CLIMATE CHANGE AS SOCIAL DRAMA

Global Warming in the Public Sphere

HOPE?

Philip Smith • Nicolas Howe
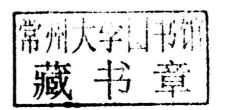
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Climate change is not just a scientific fact, nor is it merely a social and political problem. It is also a set of stories and characters that amount to a social drama. This drama, as much as hard scientific or political realities, shapes perception of the issues. Philip Smith and Nicolas Howe use the perspective of Aristotelian cultural sociology to explore this meaningful and visible surface of climate change in the public sphere. Whereas most research aims to explain barriers to awareness, here the authors switch the agenda to look at the moments when global warming actually gets attention. Chapters consider struggles over apocalyptic scenarios, explain the success of Al Gore and *An Inconvenient Truth*, unpack the deeper social meanings of the climate conference and Climategate, critique controversial advertising campaigns and climate art, and question the much touted transformative potential of natural disasters such as Superstorm Sandy.

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Acknowledgments

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Introduction

The Problem of Climate Change

Scientists agree that anthropogenic climate change is real and that it is a very serious threat on multiple levels for the entire planet (IPCC 2014). Economic, social, political, and biological systems are all said to be in trouble. Moreover, the window of opportunity for dealing with the problem is limited. At the same time, the public around the globe is mostly apathetic. Even in countries like Norway, where high levels of environmental concern and political involvement are the norm, climate change often seems more like "background noise" than a problem demanding radical collective action (Norgaard 2011). Contrary to what one might think, a similar situation pertains in the United States. Here, despite an effective right-wing campaign to discredit climate science (Oreskes and Conway 2010), surveys today show that a majority of people believe that climate change is happening and needs to be addressed, including, now, a majority of Republicans (Maibach et al. 2013). Yet many of these same surveys indicate that most Americans are unwilling to make meaningful sacrifices to deal with the problem. There appears to be insufficient support for social mobilization of the kind that will make a real difference (for a dissenting view, see Krosnick and MacInnis 2013). True enough, political and bureaucratic elites can mandate the kinds of policies advocated by climate science, with its long-term, evidence-based views. Yet there will be problems with compliance and implementation when public buy-in is weak. In democratic contexts, electoral sanctions can follow if cultural horizons for responding to climate change are not aligned with public policies (Lorenzoni and Pidgeon 2006).

What exactly is the problem? It is not simply that there is a substantial corps of climate change deniers confusing the public with nefarious

tactics, nor is it that the carbon industries have easily bought off political leaders. The issue is more subtle. Whereas the science community sees itself as almost completely unified, the public is more likely to perceive dissent and scientific uncertainty, with many still doubtful about whether climate change is caused by specifically human activity.[1] The public is also rather likely to believe that climate change will not greatly impact upon themselves personally. People see it as a problem for other generations or distant parts of the globe. Whereas the scientific and environmental communities speak of the urgency of the issue and the need to implement radical solutions, the general public is more likely to believe or hope that a painless technological fix will eventually come along. Finally, even though climate change is increasingly said to be a "serious problem," it somehow gets pushed to the bottom of the heap when respondents are asked to prioritize a number of "serious problems" in rank order. Education, health care, jobs, and so forth are generally picked out as the leading priorities facing each nation at any given point in time (e.g., Downing and Ballantyne 2007; Lorenzoni and Pidgeon 2006).

The frustration of the science community is palpable. It has worked patiently for years, often in difficult circumstances, to assemble evidence (Weart 2008). A cross-national, cross-disciplinary field of brilliant minds has emerged that is characterized by unparalleled levels of cooperation. By and large the message from this coalition has remained disciplined and consistent, too. With the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), they have built a transparent and exhaustive review process. As the historian of climate science Paul Edwards (2010, 439) puts it, "this is the best knowledge we are going to get." The scientists have done their part. It is a success story. Yet, at the end of the day, neither facts nor experts seem to matter that much when it comes to shaping popular perceptions and motivations, especially in countries like the United States, where climate politics is still sharply divided.

Explaining this gap has become a social science cottage industry. Anthony Giddens (2009, 2) has even given it a name: Giddens's paradox. This states, "since the dangers posed by global warming aren't tangible, immediate or visible in the course of day-to-day life, however awesome

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[1] For the most detailed and revealing surveys of American public opinion, see the *Global Warming's Six Americas* series put out by the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication and the George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication (Leiserowitz et al. 2013). For cross-national overviews of public opinion on climate change, see Brechin (2010) and Brechin and Bhandari (2011).

they appear, many will sit on their hands and do nothing of a concrete nature about them. Yet waiting until they become visible and acute before being stirred to serious action will, by definition, be too late." Researchers working with this basic assumption typically isolate several factors that make climate change a tough sell and that dampen the impact of scientific consensus (see Ungar 2000; Wuthnow 2010). These are as follows:

1. As noted in the preceding Giddens quotation, climate change looks to be a chronic rather than an acute condition. It suffers relative to immediate threats, such as the SARS virus, because life never appears to be in clear and present danger. This keeps it on the back burner. The typical analogy here is giving up smoking. What harm will another cigarette do?

2. People tend to discount future discomfort against current pleasure. An increase of a few degrees in temperature or of a couple of feet in sea levels a few decades from now will be a problem only for the "future me," not for "now me." It will cause less pain to "future me" than any action today would cause to "now me."

3. Efforts to identify catastrophic and immediate impacts by pointing to flooding, hurricanes, tornadoes, wars, and so forth seem contrived, as the causal pathways to such specifics from a generic process are indirect or multivariate. Besides, these things all existed before climate change and will exist forever.

4. Dealing with climate change the way that environmental activists wish would dramatically alter all aspects of lifestyle and impose costs right across the social system. The habituated barriers to buy-in are considerable. Denial or disassociation becomes the more attractive psychological option.

5. Scientific nostrums are seemingly contradicted by personal embodied experience on a daily or seasonal basis. The weather changes from day to day. Every time we have snowfall, it seems as if global warming is a myth.

6. Climate change is an ongoing background issue. It must struggle to become newsworthy or attention grabbing because there is no interruption to a pattern. We report an eclipse of the moon, not the fact that it came out last night as usual.

7. The problem is complex in its causality, widespread in its impacts, and not amenable to any easy conversion into compelling cultural forms that transmit danger and urgency to ordinary people.

8. Deeply entrenched values and norms that are reinforced by personal networks are a source of bias. These prevent people from accepting scientific data on climate change, from seeing the real threat, and from being able to change their attitudes and actions.
9. Free rider problems dog efforts at collective action over climate change. The rational strategy is to continue to pollute while others cut their emissions.

Such analyses look persuasive initially. Yet they become less convincing if one thinks counterfactually of a world in which climate change *was* taken seriously as an urgent problem. In that parallel universe, would not many of the same factors be edited, redescribed, and then invoked post hoc a couple of decades later as reasons for success? Most notably, the spatial, temporal, causal, and consequential ubiquity of climate change allowed it to be "seen everywhere" and so never escape our attention (arguments 1, 3, and 6). Furthermore, this complex, large-scale, and octopus-like quality maximized opportunities for the conversion of the danger into compelling cultural forms (argument 7). Multiple amelioration strategies were available, allowing everyone to buy in and gain a sense of participation in addressing the problem (argument 4). As a nagging problem, it was like a toothache that could not be ignored (argument 1). Discourses sentimentalizing childhood and urging stewardship led to action on behalf of future generations. Just as individuals take account of the distant future all the time with things like their pension plans or prepaid funerals, and states plan ahead when they issue thirty-year bonds or dedicate national parks in perpetuity, so did agents also plan ahead for climate change (argument 2). Binding international treaties were easy to develop, as humans are capable of reflexivity and generosity when it comes to the tragedy of the commons. Earlier precedents in fields like nuclear non-proliferation, whaling, and chlorofluorocarbon production bans made it easy to see how to set up such agreements (argument 9). The reality of climate change was confirmed by bodily experience every time there was "unusual" weather (argument 5). (With its record-shattering heat waves, droughts, and wildfires, 2012 sealed the deal.) As for those values and norms and their associated "culture wars" subtext (argument 8), these crumbled amazingly quickly, just as they had with other seemingly visceral and intractable responses to racial segregation in the 1960s or to homosexuality and gay marriage more recently. Just as having a gay child was shown to change the attitudes of hardened Republican politicians, the personal networks that were supposed to hold climate irrationality in

place turned out to be the pathways through which progressive attitudes were propagated.

Climate change also had the benefit of being complex and hard to understand, with diffuse causal connections and long-term payoffs (argument 7), like many other cultural forms that have done well in human history. The major world religions, for example, have proven to be very effective at propagating themselves. These, too, are complex, abstract systems that are unverifiable and often contradict experience (e.g., the problem of suffering), offer salvation only after death, and require far-reaching and often sacrificial changes to lifestyle that extend as far as martyrdom. Marxism–communism as a social movement likewise inverted common sense in its problem diagnosis, required deep identity transformations, and offered a payoff for generations in a long distant future. Neoliberal economics has swept the world. Yet this is an idea whose core model famously involves a hand that is as invisible as carbon dioxide. Markets are caught up in complex chains of causation; the payoff to painful economic restructuring is often distant. None of this stopped people from believing in the power of markets, putting shares in their pension plans, or closing down entire industries. What is more, we are accustomed to thinking of nature as responsive to our moral failings. Is it any surprise that when we looked at the modern history of ideas about climatic change, we saw periods of intense anxiety about the disastrous effects of human activity (Behringer 2010; Boia 2005; Fleming 1998; Grove 1995)? Although humans have never faced a problem quite like contemporary global warming (Chakrabarty 2009; McNeill 2008), they *have* changed their societies to prepare for future worlds.

So what is to be done? Most work by social scientists looks backward. It offers a diagnosis of the reasons for failure. By relentlessly indicating the magnitude of the task we face, then itemizing barriers to climate awareness and action, it arguably contributes to the mood of fatalism it purports merely to analyze. It normalizes the status quo rather than trying to open doors. Such a perspective contrasts sharply with that of activists who are incessantly looking for pragmatic ways to break down fatalism, for options to change the game rather than parse its rules. We try to occupy a middle ground. Ours is a scholarly analysis, not an engaged one. Yet we look forward and with hope. Where we diagnose failure, we do so with reference to surmountable contingencies in representation and performance, not the wiring of the brain or the objective features of climate change itself. Like activists, we also turn to culture for answers. More and more scholars are doing the same to explain climate politics,

and we cheer this trend.[2] But we also break quite sharply from many of these scholars, and in some important ways. For the most part, as we see in Chapter 2, they use culture to identify deeply rooted and divergent values, epistemologies, and structures of feeling that prevent action. Our focus is more strongly on contingency and on the possibilities that climate change could or should be able to open up for multiple and flexible cultural plays. With some theory and considerable analysis of positive and negative examples, this book explores how such discussions are configured, what gets attention, what is going wrong, and even what might work. At the end of the book, we have no sales manual for climate change activism, but there will have been some lessons learned.

Our principal claim will be that climate change within the public sphere takes the form of a social drama. We expand on this insight in Chapter 2. In the interim, it is sufficient to say that much of what the average citizen follows is an unfolding set of stories with characters and plots. These arrive episodically, sometimes as a portentous saga, sometimes as melodrama, and at other times as soap opera. Paying attention to this drama, exploring its various incarnations, and figuring out just how to study it form the core purpose of our book. This is a different perspective to the usual social scientific investigation of cultural bias, risk perception, or the public understanding of science, but it is not fundamentally incompatible with them. We believe that the theory of social drama brings cultural analysis closer to the actual properties of globally circulating texts and images, which until now have been most creatively studied by researchers in the humanities. In keeping with this interdisciplinary project, we turn away from the so-called leading edge of sociological theory and show that the Greek philosopher Aristotle offers many of the "new" theoretical resources we need to explore this rich world of representation and performance. We mine his thought in a new way by synthesizing his two major texts, the *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*, and connecting him to more contemporary cultural theory. The *Poetics* offers insights into cultural structures and their emotional impacts. The *Rhetoric* exposes the conditions for successful performance when making claims to an audience. Together they provide remarkable leverage when it comes to unpacking dramatic effects in public events.

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[2] Prominent examples include Beck (2009, 2010), Boykoff (2011), Crate and Nuttall (2009), Demeritt (2001), Doyle (2011), Hulme (2009), Jasanoff (2010, 2011), Kahan et al. (2011), Malone (2009), Norgaard (2011), Rayner and Thompson (1998), Strauss and Orlove (2003), and Urry (2011).

In arguing that climate change is a social drama, we need to be clear at the outset that we are not using the term *social drama* in a pejorative sense. We are not suggesting that it is a panic or even a "moral panic" replete with disproportional responses and false beliefs that will disappear like a flash in the pan. Nor are we saying that activists are overly emotional. Nor are we saying that fiction is more powerful at the end of the day than scientific facts. In Australia and Britain, the phrase "no dramas" is sometimes used interchangeably with "no worries" to suggest that things are under control. The implication is that drama is bad and that, if we can get rid of the dramatic, we can all calm down and get back on track. However, we are not saying that climate change should only be considered or represented in cool, clinical, rational ways and that culture is a barrier to clear understanding – that a "no worries, no dramas" path is one that our society should take. Our argument is quite different. We argue that, like it or not, climate change takes on a certain set of properties once it moves from nature and science and into the public sphere. We see the concept of social drama as capturing much of this. Our intent in this book is to map, explain, and think through what this means.

Hence the empirical chapters that follow scout the social drama over a number of domains where it has moved toward the foreground in public life. Each domain also allows us to highlight in various proportions the centrality of diverse Aristotelian constructs, although we also make use of literatures elsewhere in the humanities and social sciences to make our analytic points. Chapter 3 looks at the role of genre, that is to say, the patterned and predictable qualities of narrative forms. We show how climate change has been represented in various ways over the years and demonstrate that generic representation ties to risk perception. This keys in turn to themes like urgency and permissible sacrifice. Our discussion highlights widespread genre confusion as an enduring problem for activists. Chapter 4 provides a telling and accessible illustration of the continuing relevance of an Aristotelian analysis of *ethos*, or character, as a force in public life. We focus here on Al Gore's rhetorical triumph in the film *An Inconvenient Truth* and, in particular, on the ways in which the movie establishes him as a person of virtue. Chapter 5 looks at another creative activity aimed at improving climate change awareness: climate change art. The analysis confirms Aristotle's hints about the limits of spectacle as a communicative mechanism. The chapter documents the failure of such art to achieve much impact and allocates considerable responsibility to a disorganized art world that is unable to establish *ethos* and convert visual stimuli into meaningful discursive action.

In Chapter 6, we move from the creative industries to the realm of the newsworthy. The chapter begins with an exploration of outrage at bungled climate change advertising campaigns and moves on to consider the leaks of e-mails known as Climategate. Pivotal to our analysis here is the intersection of *ethos* with *pathos*, or audience sympathy. These news stories damaged climate activism by making audience identification with both activists and scientific protagonists unattractive. Chapter 7 continues the study of newsworthy public events by investigating the representation of climate conferences. We suggest that conferences are about more than just treaties and horse-trading; they are also a visible symbol of global solidarity or discord and so might be considered to be acts of theatre. A comparative study of gatherings at Copenhagen, Durban, and Cancun enables us to isolate the qualities of an effective collective performance by participants. We also pay attention to the rhetorical power of individual truth-tellers. Our final empirical chapter, Chapter 8, looks at the role of place, locality, and event and so switches attention from the players to the stage or setting on which the drama unfolds. The spotlight here is on meaningful landscape and on place myths as constitutive dramatic elements. Through analyses of the genocide in Darfur and of Superstorm Sandy in New York, we suggest that place can be thought of as an agent that has particular narrative effects. Although our book is for the most part an anatomy of missed opportunities, our concluding chapter offers some hopeful moments. Following Aristotle, we discuss the positive role of shared emotional engagement in public events. We highlight our positive examples and flag the Aristotelian targets for which activists should be aiming as they seek to engage with *ethos*, *pathos*, and genre.

Approach and Methodology: Justification and Explanation

Before we proceed to these in-depth discussions, we should pause to outline the wider intellectual perspective that underpins this book. Many of our readers will be familiar with the norms of interpretive social science and may wish to skip the next few pages. Those with backgrounds in cultural studies and the environmental humanities, for example, will have an intuitive or theoretical understanding of our approach. Yet given the interdisciplinary reach of climate change as a field, we expect some readers to be from positivist backgrounds in environmental science or those social sciences making use of formal and experimental methods such as social psychology. Such scholars and activists may well be unfamiliar with our root paradigm. A brief orientation can help.