Where do we go from here? 
Climate change as a human affair

Cristina Bradatan 
Texas Tech University, USA

Abstract
Although climate change has slowly emerged in academic, media and political debates as an important social issue, it might be too slow for something to change significantly before it is too late. As such, it is probably a good time for social scientists to get more involved in understanding and explaining how this entirely human affair can be tackled and how it will affect our lives. The three books reviewed here address the sociology of climate change from different perspectives.

Keywords
Climate change, migration, sociology of environment

Anthony Giddens, The Politics of Climate Change, 2nd edn, Polity Press: Cambridge, 2011; 269 pp.: ISBN 9780745646923, US$25.74 (pbk)

John Urry, Climate Change and Society, Polity Press: Cambridge, 2011; 217 pp.: ISBN 9780745650371, US$22.38 (pbk)

Etienne Piguet, Antoine Pecaud and Paul de Guchteneire (eds), Migration and Climate Change, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2011; 464 pp.: ISBN 9781107662254, $21.96 (pbk)

Somehow unexpectedly for many of its advocates, the topic of climate change was never mentioned as such during the 2012 US presidential campaign. There were, however, instances when green energy got some attention: in the first presidential debate, the Republican candidate brought up the topic twice, criticizing the president for having spent excessively on something doomed to fail. The Republican contender, however, thought it was important to portray himself as a friend rather than foe of green energy (‘I

Corresponding author:
Cristina Bradatan, Texas Tech University, Mail Stop 1012, Holden Hall 158, Lubbock, TX 79401, USA. 
Email: cristina.bradatan@ttu.edu
like green energy as well’; ‘I am all in favor of green energy’). One of the planet’s largest polluters, the US is painfully slow in implementing significant policies tackling the problem of climate change; the Kyoto protocol remains unsigned despite a Democrat-dominated Senate, president and – at some point – even the House.

The fact that green energy became a topic of interest in a presidential debate is relevant. It highlights that environmental policies and changes have become a mainstream political concern, although still controversial it seems. In the meantime, the European Union, once a leading force in climate change politics and research, struggles to get out of the economic crisis, while developing countries such as China have become leaders in air pollution. In the media, the ‘truth’ or ‘lack of truth’ in climate change predictions is still a hot topic, and the ‘ClimateGate’ affair gets brought to life again and again, despite being already cleared up by several scientific bodies. Less than two weeks before the first US presidential debate, for example, (18 September 2012), Forbes Magazine published an article on what they called ‘ClimateGate star Michael Mann courts legal disaster’, while Science (28 September 2012) reported that ‘climate scientist Michael Mann won an initial victory in his latest legal battle’. Meanwhile, the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere keeps increasing and the Arctic ice is becoming thinner.

Where do we go, then, from here? This review essay focuses on the idea briefly presented above: although climate change slowly emerges in academic, media and political debates as an important social issue, it might be too slow for something to change significantly before it is too late. As such, it is probably a good time for social scientists to become more involved in understanding and explaining how this entirely human affair can be tackled and how it will affect our lives. The three books reviewed here, The Politics of Climate Change by Anthony Giddens, Climate Change and Society by John Urry and Migration and Climate Change, edited by Etienne Piguet, Antoine Pecaud and Paul de Guchteneire, all focus on this topic, albeit from different perspectives.

Giddens’s book is not so much about how climate policies are defined and implemented nowadays, as it is about how and why they should be defined in a certain way. It looks at climate change from a pragmatic and balanced rather than ‘radically green’ point of view. In fact, one point to which Giddens goes back repeatedly is that global warming should not be seen and treated as a part of green movement politics. The main focus of the green movement, according to him, is to protect the environment from the damage inflicted by human beings. Tackling global warming is a way to protect human beings.

Second, while many ideas and concepts are common to both climate change and green movements activists, they need to be re-evaluated and discussed rather than taken for granted. The ‘precautionary principle’, a guiding concept of the green movement and one that has been incorporated into the global warming discussions, is one of these ideas. The precautionary principle emphasizes safety over risk, ‘better safe than sorry’ as opposed to ‘he who hesitates is lost’. Giddens (following Sunstein) argues that if applied faithfully in all situations, this principle can lead to unwanted effects – for example, the intervention in Iraq can be very well explained as an application of this principle, a precautionary measure taken against a potential threat before it materializes. Therefore, policies relevant to preventing or coping with global warming might sometimes go against the precautionary principle. For example, the green movement is hostile to bio-engineering and genetically modified crops because the long-term effects of these
changes are still unknown. However, coping at the same time with population growth and global warming would make the use of genetically modified crops a necessity in many parts of the world. Similarly, ‘conservationists might resist the building of a nuclear power station, or a wind farm, in a given area of the countryside’ (p. 54), although this would not be seen as a problem for those interested strictly in global warming.

Third, there is a fundamental difference between climate change and environmental problems. Global warming is not visible to the layperson in the same way environmental changes are: global climate change is not simply an extension of more traditional forms of industrial pollution, it is qualitatively different. Scientists, and scientists alone, have directed our attention to it, since it is not visible in the way the London smog was or smoke-stack pollution. We are wholly dependent on the research and monitoring work of scientists to track the progress of warming and map its consequences (p. 53).

While there is a tendency in the media and the general public to attribute catastrophic events, such as Hurricane Sandy, to global warming, this is not a proposition that can be verified with certainty. Indeed, such an attribution can have a positive impact on the climate change movement by exposing the climate change effects in an immediately manifest way rather than through the scientists’ models. Yet, if the event is not necessarily related to climate change, it can also undermine the whole idea of climate change. Then, how can one decide whether or not a hurricane or drought is the result of climate change? Giddens uses the example of the 2000 UK flooding that affected 10,000 properties to show how such claims can be scientific validated (p. 171):

The researchers ran several thousand computer simulation models of the weather patterns, both under normal conditions and conditions as they might have been had greenhouse gas emissions not existed. In 90 per cent of the simulations the results showed that humanly induced global warming increased the risk of floods occurring in England and Wales by more than 20 per cent, and in two out of three cases by 90 per cent. In other words, the probability is high that the floods were influenced by climate change.

While Giddens’s book is focused on the current state of climate change research and policy, Urry (2011) concentrates on how our future will look like when the effects of global warming are taken into account. As such, Climate Change and Society is an attempt to bring society back to the center of climate change analysis. Human behavior, Urry argues, is primarily described by using economic models. This is also the case with discussions related to climate change. Economic models are based on the assumption of the rational, individual actor, who takes decisions based on utility. And while such models may be simplification of reality rather than means of an exhaustive description of it, the main problem with economic models is that they ignore important drivers of human behavior. People, Urry argues (pp. 3–4):

… do not behave as individually separate economic consumers maximizing their individual utility from the basket of goods and services they purchase and use given fixed and unchanging preferences. People are rather creatures of social routine and habit, but also of fashion and fad. The patterns of routine and fashion stem from how people are, much of the time, locked into and reproduce different social practices and institutions, including families, households, social classes, genders, work groups, schools, ethnicities, generations, nations and so on.
How is this methodological problem relevant to the climate change debates? Well, if we really want to understand how to tackle global warming and how to prepare ourselves for the effects that climate change will have on human communities, then we need models with a good predictive power. Since economic models do not incorporate important features of observed human behavior, it is now time for other social sciences to get involved and develop such models if we are to address the challenging issue of global warming. Urry’s book attempts to highlight exactly these ‘other than economic’ factors that influence human beings. One area of focus is the changing relationship between people and places and, related to this, cosmopolitanism as an important social force. Places are no longer ‘places of belonging’ but rather things to be experienced as tourists, ‘landscape’ rather than ‘land’. ‘Collecting’ places through tourism is an important component of one’s social identity. Yet, this was made possible with a high carbon cost. While this new relationship between people and places raises the danger of global warming, it can also be used as a way to increase awareness and push toward policies to tackle climate change. Extensive mobility creates cosmopolitanism, leads to openness toward people and places from all over the world, and creates connections between people living far away. This, in turn, leads to a certain sensitivity toward environmental problems confronting global communities: a tsunami in Thailand is no longer something that affects some distant people, but something that happens in a place I traveled to a couple of months ago. Cosmopolitanism, therefore, can be used as a force to forge a large international movement and push for global policies to address global warming once a shocking event due to climate change affects a part of the world (p. 162):

A massive collapse of oil supply or oil price increase or dramatic flooding or drought in a global city could constitute the event that provokes such a dramatic ‘climate change shock treatment’. This treatment would short-circuit procedures and plans and lead to the widespread top down imposition of a low carbon future.

Looking to the future, Urry imagines four possible scenarios for global society: perpetual consumerism; local sustainability; regional warlordism; and low carbon, digital networks. The first (very unlikely) scenario (perpetual consumerism) is just an extension of the current state of affairs, possible only if some kind of ‘technological fix’ occurs and decreases energy costs. While not explicitly claimed as such in Urry’s description, this ‘technological fix’ would solve the problem of global warming in some magical way as well. The local sustainability scenario describes a global society formed of networks of self-reliant, physically semi-isolated communities ‘in which people would live, work and mostly socialize’ (p. 146). This new world would be significantly different from what we currently have and would probably be the result of a dramatic decrease in cheap energy, climate change and, as a result, social conflict. However, the same factors can also lead to a ‘barbaric future’, exemplified by the third scenario (regional warlordism), in which the world would be more similar to present-day Afghanistan, but without any US troops. The fourth scenario (low carbon, digital networks) is very much similar to the second one, with people living in small communities, carbon use much controlled and travel limited. Although he does not exclude other ideas, throughout the book Urry is more inclined to adopt the shock perspective in which the world is forced to change due
to a dramatic change in the availability of cheap energy or significant environmental
degradation due to climate change.

But isn’t the world already going through major environmental problems that have a
significant effect on people’s lives? The third book reviewed in this essay, *Migration and
Climate Change*, tries to clarify whether or not environmental changes already affect one
aspect of our world society: migration. Albeit a collection of articles, *Migration and
Climate Change* succeeds in offering a comprehensive and coherent perspective on the
relationship between migration and environmental changes. Climate change is expected
to have, directly or indirectly, a significant effect on human migration. The alteration of
living conditions and access to food and water will increase the risks of migration, exac-
terbate social conflicts and destabilize communities. It is estimated that every year 83
million people are already affected by extreme changes in temperature, droughts and
wildfire (p. 8), and up to 250 million people will be exposed to these effects in the next
10 years (IPCC, 2007, cited p. 8). It is easy to imagine that, when confronted with
changes in climate – rising temperature, sea levels and drought – whole communities
will depart for more hospitable environments.

Most contributions in this book revolve around the idea of ‘environmental refugees’,
a concept that first appeared in the literature in the 1970s or 1980s (Gemenne, p. 228).
Although most of these environmental migrants are expected to move within national
borders, the literature is focused more on the changes in international migration due to
climate changes (Koser, p. 289). This interest results from the fact that, while for inter-
nally displaced migrants it is rather obvious that their own government is the main insti-
tution that needs to provide support, less clear is the status of an environmental migrant
who migrates internationally. As Cornil (p. 360) points out, the refugee definition given
by the Geneva Convention does not include this type of situation. Extending the defini-
tion of refugees to include environmental migrants is complicated because of ‘legal tech-
nical reasons, as human rights vocabulary did not sufficiently include environmental
dynamics’, as well as political reasons because such an ‘initiative would meet consider-
able resistance’ (Cournil, p. 366).

Another group of articles frames empirically the issue of environmentally driven
migration in countries and areas such as Brazil, Nepal, Bangladesh, the Nile Delta,
Mekong Delta and Sahel. The general idea of these studies is that the in-field relationship
between migration and environmental changes is influenced by a large variety of factors
such as culture, gender (Hunter and David), income, existence of migration networks,
economic development and population growth in the region. Although migration occurs
when extreme weather events such as flooding affects a region, people might not neces-
sarily leave because of the event itself but because of other related factors, such as
increasing indebtedness among Bangladeshi villagers (Findlay and Geddes). A general
idea that unifies all the studies included in this volume is that, while individual responses
to environmental changes are not easy to predict, communities are and will be neverthe-
less affected and changed by them. While the research on climate change and migration
as well as, generally, the social impact of climate change is still in its infancy, each of the
articles included in this edited book shows how this kind of research could benefit from
dedicated support, such as the EACH-FOR (Environmental Change and Forced
Migration) project, financed by the European Union.
Going back to the initial question of this essay, where do we go from here? How can we, as social scientists, contribute to discussing global warming? The first two books reviewed here answer unequivocally that our knowledge of human behavior and society should be used more and better in addressing this challenge to human society. We know that human behavior is complicated and rather difficult to predict using any type of models. Yet, instead of what is currently used, we should work toward developing theories and models with a better predictive power. Urry shows that just because we do not have enough data, we should not be afraid of imagining future scenarios: it is better to start somewhere using knowledge that we have, rather than simply leave the field open for other sciences with less knowledge about human behavior. The third book, Migration and Climate Change, exemplifies this attitude by showing how we can contribute: while it makes sense that people confronted with stressful environmental changes would leave, this is not necessarily the case. In fact, even when they leave, they might do it not because of environmental changes, but due to the poverty that follows. Community case studies show that the relationship between migration and environment changes is strongly dependent on a large variety of factors, such as culture, gender, income, existence of migration of networks and population growth in the region. Because people do not simply behave as rational, self-interested individuals, rational choice models do not have a good predictive power in this case. This is how a social scientist with a more sophisticated perspective on human beings can make a difference: by understanding and explaining the complexity of human behavior when one is confronted with significant environmental changes.

Author biography

Cristina Bradatan is an Associate Professor of Sociology at Texas Tech University and AAAS fellow in the USAID Office of Global Climate Change (2013–2015). Her research interests are social response to climate change, migration and complex systems.