refers to what is “lost in the gap” between these two fields (Adorno, 2000, p. 143). Sociology would benefit from renewed attention to the structure and process of economic activity because production and consumption are fundamental requirements for social institutions to exist and reproduce themselves and, further, the dynamics of capitalism deeply impact social relations and consciousness; they determine “the structure of our society down to the level, I would almost say, of the most delicate subjective behaviour” (Adorno, 2000, p. 143). One element of Adorno's critique of phenomenology, discussed below, is its blindness to the way capitalism conditions consciousness down to “the most delicate subjective behaviour” (see Benzer, 2011, Ch. 1), a limitation we seek to close here. Capitalism conditions consciousness through the following interrelated variables, interrelated by capitalism's underlying drive to accumulate capital: the exchange principle, capitalist productive relations, and the culture industry. Each aspect and their relation to consciousness are summarized below, followed by an overview of Adorno's opening for a critical phenomenology.

Adorno often uses the term the “exchange principle” to describe what Lukács (1971) calls the “commodity form”: “the form of equivalence between qualitatively unequal things, established by their exchange at the market” (Kavoulakos, 2017, p. 68). Capitalism demands a leveling of qualitative differences between objects into commensurable equivalents for the market. This structural necessity, coupled with a need to master reality to survive, conditions a form of thinking that Adorno (1973a) terms “identity thinking” or “identification.” Identity thinking is marked by (1) *classification* or *conceptualization* (constituting something as an “instance of a kind”) (Stone, 2008, p. 54) and (2) *naturalization* or ideological *reification* (“tak[ing] categories produced by humans in society as describing intrinsic, natural properties of objects”) (Benzer, 2011, p. 18). The most important aspect of Adorno's, (2000, p. 76) analysis of identity thinking for this project is the diagnosis of the ubiquity of *instrumental reason*, or, when “the instruments or means of thought have become independent of the purposes of thought, have become reified.” The critique of instrumental reason is not a critique of means-ends rationality *per se*, but an analysis of the modern inability to set substantive goals through reason and the heightening of means (technological development, economic production) to ends. Due to the “universal exchange relationship[,] ... everything that exists, exists only for something

else ... The very world in which nothing exists for its own sake is also the world of an unleashed production that forgets its human aims" (Adorno, 1993, p. 29). This point is returned to in Section 3.2.

Identity thinking is normative in capitalist societies because seeing equivalence between unlike objects and instrumentalization are necessary to adapt to capitalist *productive relations* and is further encouraged by the *culture industry*. To survive in modern societies, most people must work for a wage or salary, which requires that we concretize specialized abstract roles and automatize practices. Capitalist productive relations shape consciousness because we must, as Lukács (1971) detailed, internalize the practices and instrumental attitude necessary to survive and "succeed" (Jütten, 2010, pp. 236f, 249). Although monopoly capitalism is—or, rather, since the neoliberal turn, *was*—characterized by a number of material benefits for many (Adorno, 2003b, pp. 102ff), survival still "depends on adaptation to a constantly changing and inherently unpredictable economic system," which conditions a calculating form of rationality (Cook, 2008, p. 7). In Adorno, this process often goes under the heading of "self-preservation," a term meant to shine light on the fact that, despite massive gains in productivity, the species is still merely *living to survive* rather than *surviving to live* due to capitalist relations of production structured around the profit motive (e.g., Adorno, 2003a, p. 117; for expansion, see Arzuga, 2019). Along with magnifying instrumental rationality, capitalist productive relations influence consciousness and behavior through "political and social impotence." People feel powerless before the reified social world because they *are* powerless, still "appendages of the machine" (Adorno, 2003a, p. 117).

Coupled with the exchange principle and the structure of productive relations, capitalism conditions consciousness through the "culture industry" (see Horkheimer & Adorno, 1969, pp. 120–167; Adorno, 1991). The culture industry has a twofold meaning: (1) culture is now a product of big business and (2) cultural products are standardized and seeming differences between products are more of the same (Johnson, 2008, pp. 121f; see Horkheimer & Adorno, 1969, p. 125). Media, entertainment, and advertising sell passivity, distraction, comfort, "pseudo-individuality" (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1969, p. 154), and escape from the fears and anxieties associated with work and employment. Adorno's, (2000, p. 69) modification of the culture industry as the "consciousness industry" during a lecture is instructive. The term *consciousness industry* implies the production and selling of the content and form of consciousness. We are consumers first, and conscious subjects after the sale. One of his most important insights for this project is that the culture industry stunts "the mass-media consumer's powers of imagination" (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1969, p. 126, emphasis added; see also Adorno, 1998, p. 172) (see Section 3.1).

To understand Adorno's critique of phenomenology it is necessary to grasp his theory of society as both an external, reified entity and a humanly-produced artifact (Adorno, 2000; Benzer, 2011, Ch. 1). The methodological and epistemological difficulty for Adorno is how to examine an elusive social totality, which is, on the one hand, an "unintelligible opacity" yet, on the other, "intelligible" and "human" (Adorno, 2000, p. 82). One route to indirectly grasp the social totality of capitalist exchange relations is, paradoxically, to analyze how the domination of capital shows itself in the epiphenomenal and familiar interactions, behaviors, objects, and thoughts of everyday life (e.g., Adorno, 1974), i.e., society's dimensions of central interest to social phenomenology. Although the negative side of Adorno's critique of phenomenology is usually emphasized (see Section 1), he leaves open the possibility for a critical phenomenological sociology. In an early untranslated critique of Husserl, Adorno argues that "despite phenomenology's failure, its concepts inadvertently offer a diagnosis of capitalist society" (Benzer, 2011, p. 40). More specifically, Adorno sociologizes Husserl's "essence" into a historical category: what is essential to all objects today is the influence of capitalist relations of production (see also Adorno, 1982, pp. 220f; 2000, pp. 31–33). Today, capitalism "utterly

determines all putatively individual objects” (Adorno quoted in Benzer, 2011, p. 40), shaping social interaction, norms, consciousness, and social artifacts. The sociologist's job is to uncover the “essence of social phenomena,” which is “stored up” history (Adorno, 2000, p. 146).

Adorno (1973, pp. 26f) affirms phenomenology's attention to the “reciprocal constitution of consciousness and objectivity” (Clucas, 2000, p. 15) without its ideological blinders and systematization. For this to be a successful program, Adorno contends, we must place consciousness and practices in social-structural context. To our knowledge (cf. Benzer, 2011, p. 41), Adorno never brought this line of thinking to bear on phenomenological sociology (see Section 1), an oversight we tackle in the next subsection.

2.3 | Rendering Schutz a materialist

Schutz's system of thought is open to Adorno's insistence that political-economic conditions influence human thought and action. In his posthumously published central work on relevance, Schutz (1970, p. 73) acknowledges that he approaches the question of relevance “as if there were no social world at all.” Though he died before he could complete his investigation into the problem of relevance (Cox, 1978, p. viii), his theory of relevance lends itself to social-structural considerations by: (1) acknowledging that our “status and role within the social system” is part of our “biographically determined situation,” which is the basis for selecting a “purpose at hand” (Schutz, 1967a, p. 9) and (2) recognizing that a given system of relevance may “[prevail] in a given social group” (Schutz, 1964a, p. 248). Analyzing forms of relevance in social-structural context will help explain *why* particular purposes at hand are selected by actors and *why* systems of relevance are commonly shared. This subsection explains how Adorno's sociology can inform our understanding of motivational, interpretative, and topical forms of relevances.

A logical entry point to make Schutz's theory of relevance more amendable to social-structural considerations is embedding because-motives in political-economic context. Because-motives “establish the [individual's] paramount project” whereas in-order-to motives “emanate from the already established paramount project” (Schutz, 1970, p. 50, emphasis removed). Since because-motives are often unknown to the actor, social scientists sometimes impute because-motives to actors (Wagner, 1983, p. 59). In contemporary societies, Adorno would argue that if one traced the “links” of the “chain” of motivational relevances (see Section 2.1), one would almost always arrive at one or more of the following because-motives, depending on one's social position and other factors: “Because I live in a capitalist society and must (1a) work for a wage/salary or pursue other avenues (e.g., thievery) to gain the means (money) to survive and take care of my family and/or other significant individuals or (1b) maximize profits to compete with other firms, survive, and take care of my family and/or other significant individuals; and (2) consume commodities to survive and, beyond survival, escape, relax, 'get a thrill', etc.” Importantly, individuals may be unaware of these motives as well as the structural imperative (capital accumulation) and social relations they emanate from. This does not mean that the imperative to accumulate capital, lived in everyday life through work and leisure, directly motivates all action, but that the *structural because-motive* of capital accumulation almost always shapes or influences motivational relevance by filtering, subsuming, or overriding other motivations. Like Karl Polanyi (1947) and Marx (see Berger and Pullberg 1965, pp. 198f), Adorno does not think economic-determinist explanations are transhistorically valid, but, in capitalist societies, all arenas of society are subjected to the imperative to accumulate capital. At the micro-level, subordinate motives adapt to the superordinate structural imperative to accumulate capital.

Individuals certainly have other motives, but these are filtered through and subjected to economic capital's structural because-motive to self-accumulate.

In addition to modifying Schutz's theory of motivation by attending to the way political-economic conditions influence motivational relevances, Adorno's critique of identity thinking and Schutz's theory of typifications overlap and are mutually beneficial theories of experience and cognition. Identity thinking "makes the dissimilar comparable by reducing it to abstract quantities" (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1969, p. 7) and is demanded by a society that requires that we treat exchange values as "congruent with reality" (Benzer, 2011, p. 37). A theory of interpretative relevance that attends to the ways that participation in capitalist production and consumption of the culture industry's products influence interpretation is not inconsistent with Schutz's premise that social context influences interpretation (see Section 2.1).

Related to analyses of capitalism's conditioning of motivational and interpretative relevances, Adorno's sociology encourages any theory of relevance to examine how political-economic context influences *which* aspects of reality become topically relevant to consciousness while others remain familiar and unproblematic, and why. Many imposed topical relevances are *structurally* imposed through advertising, marketing, media, and work. For example, a commodity may "catch my interest" (becomes topically relevant) due to advertising or one's work schedule is made problematic (becomes topically relevant) by new flexible labor laws. More generally, Adorno asks us to reflect on the extent to which the selectivity of consciousness is instrumental, looking to the world as/for tools to procure, sustain, or be successful in employment/employing or consuming the images and products of the culture industry.

To summarize, Adorno's framework can strengthen Schutz's theory of relevance by placing topical, interpretative, and motivational relevances in social-structural context. To illustrate the fruitfulness of this political-economic approach for understanding "why these facts and precisely these are selected by thought from the totality of lived experience and regarded as relevant" (Schutz, 1967c: 250), we offer a few illustrations of our political-economy of relevance framework in the context of climate change inaction.

3 | APPLYING THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF RELEVANCE TO CLIMATE CHANGE INACTION

A political economy of relevance can help us better understand how social and environmental problems are interpreted and (not) responded to. We apply this approach to examine climate change inaction (see Section 1). More specifically, we theorize how understandings and representations of climate change and its solutions constrain the social transformation that is necessary to adequately limit global warming.

We illustrate the fruitfulness of a political-economic theory of relevance in two ways: (1) analyzing how popular interpretations of an especially dire and direct climate change report are influenced by political-economic context and (2) revising and deepening Ollinaho's application of Schutz to explain climate change inaction. Theoretically, the first application concerns the three forms of relevance (topical, interpretative, motivational) embedded in political-economic context while the second application concerns a more fundamental question about interest, motive, and relevance systems.

3.1 | Application 1: Popularizations of the IPCC's 2018 special report

In October of 2018, the IPCC released a special report on climate change stating that the international goal of keeping temperatures within 2 degrees C of pre-industrial levels is no longer sufficient and that rapid and transformative social changes are required to stay within a safer limit of 1.5 degrees C (IPCC 2018). The report explains that previous publications were likely underestimating the severity and extent of climate impacts associated with a 2 degrees C temperature increase and that significant and immediate action is necessary to avoid dangerous consequences. This evoked an outpouring of news coverage, editorials, and opinion pieces. A search of these publications offers numerous examples that illustrate how individuals and news organizations are interpreting and diagnosing climate change. Of the dominant interpretations, we specifically selected three pieces to illustrate how a political economy of relevance approach can help us to understand how organizations and individuals diagnose climate change as a certain type problem and therefore support a specific type of solution. We are not interested in the relative quantity of varying media framings of the report. Instead, we are intrigued by the fact that the unambiguously dire report with a radical prescription could be interpreted in any other way than dire and transformative. Examining mass media is fitting as it is a central vehicle of the culture industry.

Exploring interpretations of the IPCC report helps illustrate how political-economic conditions influence cognition and experience because the interpretation and prescription for climate change in the special report is, again, especially dire in assessment and transformational in prescription. It makes clear that societies would need to fundamentally and immediately alter the status quo to remain below 1.5 degrees C above preindustrial levels: “rapid and far-reaching transitions in energy, land, urban and infrastructure, and industrial systems” are required, changes that are “unprecedented in terms of scale” (IPCC, 2018, pp. 21, 17). The application of our framework in this subsection is an analysis of how relevance systems conditioned by political-economic context and communicated through the culture industry filter and shape climate change information from a direct and dire report by a respected and authoritative communicator of climate change knowledge. We illustrate how a political economy of relevance approach can help us better understand current interpretations and proposed solutions to climate change and how they draw attention away from more transformative approaches. We investigate what information from the report is deemed relevant enough to report (*topical relevance*), how information from the report is interpreted (*interpretative relevance*), and the because and in-order-to motives implicit in or explicitly used by the popular pieces (*motivational relevance*).

Our first example is the interpretation of climate change as an individual problem as illustrated in a CNN news article titled, “What the new report on climate change expects from you” (Mackintosh, 2018). The article focuses on individual actions as causes of climate change and therefore the need to modify individual actions to address climate change. The first line of the article states that the IPCC report demands change from governments and individuals but then shifts all attention toward individuals in interpreting the report's call for “rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society” (IPCC, 2018). The CNN article states,

[t]he IPCC's models emphasize the need for people to change their lifestyle and consumption patterns to more sustainable alternatives, specifically in areas they can control, like modes of transportation, the buildings they inhabit and their dietary preferences.

However, in the 25-page technical summary of the IPCC report (2018) there is only a brief mention of lifestyle changes among a suite of mitigation pathways and policies. Yet the reporter interprets the call for social transformation in the report as an individual problem.

Interpreting the IPCC's call for changes in society as changes among individuals results in the promotion of specific solutions. In this case, the need for “rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society” becomes a matter of consumption choices. The rest of the text of the CNN article (Mackintosh, 2018) follows the subheading: “Here's what consumers can do.” The list of actions includes changes in transportation (e.g., car sharing and using hybrid cars), housing (e.g., using a smart thermostat), and diet (consuming 30% less animal products). The author concludes that these types of changes can result in “a new dimension to climate modeling: the impact of changes in human behavior.” However, as illustrated years ago by Jensen (2009) changes in individual actions from everyone in the United States would likely only reduce the nation's greenhouse gas emissions by 22% and scientists say we need to reduce emission by 75% globally. In addition, a focus on changing personal consumption behaviors as a solution to climate change overlooks important relationships between consumption and production: that production drives consumption (Galbraith, 1958; Schnaiberg, 1980), largely through advertising and the creation of false needs via the culture industry (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1969). Therefore, focusing on individual choices remains short-sighted.

We now turn to our second example. An opinion piece by two economists published in *The Globe and Mail* portrays climate change as a different type of problem: a market problem requiring a market-based solution. Beugin and Ragan (2018) translate the IPCC report's findings into monetary terms: “[c]limate change is here, and it could start to become very costly, very quickly.” Focusing on the report's economic estimates, they argue for action to reduce future climate impacts and associated costs. While describing the problem in economic terms, they also explain it as a price-based problem that can be corrected. Beugin and Ragan (2018) draw from other economists, namely Nordhaus, arguing that “price-type approaches” are efficient and effective and state that “harnessing market forces might solve this problem more easily than critics expect.” They explain the importance of “getting the economic incentives right” to address climate change. The authors argue that carbon pricing approaches can be designed to protect businesses and reduce greenhouse gas emissions and optimistically state that “the best that economics has to offer is telling us we have a key solution right under our noses.”

Reducing greenhouse gas emissions through market-based reforms has remained the most popular and widely implemented approach with more countries, states and regions participating in carbon markets over time. However, a market-based solution to climate change overlooks how the commodification of nature – fossil fuels – has created the climate problem in the first place and how further marketization fails to address the negative impacts (Stuart et al., 2019) while increasing profits for dominant financial entities (Lohmann, 2010; Klein, 2014).

Our final example focuses on interpreting climate change as a technological issue that can be addressed through technological fixes. While our first example was written by a reporter, and the second by academics, this last example focuses on a piece written by a board member of the South-central Minnesota Clean Energy Council, Leigh Pomeroy (2018), that was published in *The Free Press* of South-Central Minnesota. In his piece titled, “My view; Why I'm (cautiously) optimistic about climate change” (2018), Pomeroy starts by acknowledging the IPCC special report, the reality of climate change, and the threats it poses to human and natural systems. He then explains why he is optimistic: consensus on climate change is finally reshaping public opinion and technological advances are underway. He focuses the rest of his piece on the latter. Pomeroy describes specific

reasons for his optimism: utilities are increasingly deploying wind and solar and the electric grid is more efficient than ever. In addition, he states:

recently, a group of billionaires under the name Breakthrough Energy Ventures has funded new companies that are breaking the mold in developing clean energy solutions, including ways to pull carbon out of the atmosphere — the holy grail for dealing with our carbon addiction.

He also describes other methods for removing greenhouse gases from the atmosphere, as simple as planting more trees and as complicated as “small-scale nuclear fusion.” Pomeroy praises Minnesota for taking steps to increase energy efficiency and renewable energy, citing Xcel Energy's commitment to be 85% carbon-free by 2030. He rebuts others' concerns about China by stating that they are now “the world's largest producer of solar panels and have built a number of massive wind project.” While Pomeroy does not explicitly describe climate change as a technological problem, his list of technological solutions clearly indicates that he is promoting a certain type of solution because he interprets climate change as a certain type of problem.

Relying on technological solutions to climate change represents a convenient and widely popular approach that is associated with the idea of a “win-win” scenario for the economy and the environment. Examples of this belief include the Breakthrough Institute, dedicated to finding technological solutions to environmental problems (Breakthrough, 2018), Bill Gates (who publicly and financially supports geoengineering), and former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson who interprets climate change as an “engineering problem” (Lukacs, 2017). Technological solutions to climate change remain widely popular as they maintain the current social order while increasing profits for high-tech investors; however, how most of these technologies are currently used, or proposed to be used, is counter-intuitive as they allow for the continued burning of fossil fuels and increasing greenhouse gas emissions (Gunderson et al., 2018). We should note that in addition to technological mitigation strategies, technological innovations for adaptation to climate change are also being discussed and developed as part of a “realist” or “pragmatist” strategy (e.g. see Hulme, 2018, Breakthrough Institute, 2018). However, these approaches were not the focus of responses to the October 2018 IPCC report in news sources.

All three popularizations of the special report in the media above represent widely supported ideas about how to address climate change. However, all three solutions fail to draw attention to the radical implications of the report and instead focus attention on, and extrapolate from, comparatively brief and minor aspects of the report. The unsustainability of the current social order and necessity of social transformation are clear in the report: the first line of the IPCC special report press release (IPCC, 2018) states that, limiting warming to 1.5 degrees C will “require rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society.” However, the above popularizations of the special report thematize aspects that are amendable to current conditions and beliefs while excluding the direst predictions and radical statements. That is, in terms of our theory, only aspects of the special report that do not challenge the current social order are made topically relevant.

Increasing evidence demonstrates that it is because current strategies further economic growth that they will fail to limit warming. Data illustrates a positive relationship between economic growth and greenhouse gas emissions (Stern, 2006; Jorgenson & Clark, 2012; York et al., 2003). GDP growth correlates with carbon emissions: a 1% increase in GDP equals a 0.5–0.7% increase in carbon emissions (Burke, Shahiduzzaman, & Stern, 2015; see Hickel & Kallis, 2019). It is also increasingly clear that technologies cannot “decouple” the relationship between growth and carbon emissions.

Economic growth generates the need for *more* energy and in consequence the generation of non-fossil fuel energy over the past five decades did not displace the use of fossil fuels (York, 2012). Two climate scientists studying carbon budgets, Anderson and Bows (2011, 2012), conclude that reductions in economic growth are necessary to effectively address climate change.

That the IPCC special report (2018) acknowledges these realities, hinted at in a proposal to address climate change by reducing economic growth and scaling down global consumption by 20% - a proposal that has received very little attention (Hickel, 2018). Instead, news and discussions, like the ones we presented here, focused on strategies that continue to prioritize economic growth, conforming to a capitalist social order. This illustrates how relevance systems are shaped by political-economic context: a growth-dependent capitalist system restricts our political horizons to depoliticized solutions. This is a problem because not only have these approaches to climate policy been shown to be ineffective (Gunderson et al., 2018), but also because they reproduce the social order that drives economic growth and, in turn, global climate change. The fact that news popularizations failed to make these *essential* points topically relevant speaks to the necessity of analyzing relevance systems in political-economic context.

Social context not only conditions what is topically relevant to addressing the purpose at hand, but also typifications (related to interpretative relevance) and prescriptions (related to motivational relevance) that are consistent with capital accumulation: individualist consumption, market-expansion, and technological development. Despite the fact that the special report clearly and openly makes the case that a fundamental transformation of the social order is required to avoid catastrophic climate change, the popularizations render the potential of catastrophic climate change an individual problem (typification) requiring individual solutions, a market problem (typification) requiring market-based solutions, and a technological problem (typification) requiring techno-fixes. The in-order-to motives of the popularizations that flow from these typifications (i.e., proposing individualist-consumptive, market-based, and technological solutions in-order-to address looming catastrophe) are all embedded in a *social-structural order* with an underlying, unyielding, and all-powerful structural because-motive: “[a]ccumulation for the sake of accumulation” (Marx, 1976, p. 742). This because-motive always sits in the background of social action in capitalist societies even when unnoticed by actors, like most because-motives (Schutz, 1967c, pp. 130f).

3.2 | Application 2: Strengthening Ollinaho's Schutzian explanation for climate change inaction

Whereas the last subsection examined how climate change is constituted by the particular relevance systems conditioned by the capitalist social order in the form of mass media, this subsection concerns why climate change is typically *unthematized* in everyday life. Why do we, collectively, typically have “more important things to deal with,” or to thematize as problems, than climate change, even if we are at least theoretically aware that these daily issues are usually of much less importance than climate change? And why does climate change rarely remain relevant for long when it is thematized at all? Further, what kind of destructive motivation or drive underlies this irrational relevance system, one that so often leaves unthematized a threat to life support systems?

Ollinaho, (2016, p. 57) seeks to answer some of these questions in his theory of how collective environmental problems—using climate change as a common example—are maintained, rather than addressed, at the level of social practice among everyday citizens of the Global North. He develops two lines of argumentation: environmental degradation is (1) objectively uneventful and (2) subjectively irrelevant. The second line of argument for climate change inaction, that environmental

degradation is subjectively *irrelevant*, draws heavily from Schutz's theory of relevance, though focuses on his theory of relevance "zones" rather than "kinds" of relevance, the focus of this article. Relevance zones range from a zone of "primary relevance" to zones of "absolute irrelevance" structured by the actor's (believed) degree of ability to dominate portions of reality to realize ends (Ollinaho, 2016, p. 58). The zone of "primary relevance" is "that part of the world within our reach which can be immediately observed by us and also at least partially dominated by us," while zones of absolute irrelevance include those where "no possible change occurring within them would – or so we believe – influence our objective at hand" (Schutz, 1964b, pp. 124, 125). The zone of primary relevance for the everyday person, "the man on the street," is determined by a "pragmatic motive," or, our bodies "gear... into the world" to dominate it for practical aims (Schutz, 1967b, p. 208). Problems like climate change are irrelevant or taken as an "intellectual problem," not part of the zone of primary relevance, where one acts to achieve goals.

By embedding practices and relevance structures in social structures, specifically those of capitalist, technological-advanced, and urban-based societies, Ollinaho (2016) corrects one of the most common critiques of phenomenological approaches in sociology (i.e., ignoring social structure). Our political economy of relevance approach can strengthen Ollinaho's application of Schutz in one important respect: explaining the prevalence of unreflective instrumentally rational practices unconcerned with substantive ends. Schutz's (1967b) system of thought is built on the assumption that a "pragmatic motive" is a primordial driver of human action and underlies relevance systems. This philosophical anthropology lies beneath many of Schutz's reflections. Drawing primarily from Schutz, Ollinaho, (2016, p. 59, cf. p. 58) accepts the pragmatic motive as an underlying explanation in his analysis: the pragmatic motive is "a typical attitude of everyday life." This subsection can be read as a case to historicize the "pragmatic motive."

The argument that relevance systems are determined by the pragmatic interests of everyday life *assumes* an aspect of social life that ought to be *explained*. Here, Adorno and his colleagues are helpful. One of the underlying arguments of the first-generation Frankfurt School is that the ubiquity of instrumentality in modern societies is related to the spread of capitalism, both of which are detrimental to internal and external nature (Gunderson, 2015). The questions should be formulated as follows: Under what *social conditions* does the average person on the street have a primarily instrumental relation to the social and natural worlds and what form does instrumental action take? Answering these questions with attention to capitalist productive relations and the culture industry is illuminating.

Again, our argument is that the structure of capitalist productive relations filters and/or subsumes all motivational relevances through the "structural because-motive" to accumulate capital. Capitalism is indifferent to, or will actively squeeze profit from, motives that do not hamper capital accumulation. Motives that hamper capital accumulation are challenged, punished, or recuperated. While members of every society are dependent on economic production and consumption for survival, capitalism is a system of production that, paradoxically and irrationally, prolongs privation despite affluence and structurally requires more production and accumulation despite increasing levels of productivity. These background conditions are important for explaining means-ends behavior and rationality in modern societies. For the Frankfurt School, instrumental decisions about the best available means to attain a given end have existed throughout human history, but these choices were typically meant to bring about concrete, valued ends and bound up with a larger notion of the world as a reasonable, "comprehensive system," where action is judged by "its harmony with this totality" (Horkheimer, 1947, p. 4). Today, in contrast, valued ends (humans and life) have become means and means (economic production and technological development) have become ends, an irrational

reversal described by thinkers as diverse as Husserl, Simmel, Scheler, and Weber. In the Frankfurt School's interpretation, instrumentality is dominant in capitalist societies because humans and the environment *must be* reduced to a mere means for “the insatiable and destructive expansive principle of the exchange society” (Adorno, 1993, p. 29; cf. Cook, 2014). In addition to their conduciveness to instrumental rationality, capitalist productive relations perpetuate the irrelevance of climate change by rendering people powerless or helpless. As stressed by Adorno (see Section 2.2), people experience subjective helplessness in the face of problems like climate change because people are objectively helpless: our survival and livelihood are wholly dependent on “administrative objects of the monopolies and their states” (Adorno, 2003b, p. 105). Stoner and Melathopoulos' (2015) great feat is articulating the relationship between reification and helplessness in relation to climate change.

Along with the capitalist structure of productive relations, the culture industry not only perpetuates the irrelevance of climate change through outright misinformation (e.g., Painter & Ashe, 2012), but also through escapism, co-optation, and manufacturing desire. The culture industry perpetuates climate change irrelevance through escapism via two routes: (1) mitigating climate change anxiety and fear (i.e., administered comfort) and (2) distraction. Mitigating climate change anxiety and fear is a feat in manipulating interpretative relevances, a ticket to stop worrying, or, as some sample headlines read: “Climate anxiety doesn't have to ruin your life: Here's how to manage it” (Andrews, 2017) and even “Stop worrying and learn to love global warming” (Duke, 2017). Even if we know that we are being sold a farce, there is still a “self-loathing” approval: we “*want* to be deceived” (Adorno, 1991, p. 89, emphasis added). The culture industry as a distraction from climate change means that constant attention to media, advertising, and cultural products thematizes topics and events that are often of far less importance than the risk of catastrophic climate change.

In addition to escapism, the culture industry perpetuates the irrelevance of climate change through communicative co-optation, or, the management of interpretative relevances in ways that do not challenge the status quo. This usually entails depoliticization: from blaming climate change on human nature (see Klein, 2018) to selling market-friendly and technological solutions, as highlighted in Section 3.1. The culture industry's manufacturing of desire or “false needs” (Adorno, 2003a, p. 121; see Marcuse, 1964) not only drives climate change by altering motivational relevances in order to offload the endless flow of commodities from a necessarily expanding “treadmill of production” (see Section 1), but also perpetuates the irrelevance of climate change through pacification via this endless flow of commodities. The culture industry encourages conformity through cheap and standardized enjoyment and is antithetical to rebellion (Kellner, 1983, p. 67). To summarize, the culture industry produces and perpetuates the irrelevance of climate change by inviting us to consume the commodities of a necessarily expanding production and to enjoy and relax in the wake of the environmental degradation produced by necessarily expanding production.

For the average person, capitalism, because it is a *lived* and taken-for-granted world, only becomes topically relevant, if ever, in moments or events in which one is forced, or perhaps invited to, throw one's own existence and the whole world into question. One such event is the existential threat of catastrophic climate change caused by an ever-expanding economic system. If capitalism is degrading our life-support and we are, usually for fleeting moments, conscious of this fact, it is reasonable to assume that capitalism would be thrown into question. It attests to the stranglehold of capitalism on consciousness that even looming catastrophe does not immediately heave every person into a sustained and deep assessment of the social condition. The depth of capitalism as a taken-for-granted world is clearest in the chatter about individual responsibility and duty in the marketplace, carbon markets, etc. in the face of impending catastrophe (see Section 3.1).

We are not suggesting that modern humans are without a pragmatic interest in carrying out daily activities, notably those embedded in the work time/free time pendulum. Surely, at the level of practice on an average day, for instance, the everyday person cares more about—“cares about” understood in terms of action, which may not be reflected in self-reports—retaining her job (or getting a job) and pursuing various consumer activities than she does about fighting an always growing fossil fuel-powered capitalism. Instead, we are suggesting that the above social conditions that *formed* the consciousness and practices of the person on the street, not to mention the street itself, should be examined. Even if Schutz's pragmatic motive is merely a claim that humans dominate the world to survive and avoid death, our “fundamental anxiety” (Schutz, 1967b), and that this motive underlies relevance systems, we remain skeptical. We are not disputing the claim that there is a survival instinct or a will to live (and not die), an assumption that is presupposed in most social theories, including Adorno's. Interaction with the environment through labor for species survival is a historical constant and this survival instinct conditions human action and cognition in every society. Self-preservation is the primordial basis of identity thinking and labor (see Cook, 2008, pp. 7ff). However, following Marx, Adorno argues that the *organization* of labor changes in every social formation and these changes are indispensable for understanding human behavior and consciousness. Invoking a survival instinct or pragmatic motive is not helpful for *explaining* the operation and variation of relevance systems. Too much is lost, analytically and empirically.

We must also be skeptical of a survival instinct-type explanation because everyday practices necessitated by capitalist societies are *antithetical to human survival*. Indeed, the primary contradiction of human history according to the Frankfurt School is this: “what counts as progress today is the domination of external and internal nature which, impelled by the instinct for self-preservation, threatens to destroy what it is meant to preserve” (Cook, 2008, p. 9). The nearly unchallenged expansion and reproduction of capitalism *despite* its temporally-near catastrophic consequences is the only evidence required. Collectively, the historical and structural because-motive of capital accumulation has *outstripped* the biological and primordial because-motive of survival. The very existence of climate change inaction is proof of this assertion. It is this problem that must be explained rather than assumed.

Despite these limitations, Ollinaho's (2016) argument is persuasive, if troubling, and he is very aware of the reality of capitalism as a social-structural condition. We agree with Ollinaho that the pragmatic concerns of everyday life are more relevant than climate change to the average person in the Global North. Our primary revision to his argument is that explaining climate change inaction at the level of practice requires an *explanation* for the pragmatic motive that Schutz says underlies all relevance systems. If one investigates what these pragmatic concerns are in social-structural context—when capitalism is interpreted as a taken-for-granted yet ever-present conditioner of individuals' paramount projects whose because-motive is often hidden yet constant—one will find that these pragmatic concerns and relevance systems are all related to, or influenced by, the imperative of capital accumulation.

4 | CONCLUSION

This project revisits the conflictual conversation between phenomenology and critical theory by bringing Adorno's sociology and critique of phenomenology into conversation with Schutz's theory of relevance. We develop a political-economic theory of relevance that places the problem of relevance, “why these facts and precisely these are selected by thought from the totality of lived experience and regarded as relevant” (Schutz, 1967c, p. 250), in political-economic context. We argue that

the drive to accumulate capital influences why particular facts are regarded as relevant in experience (topical relevance) as well as how relevant material is interpreted (interpretative relevance) and acted toward (motivational relevance). We apply this framework to the problem of climate change inaction, or the question of why societies have failed to effectively respond to climate change. We illustrate the fruitfulness of our framework by analyzing interpretations of the IPCC's (2018) special report on the prospect of catastrophic climate change and strengthening Ollinaho's (2016) Schutzian explanation for climate change inaction.

A political-economic theory of relevance offers a neglected, yet critical, perspective in understanding climate change inaction and ineffective action. While much attention has focused on macro-level phenomena, such as well-funded denialist campaigns, weak international agreements, and the ineffectiveness of carbon markets (McCright & Dunlap, 2010; Beck, 2010; Klein, 2014; Stuart et al., 2019), others have focused on psychological factors regarding how individuals perceive and process information about climate change (e.g., Dietz et al., 2007; Feygina, et al., 2010; Shwom et al., 2010; McCright, Dunlap, & Xiao, 2014). A political economy of relevance illustrates how these two realms intersect and specifically how social-structural context shapes what receives attention, what seems rational, and what seems possible in response to climate change. The imperative to accumulate capital acts as the ultimate, and in some cases invisible, "structural because-motive" that constrains interpretations of climate change and limits individuals to solutions that fit within capitalist logic. Therefore, more effective solutions that break free of this logic are rendered irrelevant.

We believe this framework can be fruitfully applied to current research gaps in the climate change views literature (see McCright et al., 2016). For instance, anti-reflexivity is a dominant theoretical approach used to explain climate change inaction (McCright & Dunlap, 2010). Supported by theories like elite cues (Krosnick, Holbrook, & Visser, 2000), anti-reflexivity compellingly links conservative politicians' defense of capitalism to the conservative American public's rejection of anthropogenic climate change. However, what remains to be explained is why even those who wish to address climate change still focus on approaches that preserve, if not expand, capitalist production, like individual-level green consumerism. Our framework resonates with prior studies that have indicated how climate change inaction emerges not from a lack of knowledge or absence of concern, but as, at least in part, a result of the continued unquestioned acceptance of, or active commitment to, the capitalist model and its social conditions. Hirschfeld's (2016) at-risk Louisiana communities fit this model. Their support for reducing environmental regulations on nearby industrial plants emerges out of both the practical need for more jobs and the pride taken in the work. It also applies to a number of Lucas and Davison's (2019) interviewees, who were, for instance, unconcerned about climate change because achieving a reasonable amount of material success was seen as a normative and moral end and thus something that could not be sacrificed in order to address climate change. Of prior studies, Norgaard (2011) most explicitly connects individual inaction to structural, political-economic conditions. Norgaard's, (2011: 12) examination of climate change inaction despite climate change knowledge, "follow[s] an arc of power that moves from the microlevel of emotions to the mesolevel of culture to the macrolevel of political economy." We contribute to Norgaard's approach in two ways. First, rather than focus on how meso-level cultural processes like "norms of attention" (see Zerubavel, 2015)—equivalent to Schutz's notion of topical relevance—reproduce wider political-economic conditions, we show how these political-economic conditions already precondition attentional norms, and other dimensions of relevance systems such as interpretation. Second, while Norgaard examines how climate change knowledge is severed from action due to emotions and norms embedded in political-economic context, we examine how climate change knowledge is

severed from action and/or *translates into ineffective action* due to relevance systems embedded in political-economic context.

Within neo-Marxist accounts of climate change, this study addresses a lack of attention to “ideational” variables that reproduce climate change drivers (see Gunderson, 2015, p. 229). Neo-Marxist accounts of climate change usually focus on how capitalism's structural need to grow constantly increases the speed and scale of the “treadmill of production,” which is the underlying driver of climate change (see Section 1). We agree with the latter argument but, in order to explain the *reproduction* of this treadmill of production despite knowledge of its negative environmental impacts, this line of analysis should be supplemented with a theory of ideology. Our framework corrects this oversight by theorizing capitalism at the levels of consciousness and practice as well, where capitalism's drive to accumulate capital is not only a social-structural fact, it is also a lived experience that shapes how we think and act. Drawing from Adorno, we argue that capitalist productive relations and the culture industry shape the way we think and act due to the domination of exchange value, which, to survive, forces humans to adopt a one-sided instrumentally rational relation to the world. Borrowing from Schutz's framework, we argue this point by revising his theory of relevance: capitalism conditions what aspects of experience are made thematic and how they are interpreted, underpinned by an ever-present “structural because-motive” (capital accumulation) that influences social action. The imperative to accumulate capital is *lived* through necessary participation in capitalist production and the consumption of the culture industry's spectacle, both of which are governed by the exchange principle. The reproductive practices associated with the latter institutions influence consciousness by nurturing instrumentality and forcing commensurability on unlike things (identity thinking).

In Marxist theory, our political-economic discussion of cognition and experience has many parallels with thinkers in the “Western” tradition who attempted to more deeply explore capitalism's reach into consciousness. As mentioned in Section 1, this project has affinities with Habermas' (1987) colonization of the lifeworld framework. One of our contributions is reformulating Schutz's theory of relevance, which is left unexplored in Habermas. Although we do not have the space to deeply engage with Habermas, one way to present our theory in relation to Habermas' is as a preliminary description of the relevance system of the “cognitive-instrumental action orientation” that is mostly freed from moral and aesthetic moments due to the system's colonization of the lifeworld. Marxist scholars have a long history of considering the role of structural-material conditions, specifically capitalism, in shaping human perception, knowledge, and patterns of thinking (Hamilton, 1974). We think Schutz's conceptual toolkit is of much use for more comprehensively and precisely describing the intricacies of ideological thought and practice (cf. Chua, 1977) and, when revised with Adorno's sociology, offers a helpful framework to examine the interaction of social conditions and ideology.

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ENDNOTE

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