

Book Review: Climate Change & Society

by Blog Admin

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*This book explores the significance of human behaviour to understanding the causes and impacts of changing climates and to assessing varied ways of responding to these changes. So far the discipline that has represented and modelled such human behaviour is economics. By contrast **Climate Change and Society** tries to place the 'social' at the heart of both the analysis of climates and of the assessment of alternative futures. **Amelia Sharman** recommends the text for students of sociology, and praises Urry for a strong introduction to the topic.*



Climate Change & Society. John Urry. Polity. May 2011.

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With such a broad title as *Climate Change & Society*, [John Urry](#)'s latest book has a lot to live up to. As a prolific author, noted sociologist Urry has written over 40 books and edited special issues, yet only in the last few years has he directly addressed the topic of climate change. However, in reading this book, it's clear that sociology has a whole has perhaps missed a beat in attending to the impact of climate change, and in particular, excess resource use, on human society.

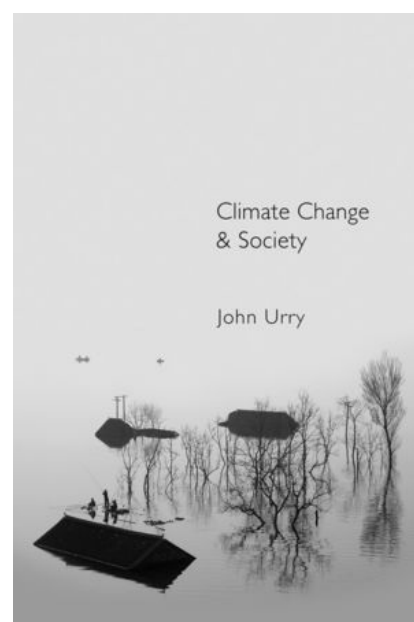
So why should sociology be interested in climate change? Urry draws inspiration from the Stern Review's call for the relevance of 'systems and behavioural theories' to deal with the complexities of climate change. However, he rails against the hegemony of economics as the premier social science methodology used to address climate change, and seeks to bring sociology to the fore of current analysis.

In the book he makes an innovative connection between systems theory, sociology and climate change to make the simple but convincing point that it is insufficient to study human systems without acknowledging the importance of the environment in influencing how those systems may operate. As debates rage in the UK on the efficiency of wind farms or whether fracking should be given the green light, this book is a timely reminder of how human reliance on the convenience of oil – including the staggering statistic that of 'all goods for sale in shops, 95 per cent call for the use of oil in some way' – is irrefutably unsustainable.

Chapter 3, 'The new catastrophism' introduces systems thinking to the sociology of climate change. While the concepts of relationships and intertwined processes are fundamental to other social and physical science areas such as geography, Urry uses the idea of the catastrophe to identify how tipping points and feedback mechanisms are also relevant to sociological systems. In so doing, he challenges headlong the 'no limits to growth' thesis at the heart of much economic analysis.

Climate Change & Society contains some vehement arguments against capitalism, in particular, the neo-liberal mode of capitalism dominant since the 1980s. He contends that we are moving towards a new 'resource capitalism' which reflects the catastrophic nature of the complex system of risks facing the planet today. He suggests that 'post-carbonist' (rather than post-modernist) societies are needed to break our resource dependence.

Non-linear disruptions that could break these dependencies feature heavily in Urry's analysis – from



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physical tipping points, to radical social interventions such as the internet, mobile telecommunications or the car. Urry uses the car throughout the book as emblematic of the rise of our oil-dependent society, as well as a tool through which an examination of what a less resource-dependent system could entail.

As both an increasingly accessible and desirable mode of transport, the convenience of the car and the social status that it affords its owner makes any challenges to its pre-eminence unlikely to succeed unless an alternative, lower-carbon, system can be developed that is *more* convenient and *more* desirable. As with any post-carbon technology, unless it is seen to actually be an improvement on the previous choice, its uptake is likely to be low. In Chapter 8, 'Innovating low carbon lives', Urry argues that the car system may only require small changes to be replaced, but that these changes have to create a new system that is 'fashionable and faddish, that wins hearts and minds, that is better and more fun'. He suggests that it is unlikely that a post-car system will develop in the global North, with the less omnipotent presence of the car in the global South meaning that other innovations could more easily develop the critical mass necessary to replace it. The example of the car makes clear the relevance of systems thinking; however, Urry is less convincing in other areas, and particularly those in which he develops in less detail, such as the development of post-carbon political systems.

A series of alternative futures are proposed towards the end of the book, although Urry suggests that more dystopian possibilities such as 'regional warlordism' are unfortunately more likely than a shift towards locally-focused, sustainable and altogether rosier visions of the future. Concluding that 'climate change science is rather like the social sciences of global society over the next few decades: absolutely essential but irreducibly uncertain', Urry reflects that the conclusions of the 1972 *Limits to Growth* report from the Club of Rome are still incredibly relevant for a 21st century world. Powerful limits to growth do exist, and perhaps the future of sociology will be more in the field of disaster studies rather than suggesting ways in which humans might be extricated from our current self-destructive systems.

For readers already familiar with social science writing in the field of climate change, and in particular those aware of the problematised nature/society relationship at the heart of much of science and technology studies, there is unlikely to be much that is novel here. However, for a student of sociology, particularly one who may not have much knowledge in the field of climate change, *Climate Change & Society* is a good introduction to this important topic.

Amelia Sharman is a PhD student at the [Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment](#) at the LSE. Her main research interests are in the relationship between science and policy, and uncertainty and controversy in political decision-making. Previously, Amelia was a Sustainability Specialist at the International Hydropower Association and a Senior Policy Advisor at the New Zealand Ministry for Economic Development. [Read more reviews by Amelia](#).

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