CALL FOR ABSTRACTS

FOR A SPECIAL ISSUE OF SOZIALE WELT

SOCIETY IN CRISIS – CRISIS OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES? KNOWLEDGE, AUTHORITY, AND RELEVANCE UNDER PRESSURE

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The current era is characterised by increasing societal pressure for substantial change. This pressure is commonly attributed to the prevalence of so-called 'grand societal challenges', including climate change and sustainable development, political instability and conflict, resurgent nationalism and authoritarianism, and demographic change and its consequences for health care, pensions, and labour markets. The pressure for societal change does not leave the social sciences untouched. Fundamental themes of their academic domains - polarisation, social integration, and inequality - now play a prominent role in societal diagnoses of crisis (Fraune and Knodt 2018; Köhler et al. 2019).

At first glance, the social sciences, and sociology in particular, appear to be called upon once again in their traditional function as 'crisis sciences' (Warsewa et al. 2020; Kiess et al. 2023). After all, they emerged from a dedicated engagement with the crises and dislocations of societal modernisation. Yet their capacity to provide the kind of knowledge now demanded cannot simply be presumed.

The reflexive scientisation of society (Marques et al. 2024) has simultaneously contributed to the disenchantment of science itself: growing demand for social-scientific knowledge has been accompanied by a growing awareness of its peculiarities, contingencies, and limitations. The progressive generation of knowledge and the diversification of the social sciences have not necessarily produced greater clarity. They have also multiplied questions, complexities, and competing interpretations. Likewise, the possible consequences, misappropriations, and strategic uses of scientific knowledge increase as such knowledge circulates more widely (Beck and Bonß 1989; Weingart 1983; Weingart et al. 2000).

Contemporary observers point to 'alternative facts', the advent of a 'post-factual age', and even a veritable ‘war on expertise’ in which hostility towards experts has become a political stance (Durnová and Čada 2021). Whether these developments amount to a simple decline in the epistemic authority of science, or even to a shift towards contempt for science, remains disputed (Vogelmann 2023). Research on conspiracy cultures shows that challenges to established knowledge do not necessarily reject science as such; they may appropriate scientific styles while contesting who is entitled to speak for truth (Harambam and Aupers 2015; Harambam 2021; Mede and Schäfer 2020). STS likewise cautions against narrating the present merely as a fall from an earlier, uncontested rule of facts. Public reason and the credibility of expertise are institutionally produced, historically situated, and politically negotiated (Sismondo 2017; Jasanoff and Simmet 2017; Eyal 2019). Calls to simply 'get our facts back' have been diagnosed as nostalgia for an authority that must instead be earned anew through public exchange between epistemically diverse viewpoints (Marres, 2018). Within STS, the question of how to defend the legitimacy of science while maintaining a characteristically constructivist stance towards 'the facts' has itself become a matter of debate (Hoffman, 2018).

At the same time, the social sciences are confronted with the scientisation of politics, as political actors invoke purported scientific consensus to settle conflicts that also involve interests and values, as became visible, for instance, during the Covid-19 pandemic (Lewandowsky et al. 2022; Barlösius et al. 2025). Scientific expertise can thereby become both indispensable to and overextended within democratic decision-making – a paradox long diagnosed in the study of science advice: the intensified use of expertise has not increased certainty but, in a self-defeating dynamic, intensified the politicisation of knowledge itself (Bijker et al. 2009; Weingart 1999). The social sciences thus find themselves caught between excessive demands and contempt. Yet it is from precisely this position that they are expected to contribute to the diagnosis and resolution of societal crises.

Pressure to act is also becoming institutionalised. Terms such as 'social impact' have entered university strategies, evaluation systems, and funding programmes. Knowledge exchange and knowledge brokering are increasingly recognised as a 'third mission' alongside research and teaching (Bandola-Gill 2023; Wissenschaftsrat 2016). Indicators are intended to capture both linear transfer and reciprocal exchange, even though evaluation practices themselves can reshape research agendas and academic conduct (de Rijcke et al. 2016). This institutionalisation is frequently theorised as a renegotiation of the 'contract' between science and society, in which relevance, its definition, measurement, and beneficiaries, has itself become a

contested category (Hessels et al., 2009). Demands for relevance therefore do not simply reach science from the outside; they are translated into organisational priorities, incentives, and criteria of academic value (Barlösius and Laux 2025).

This special issue asks whether the crises increasingly diagnosed in contemporary societies simultaneously constitute a crisis for the social sciences themselves. These crises confront the social sciences once more with the task of debating whether and how they can contribute to societal problem-solving and thereby meet demands to become 'more relevant'. Yet knowledge production takes place under difficult conditions: the problems to be addressed are highly complex, while science itself is met with distrust, selective appropriation, and misplaced idealisation – as when climate movements mobilise 'behind the science' and demand science-driven decision-making (Rödder & Pavenstädt, 2022). This requires a delicate balance between society's demand for clarity and complexity reduction and the character of scientific knowledge, which is marked by complexity, uncertainty, and an awareness of contingency. The social sciences thus face a dilemma: they may emphasise the fundamental openness of scientific knowledge at the cost of its persuasive power and practical usability, or stage their knowledge as definitive against their better judgement (Strohschneider 2014).

The special issue seeks a systematic examination of the changing epistemic, institutional, and societal conditions under which social-scientific knowledge is produced, legitimised, contested, and used. It examines how the social sciences themselves become objects of contestation, expectation, and critique, and how they navigate their dual role as analytical observers and public interlocutors. In doing so, the special issue aims to strengthen the interface between general sociology, sociology of science, STS, and political theory - an interface that has gained renewed relevance in debates about epistemic authority, public trust, research impact, and the politicisation of knowledge. We invite contributions addressing one or more of the following three thematic fields:

1. **Truth, epistemic authority, and democracy:** How much 'truth' does democracy need? This question invites reflection on the tension between factual truth and a potential 'tyranny of truth' (Arendt 1972 [1967]). Contributions may examine how conflicts over interests and values become controversies about evidence, how populist or counter-expert publics contest epistemic authority, and which institutional arrangements can sustain public reason without turning democracy into epistocracy or expertise into a partisan resource

2. **Science for whom and science for what?:** How do social scientists understand their societal role, and who defines the ‘common good’ and the problems that enter research agendas? Contributions may examine how professional role conceptions, funding priorities, impact agendas, and evaluation indicators shape the distribution of attention, resources, and epistemic authority

3. **Expertise and engagement:** STS have shown that responses to expertise depend not only on information but also on institutional conduct, identities, and the recognition of experiential knowledge (Wynne 1992). Contributions may examine how relational, participatory, or co-productive forms of engagement can accommodate dissent while preserving analytical distance and epistemic standards

We welcome theoretical, conceptual, and empirically grounded contributions from sociology and adjacent fields. Comparative and internationally oriented contributions are particularly welcome. Contributions should be in English.

Please send an abstract to the guest editors by **January 31, 2027**. Please include a provisional title, three to five keywords, and a brief biographical note.

All full papers will be subject to the journal's peer-review procedure.

Timeline

31.01.2027: Deadline for abstracts

15.02.2027: Decision on abstracts by the guest editors

31.08.2027: Submission of full papers to the guest editors

March 2028: Peer review and editorial feedback

30.08.2028: Submission of finalized papers

Winter 2028/29: Publication of the special issue

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