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Book Review Symposium: John Urry *Climate Change and Society*

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John Urry
Climate Change and Society
Oxford: Polity Press, £15.99 (ISBN: 9780745650371), 200 pp.

Reviewed by: Leon Sealey-Huggins, *University of Leeds, UK*

It is almost four years since as a final year undergraduate writing my dissertation on climate change and cycling policy I stumbled upon Constance Lever-Tracy's (2008) account of mainstream sociology's reluctance to engage with climate change. In the years since, works have emerged which demonstrate that the mainstream of the discipline now recognizes the relevance of climate change to sociology, as well as the degree to which so many existing accounts are substantially unsociological. All of this indicates the pace at which sociologists have moved since 2008, a year in which I also watched John Urry give a rather sobering keynote speech on climate change at the annual BSA conference.

There are many things to be learned from Urry's recent extended excursion into this area. One is that sociologists still have some way to go in speaking about climate change, although I am reminded of the public sociology debate in wondering who listens when we sociologists speak. The kinds of contribution sociologists have to make are often those which make uncomfortable reading for established interest groups. Even if this might be the case with Urry's new book *Climate Change and Society*, the book is accessibly written and deserves to be read well beyond the confines of academic sociology, or indeed the academy more generally.

Urry's main concern is to encourage and shape a new 'post-carbon sociology' (p. 16), which in turn might then help usher in post-carbon societies. The book covers a wide range of topics such as the contested terrain of climate science, the impacts of oil scarcity on the global financial crisis, the profoundly unsustainable character of the pleasure industries of the Gulf states, and the lasting, and devastating, influences of the legacies of 20th-century consumer capitalism, as typified by the high carbon systems of the United States.

Deftly drawing together a wide range of materials from Hollywood cinema to the complexity sciences, Urry's analysis combines sobering warnings about potential impending catastrophes, with hints at reasons for optimism about the possible emergence of innovative low carbon lifestyles. His sociological imagination is well attuned to the locked-in trajectories of human behaviour which mean that hearing about the (un)likelihood of reversing problematic trends makes for uncomfortable reading.

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Ultimately for Urry, energy and resources are a crucial dimension of any analysis of climate change, and this leads to his concentration on the role of carbon, and carbon consumptive patterns of behaviour. I felt that the heavy focus on carbon, however, perhaps means that it is harder to make the sociological argument that climate change and our responses (or not) to it are inseparably bound up with general social processes which cannot easily be isolated in terms of abstract emissions. Rather, climate change needs to be understood as inherently bound up with questions of politics and ethics, and the kinds of values which come to dominate in discussions. Indeed, Urry himself admits that he neglects issues of environmental justice, which is one area where sociologists surely have much to contribute. In many ways this neglect is more than justified by the breadth of Urry's engagement elsewhere, but it also perhaps rests on his evaluation of the concept of the 'post-political' as deployed by Erik Swyngedouw (2010).

While Urry rightly seeks to probe Swyngedouw's argument, he seems to me to overlook the potential ethical force of the application of the concept of the post-political to the study of climate change. Briefly, the post-political is based 'around the perceived inevitability of capitalism and a market economy as the basic organizational structure of the social and economic order, for which there is no alternative' (Swyngedouw, 2010: 215). The argument that there is a post-political trend to climate change responses confronts the consensus that has emerged which restricts discussions of responses to climate change to a focus on carbon emissions, often ignoring the ethical implications of the socio-political structuring of their release.

One of Urry's criticisms of Swyngedouw's thesis, however, is that it neglects 'the range of different politics surrounding climate change debates' as evidenced by social movement protests and opposition to dominant carbon-intensive practices (p. 91). Urry suggests a disconnect, then, between Swyngedouw's ideas and movements' politics. In practice, however, the idea of a depoliticized or post-political response to climate change was taken up by many climate justice activists in their mobilizations in Copenhagen and beyond (see, for example, Pusey and Russell, 2010). Nevertheless there is fertile ground for further investigation of the nuanced ways in which the trends emerging in relation to the politics of climate change might indeed be post-political.

This discussion is itself something of an aside, however, and Urry's timely contribution remains a well-argued, detailed example of what sociologists can do when they turn their attention to climate change. As such it challenges the problematic, and somewhat myopic, dominance of (some) natural sciences, and the imperialist colonization of climate change by economics (p. 3). There can be no adequate response to climate change without the kind of heightened sociological sensibility Urry demonstrates.

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Reviewed by: Amanda Rohloff, *Brunel University, UK*

John Urry's timely book adds to the growing sociological literature on climate change, building on books by Anthony Giddens (*The Politics of Climate Change*) and Ulrich Beck (*World at Risk*), along with numerous others. At a time when climate change is a topical, yet still contested and far from resolved issue, there is great need for research on climate change and society, and for developing what Urry calls a 'post-carbon sociology', a 'resource turn' in sociology, focusing on societal resource-dependence and resource-consequences.

The main thrust of the book is to explore how to shift from high carbon to low carbon economies and societies. It begins by arguing for the importance of examining society when thinking about climate change. Urry contends that sociology and other social sciences must displace economics as the dominant social science through which to explore and address climate change. He argues that economics ignores that economic systems are interrelated with other social systems that are tied into high carbon economies and societies. Moreover, the dominant economic model of individuals as rationally calculating beings neglects the relevance of fashion, fad, social routine and habit, and how people become locked into social practices.

The second chapter explores the development of various climate change discourses, including the development of climate change sciences. However, in relation to climate change science, Urry focuses more on 'this is what the sciences tells us and this is how they know what they know', than a sociology of the sciences of climate change per se. In a book that is arguing for the urgent need to insert sociology into climate change research and decisions, it is perhaps unsurprising that the focus is on asserting the authority of the sciences of climate change, rather than exploring sociologically how they developed; for a sociology of climate change science, we must look elsewhere.

Chapters 4 and 5 focus on high carbon societies and practices, including the development of places of high carbon consumption, or 'energy excess'. Metaphors of 'excess' and 'binge mobility', combined with passages on addiction, parallel those found in popular literature on climate change and carry with them rather strong connotations. But perhaps this is unsurprising, given the nature of the topic and the possible futures that may ensue should low carbon systems not develop soon enough. Urry's use of 'addiction' is interesting. He appears to conceptualize it as a form of socio-psychic dependence that is further entrenched via wider social and economic processes. Such a conceptualizing of addiction would be interesting to compare with others, and with other empirical examples.

From Chapter 7 onwards, Urry begins to explore the possibility of shifting towards a low carbon system. Using the example of the 2008 financial and economic crisis, he assesses how the crash occurred as a lesson for how we might govern climate change. One of the main thrusts of his argument here is the need for a 'resource capitalism', in which there is a recognition that resources are limited and that pollution must be kept within manageable bounds, where market regulation is viewed as essential, and where a long-term perspective takes the future and future generations increasingly into consideration. Here and elsewhere Urry discusses the significance of crises in shifting from carbon intensive systems to less intensive ones, where change is deemed necessary in the face of crisis (one might compare this to moral panic literature that examines the

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'piggy-backing' on 'real-world events' for climate change). Such occurrences are one of many unpredictable processes that contribute to innovation in systems, where systems may suddenly tip from one path to another. Focusing on the car system, Urry begins to sketch out what innovations would be necessary for the current car system to 'switch' to a new low carbon system of mobility. However, here and throughout, Urry highlights that some of these 'positive' changes (such as lower carbon) may bring with them potentially 'negative' changes such as increased surveillance which may endanger people's civil liberties in what may turn into a 'digital "Orwellian-ization" of self and society, with more or less no activity or movement without digital tracing and tracking' (p. 153).

Such an Orwellian scenario is one of four possible future scenarios that Urry describes in Chapter 9; the other three are 'perpetual consumerism', 'local sustainability', and 'regional warlordism'. The latter is characterized by a complete breakdown of civilization, what Norbert Elias would call a process of decivilization (Urry writes 'In this decivilizing energy-starved future …' and outlines many 'reversals' that could be seen as examples of Elias's symptoms of decivilizing).

The final chapter brings together the arguments presented in the book, arguing once again for the importance of 'bringing society into climate change'. Urry argues for a shift in focus away from individuals towards social-and-physical systems. But his outlook for the future is bleak. In the possible futures he explores, Urry acknowledges both the positive and negative consequences of each. Even so, he appears to believe that it is already too late, that the 'regional warlordism' future scenario is the most likely. He finishes by stating:

> … my claim is that there is a strong probability that nothing can be done except to *prepare* for various catastrophes. Unless some remarkable and unlikely system reversals take place in the extremely near future, sociology's role will lie more in the field of disaster studies. (p. 166)

By the time I had finished reading the book, I was feeling rather downhearted about the future of life on earth. But as one of my interview participants once said, 'It's not happy being an environmentalist. It's a miserable business.'

One of my main criticisms of *Climate Change and Society* is that it still does not go into enough detail as to how we might shift towards 'resource capitalism', 'low carbon lives', etc. Is it the case that this should be left up to others to decide? Or should sociologists be working more actively with those in other sectors, and with policy-makers, to try and achieve more desirable outcomes?

Reviewed by: Mike Hulme, *University of East Anglia, UK*

It is now more than 20 years since Andrew Ross wrote *Strange Weather*, one of the first sociological texts which included a critical treatment of the new idea of anthropogenic global climate change. Ross's 1991 critique was for some years an idiosyncratic outlier in many respects and until the last two or three years there has been very little deep and prolonged engagement with climate change by sociologists. Giddens wrote *The Politics of Climate Change* in 2009, sociologist Lever-Tracy has edited Routledge's recent

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Handbook on Climate Change and Society, while the pages of sociology journals have also seen a rise in the number articles analysing climate change.

The reason for this new sociological involvement with climate change is not hard to find. In recent years it has become clear that politics (e.g. COP15), economics (e.g. the EU emissions trading system) and new technologies (e.g. carbon capture and storage), neither alone nor together, are going to 'solve' climate change. And so in *Climate Change and Society*, sociologist John Urry laments the way in which economics, in particular, has gained the ascendency in the public framing and policy analysis of climate change. He rails against the imperialism of the economics paradigm in guiding environmental public policy (in particular the 2006 Stern Review), just as he rails against the military-industrial carbon complex and its hold on political power.

Urry approaches climate change first and foremost as a social issue and not as an environmental, political or economic one. For him climate change is a social problem and the solutions – if indeed there will be any – will be largely social. *Climate Change and Society* is therefore calling for a more confrontational engagement by the sociological discipline with the phenomenon of anthropogenic climate change. Far from modernity having sorted out the resource issue, which Urry claims most sociologists have too casually assumed, it is precisely around the question of resources that sociology now needs to reorientate itself as a discipline. And climate change is the exemplar of why this reorientation matters.

So what insights from sociology does he bring forward to change the terms of public and policy engagement with the issue? Urry offers important perspectives on the viral and uncontrollable nature of innovation processes: 'planning to innovate a specific and predictable set of low carbon systems is likely to be impossible' (p. 160). And as someone who has worked extensively on sociologies of mobility he offers insightful analysis into how forms of mobility are embedded in the social practices of high carbon living. He also offers a helpful short commentary on environmental scandals and the idea of 'symbolic capital'.

I am less convinced by the adequacy of the three discourses which he uses to represent climate science: scepticism, gradualism and catastrophism. (And can he really claim, with Mark Lynas, that 'the science of climate change has come to be reasonably stabilised' (p. 3)? Urry sides with the catastrophists and develops his case through a chapter titled 'The new catastrophism'. But for a stance which seems so central to his later prognosis of the human future I would have liked him to have placed this discourse in a more critical and historical analysis. Does catastrophism simply emerge from a pure science discovering how things 'really are' – or do its imaginative flourishes emerge from deeper cultural and religious roots? Urry lists two dozen books and films which 'proclaim a new dark age is on its way' (p. 38), yet he doesn't ask who is writing and producing them and why they may be doing so.

I am also left rather unsure about where he stands in relation to the Plan B for tackling climate change which he outlines (Plan A is presumably business-as-usual deploying the politics and economics of neo-liberalism and the military-industrial carbon complex). In Chapter 7 he describes 'the sole plan on offer' (p. 120) as being a shift to a low carbon economy and society brought about by a new resource-centred capitalism. This is what elsewhere he sees as being brought about by a 'disruptive cosmopolitan innovation' (p. 138).

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And yet, as he progresses through his remaining three chapters, Urry becomes increasingly pessimistic that Plan B could ever be realized. In Chapter 9 he offers four alternative quite gloomy scenarios, all of which are constrained by the carbon lock-in which he has earlier described. And then in his concluding chapter he reveals he has ‘little sense that Plan B can develop in time’ (p. 167) and his final claim ‘that there is a strong possibility that nothing can be done except to prepare for various catastrophes’ (p. 166). Urry drily remarks that it is perhaps the sociology of disaster risk management – catastrophe management – that sociologists will most be in demand for as the century unfolds.

This seems to paint the future in the dark tones adopted by social movements such as the Dark Mountain Project. We are back to the ‘new catastrophism’ Urry earlier seemed to have endorsed.

But for me there is a third narrative which works alongside the techno-economics of Lord Stern and the bleak future offered by Urry. It is about the rediscovery of virtue and reconnecting with the humanistic traditions of wisdom, love, humility, integrity and hope. This narrative may appear to be directly orthogonal to Urry’s claim that ‘it is not individuals who have to change but social-and-physical systems’ (p. 156). And yet the humanist tradition has much to say about the exercise of virtue and how this can express itself in various collective forms such as civic virtue, cultural wisdom and spiritual hope. This alternative narrative is about recentring our response to climate change not in social processes as Urry seeks to do, but in the domain of expressive human virtues and relationships.

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