



Sociology Still Lagging on Climate Change

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Abstract

This note responds to the discussion pieces by Elizabeth Shove and John Urry in the debates section of Sociological Research Online, 31 August 2010.

Introduction

1.1 While John Urry seeks to “engender a sociology of climate change”, Elizabeth Shove argues we already have no shortage of writings or studies on subjects clearly related to climate change, but that individualistic economics and psychology have monopolised the attention of policy makers and no one is listening to us. Sadly Shove is demonstrably wrong. While quite a few specialist sociologists have worked and written on this subject^[1], their voices have scarcely yet penetrated to many of the hallowed halls of leading mainstream sociology journals. I believe a sociological lens is indispensable for an understanding of the causes and impacts of climate change and of our responses to this threat. I also doubt if there is much useful we can say about the future of social structures, systems and cultures without taking this unprecedented and cascading danger into account. Whether or not societies ignore or confront the crisis and how they do so, will affect and be affected by every aspect of social life.

Sociological silence continues

2.1 A search I made a few years ago found no appearance of either the term “climate change” or “global warming” in article titles or abstracts in seven major sociological journals (*Acta Sociologica*, *American Journal of Sociology*, *British Journal of Sociology*^[2], *Current Sociology*, *International Sociology*, *Journal of Sociology* and *Sociology*) from January 2000 to mid 2005. Not a single paper focussed on this subject. Similarly, Eco Marxist writings about climate change were ignored in *New Left Review*. The mainstream impact of the work on climate change by Ecological Modernisation theorists and Eco-Marxists had been very limited. I speculated about the reasons for such avoidance and suggested it was due in part to our foundational suspicion of science and technology as prime movers of social change and in part to a more recent wariness of speculating about a future that has so often confounded our predictions (Lever-Tracy 2008).

2.2 I have just repeated the same search from mid 2005 to September 2010 and found only six appearances of the terms “climate change” or “global warming” in titles or abstracts in the seven journals. Three of these involve earlier work by the contributors to this current discussion! In 2008 there appeared in the *British Journal of Sociology* an article by John Urry on “Climate change, travel and complex futures” and in the same year a symposium in *Current Sociology* with four papers, two by myself and one each by Steven Brechin and Terry Leahy. A year later *Current Sociology* also published a paper on “Climate change after Kyoto” by Steven Yearley. Apart from these there was silence in these prestigious journals. It seems the reasons for this sociological avoidance of the subject have still not dissipated. Meanwhile, widely read and cited books, which discuss the social causes and implications of climate change, have been authored by literate natural scientists and science journalists - for example writings by Jared Diamond, Mark Diesendorf, Mike Hulme, Tim Flannery and by Gabrielle Walker and David King. Giddens’ (2009) welcome book breaks the mould, but is significantly titled *The Politics of Climate Change*.

2.3 Attempts to insulate sociology from natural science have a long history going back to Emile Durkheim and the origins of the discipline. This has been a major subject of debate between realists and social constructivists within environmental sociology, since Catton and Dunlap first counter-posed their “New Ecological Paradigm” to what they called the “Human Exemptionalist Paradigm” in the late 1970s (Dunlap 2002; Yearley 2002). Mainstream sociologists have remained much closer to the social constructivist paradigm of nature, which is not concerned with the validity or otherwise of the findings of natural scientists.

2.4 Stephen Crooke's presidential address to the Australian Sociological Association conference in 2000 called on sociology to re-engage with the substantive knowledge of the natural sciences: "The relations between natural, technical and social processes lie at the heart of fundamental issues from climate change to genetic engineering... we must place the same issues at the top of our agendas" (Crooke, 2003: 11). His call has not been heeded and the Australian *Journal of Sociology* has recorded no articles focussed on climate change to date. Pakulski and Trantor's eulogy on Crooke's death (2004) made no reference to his call for multi disciplinarity or to his belief that sociologists should become familiar with debates in the sciences and "more comfortable with the culture of the natural sciences generally" (Crooke, 2003:11).

2.5 Ten years later John Urry's "ten commandments" (2010), like his 2008 article, are again a powerful call for sociology to re-engage with the relations between nature and society, natural and social science, and to challenge the dominance of economics over policy making for a low carbon economy, but he still perpetuates aspects of the original inhibitions, having little to say about technological change or how it might affect the future. The recent piece merely warns (correctly of course, but surely redundantly) against any promise of "a single magical technological fix...Almost certainly there are no such single fixes and no killer techniques in and of themselves", but he has nothing more to say about any social forces that might in future facilitate, hinder or shape new forms of non carbon based energy, or about the kind of society that might evolve with them. (This contrasts with his dramatic scenarios of a world where effective action has failed).

Capitalism and technology

3.1 Sociologists have often tended to be wary of "technological determinism", but the rejection of a single *sui generis*, uni-linear and inevitable "magical" technological logic should not preclude attention to the interaction and mutual shaping of society and technology. Without electricity there could have been no moving assembly line or carefully calibrated division of labour in mass production. Without microelectronics and information technology there could be no flexible global economy, linking multitudes of small and medium producers to global markets. Capitalism is not a monolithic and unidirectional system. Without divergent trends and new rising actors, these technological changes would themselves have remained stillborn. Over its history we have seen the self-transformation of capitalism through many crises, which were survived in the absence of a viable alternative. There is, however, no inevitability here. Both the electric car and the gas powered fridge are examples of viable technologies whose development was blocked by established monopolistic power.

3.2 The crisis of global warming has produced a global imperative for a decarbonisation of our production and consumption. As Urry rightly acknowledges, this cannot be achieved by individual initiatives but will require prolonged and extensive changes in society, culture and technology and at least the emergence of a very different, but perhaps not wholly unprecedented kind of capitalism.

3.3 It would for example require a retooling of the energy, production and transport systems leading to a shift of resources and values from immediate consumption and into savings and long-term planning and investment. This would require new regulatory and co-operative relations between the private and public sectors. Any Consumer goods themselves would need to be durable rather than fashionable and marketing would cease to be the prime driver of production. A major research focus would need to be devoted to investigating the safety and viability of uncertain options which will take decades to perfect, such as nuclear waste disposal, fusion power or carbon sequestration. It would be necessary to set in train huge projects, such as the effective insulation and solarisation of the existing housing stock, the construction of a DC grid to distribute renewable energy from deserts and offshore wind farms, new public transport systems and the replacement of all fossil fuel vehicles.

3.4 Such uncertain long-term projects cannot be driven by expectations of short-term profitability, but there is no shortage of examples of dramatic changes of direction in the history of capitalism. In another such major crisis for example, "war communism" saw massive social mobilisation, state transformation and economic change. In the US, Roosevelt's seemingly unrealistic call for the production of 50,000 aeroplanes in 1940 was over-fulfilled by 100%. Britain's regulations, rationing and welfare, its full employment, national solidarity and individual self sacrifice had little continuity with what had gone before, although they led on to a post-war capitalism very different from that of the 1930s.

3.5 In the opposite direction, the long post-war boom unravelled with surprising speed, when struck by the crisis of profitability, in the late 1960s. Much faster than anyone could have predicted, the Keynesian *dirigiste* welfare state, which had emerged from the War, and the class consensus that it protected, were dismantled. The system of Fordist mass production for domestic markets, stabilised by tripartite accords between large corporations, strong bureaucratic unions and interventionist states, increasingly lost its dominance. The new leadership moved from nationally based industrial capital to globalising financial capital, which gained in strength with each liberalising step. The initial, tentative deregulatory moves gathered momentum and became an avalanche (Helleiner 1995;Holloway 1994).

The current crossroads

4.1 The global financial crisis in 2008 and 2009 saw some weakening and discrediting of the "business as usual" advocates. There were pressures to devote significant amounts of government stimulus packages to major carbon reducing infrastructure schemes. The hesitant recovery at the end of the decade, and renewed conservative assaults on neo Keynesianism have led to a stalling of some of these moves for the time being.

4.2 The road block to global agreement in Copenhagen and the new assaults on climate science by industry funded sceptics, should not however blind us to the continuing emergence of new currents within

global capitalism today. For example:

1. The large majority of South Korea's multi-billion dollar economic stimulus package, is reportedly to be spent on "green jobs" and energy efficiency measures.
2. In August California approved a plan for the world's largest solar thermal farm in the Mojave Desert.
3. In September Germany's current strong international trade balance was in part attributed to the fact that "The government through energy and transportation policy, has fostered a German edge in manufacturing high-speed rail, wind turbines and other technologies that Germans have sold to the Chinese" (Faiola, 2010:18).
4. In the same month the CEO of BHP (one of the largest mining companies in the world) called for Australia to introduce a carbon price, in order to enable industry to prepare with certainty for what would inevitably come.
5. There are countless reports of continuing smaller initiatives by innovative firms and local bodies, and of research and development efforts to overcome technical and high cost obstacles.

4.3 The overall upward trend of global warming continues, with a changing climate increasingly expressed in the greater probability of experiencing damaging weather events in many parts of the world. NASA'S Godard Institute has now collated air, land and sea measurements for the first half of 2010, and found the average global temperature to be the highest ever recorded. The year 2010 is well on the way to experiencing the hottest global average temperature ever, exceeding the previous record temperature of 1998. If the massive fires in Russia, the devastation of Pakistan's unprecedentedly severe monsoonal floods and the worst floods in Europe in 800 years are any indication of what might be expected in the future, the issue will not go away, nor will the opportunities for innovator profits

4.4 We are at a cross roads where it is as yet unclear which changes will prove most effective and which, if any will prevail in the battle of potential winners and losers. Each has profound but as yet unclear implications for class and power relations and for the culture and values of the future. Sociologists who are familiar with the large scale social and cultural changes of the past should be better prepared to understand the possibility of such diverging futures than economists and psychologists, with their expectations of a fixed human nature and their a-historical short term perspectives. Sociology must either claim and merit a central role on this issue or accept the increasing marginality of the discipline.

Notes

¹ The just published *Routledge Handbook of Climate Change and Society* (2010) includes 15 sociologists among its 41 authors.

² For the BJS information was available on titles but not on abstracts.

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