BOOK REVIEW

Climate Change and Society

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At a British Sociological Association workshop in January 2011 the question of how to make sociology more influential in policy circles arose. John Urry, sitting on the event's panel, put forward the opinion that a genuine crossover text on climate change and society would go a long way to embedding sociological insights into thinking on climate change. It was perhaps fortuitous then that Urry already had a book that aimed to do such a thing on the road to publication: *Climate Change and Society* was published just a few months later in May 2011.

Urry is not the first eminent sociologist to pronounce on issues of climate change, having been preceded by Anthony Giddens' *The Politics of Climate Change* (2009). There are some similarities between the two: both seek to capture some of the central debates in the social sciences on climate change in an attempt to – at least partly – make them their own. Giddens' book – subject to one of the most coruscating reviews I have seen in an academic journal (Castree, 2010) – summarised but failed to add much of substance to climate policy debates, despite attempting to humbly coin the (non-)concept 'The Giddens Paradox'.

Urry's sociological adventures in carbon on the other hand provide something more. Much of the book is concerned with summarising (though not always explicitly referencing) on-going discussions in the social sciences with regard to climate change: most prominently social practice and transitions theories. But there are genuine moments of intrigue within the book, in particular the central conceit surrounding the role of mobilities (broadly conceived) in the construction of climate change. Mobility, Urry argues, is central to contemporary Western resource use, and as such should be a core focus of climate change interventions. We need, for example, to seek life 'after the car'; and to vastly reduce the 'resource miles' required to live our daily lives.

Urry frames the debate through a concern for non-linear systems as opposed to what he critiques as the 'gradualist' approach of economistic understandings of climate 'futures'. This works through both his understanding of climate science and of societal systems, in particular in discussing the importance of social innovation to determining societal futures and the importance of 'tipping points' that can lead to the

dramatic alteration of the direction of physical and societal systems in very short periods of time. In setting out the core societal problems and potential solutions with regard to climate change Urry emphasises the role of mobilities in generating the state of 'carbon lock-in' that western society now finds itself in. This point is made well, and draws on the author's extensive work in this field to do so.

When attempting to conceptualise low carbon futures more broadly, however, the points tend to be more general and less clearly made. The arguments around future directions for economic organisation and analysis of climate change policy tend to be quite generalist and do not always add to existing debates. For instance, Urry argues for a new capitalist epoch – and here Urry falls for his own critique of modern sociology as overly fond of epochalism – that of resource capitalism: 'only resource capitalism is remotely feasible as providing the conditions for reversing to a low carbon economy-and-society' (p. 109). At heart, this epoch centres on the fact that:

> nature would not be regarded as separate from the economy and hence would not be available for transformation through short-term profit maximisation .. Resource capitalism entails the clear recognition that there is limited capability to supply resources and absorb pollution ... Overall, economies shift the measurement of success from that of GDP to minimising the impact on energy, materials and land. (p. 119)

This is a vague and unoriginal conception of what a low-carbon economy might look like, and there is little in the book to suggest how such an economy might operate in practice. It does however highlight a critical issue for climate policy more generally. The book argues that traditional overarching policy goals have largely been concerned with maximising the 'good' (wealth, health, 'quality of life'), while climate policy is essentially about minimising the 'bad'. In order to overcome this, Urry maintains that there is a need to find positive low carbon alternatives:

> There must be positive alternatives to low carbon lives. My question here is: how can low carbon lives be innovated, generalised and sustained as a practical, desirable and fashionable set of alternatives? (p. 122)

The development of such alternatives requires a focus on innovation. However, while literature on innovation in low-carbon transitions elsewhere has more or less exclusively focused on technological fixes, Urry opens this up, in part through emphasis on the need for social innovations, but also through highlighting the importance of users in determining innovation pathways, especially in turning niche innovations into 'systemic practices'. Here Urry talks of the ways in which users and other innovators adapt technologies for their own uses, which in turn impact on other technologies and practices to develop into full technological systems of practice. This is illustrated through a discussion of society 'after the car', the subject of a previous book involving the same author (Dennis and Urry, 2009).

In fact readers of both books may recognise elements of *After the car* in this text, not just in discussions of mobilities, but also on more broad scenarios of the 'post-carbon' world, in turn developed from work on the 2006 UK Science and Technology Foresight programme. So, in the spirit of the book's theme, recycling of resources appears to play a part in the text itself.

Society *After the car* also involves a more broad societal shift to a 'digital world' with all movements tracked and systematised, a central part of which is the development of virtual systems that can replicate physical co-presence. Discussions in this area are necessarily speculative: as Urry admits, it is impossible to reliably predict future innovations. This speculation is engaging, while also highlighting the difficulties inherent in attempting to 'govern' transitions: something that this book is particularly

light on. There are lists of prerequisites for a post-carbon economy but these do not really extend to the modes and systems of governing that will be necessary for it to work.

In the end this comes across as a largely pessimistic book. It contains some chinks of optimism or hope but even some of these seem to take a rather pessimistic view of humanity. For instance, we need to harness 'the power of fad': a premise that seems to assume (perhaps rightly) that humans are swayed above all by the value of brands and signs in performing particular practices. The book concludes with the thought that 'there is a strong possibility that nothing can be done except *prepare* for various catastrophes' (p. 166, author's emphasis) and, quoting Mike Davis, argues that the combination of resource constraints and climate change may well lead to 'negative synergies probably beyond our imagination' (Davis, 2010: 25).

There are number of strands to this book, many of which are complementary and overlap one-another. However, by both attempting a summary of the main issues on climate change as well as beating a distinctive path to understanding low carbon futures the book runs a fine line between covering all the issues and occasional incoherence. For instance, broad level discussions on the role of high oil prices in creating the current on-going global economic crisis, on the global politics of carbon reduction and on the science of climate change are interspersed with the more specific debates on mobilities, innovation and low-carbon futures. Inevitably Urry is strongest when writing on subjects that he has most experience of - essentially the changing nature of consumption and mobilities - and the weaker passages occur when he attempts to conceptualise ideas regarding carbon economies.

Climate Change and Society is certainly an enjoyable and relatively light read for anyone cognisant with social science debates on climate change and sustainability: a gentle read before bed rather than with furrowed brow in the library. It would also provide an excellent undergraduate text. For the academic reader the sparse referencing might prove frustrating; at the same time the appeal of the book beyond academia is questionable. It may be that one reason that books on the science, economics and mainstream politics of climate change hold general appeal is that these are popular 'crossover' subjects in themselves: the lustre of sociology shines somewhat less brightly. Nevertheless I would recommend the book to someone interested in understanding the central issues on climate change within a broader context of societal systems and practices.

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