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Review essay: Disagreeing about the climate

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Introduction

The science concerning climate change is clear, both sides of the argument agree. What they don't agree about is what that clarity means. Each side considers the matter settled, and their points of view unsettle each attempt to make public policy.

We hope it doesn't have to remain that way. The world came together in the 1980s to stamp out the problems that were threatening the ozone layer of the atmosphere, with stunning success. After a few years of a public information campaign bringing scientists, economists and politicians together, the Montreal Protocol of 1987 led to a global ban on chlorofluorocarbons and the earth's self-healing capabilities took over. And yet a quarter of a century and scores of international reports later, we face a more urgent (some say much less urgent, or indeed non-) problem threatening catastrophic (or insignificant, or even beneficial) alterations in the way we live. And yet it has proved impossible to muster a consensus on how to move forward, or backward, to a solution, or to an even bigger problem.

Why do we disagree about climate change? The science of climate change is complex. The economics tug us in different directions, asking us what we value - and then we discover that our values differ, based at least in part on our beliefs. In attempting to

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persuade others about those beliefs we invoke rhetoric that can dissuade as well, in part because if our differing perceptions of the risks that language invokes. Global problems require a different mode of governance than ones that are contained within borders, and then even global governance mechanisms that may work in the short term are difficult to sustain when the dangers they are meant to confront are distant in time as well as space.


For directors of corporations, however, the calls to action that surround the debate over climate change are anything but distant. Increasing numbers of investors (e.g. IIGCC 2008) demand some form of disclosure about climate risks (GRI 2006; CDSB 2009). Among them are fund managers not yet convinced of the need for corporate social responsibility and related social or even more general reporting on environmental matters. The likelihood of legislative and regulatory action on carbon emissions is high enough in many parts of the world, however, that even climate sceptics face the need to invest in information gathering and analysis. Uncertainty is understandable, so how can it be understood?

Social meanings of climate

Mike Hulme thinks the reasons for the persistent differences lies in the complex ways we see and use climate change as a totem for other, deep-seeded ways in which we view the world. In his book Why We Disagree about Climate Change (2009), Hulme calls climate change a battleground between different philosophies of science, a justification for converting public commons into private assets, the inspiration for new social movements, and a threat to our security, justifying a new form of geo-diplomacy. The disagreements stem from these considerations and then reinforce them, making it difficult to reach consensus on the facts, let alone the interpretation.

Hulme acknowledges his own orientations upfront: he is a geographer and environmentalist, director of the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research at the...
University of East Anglia in England. He has dabbled in studying history, too. He is a white man from a northern European country, a democratic socialist in his politics, and a Christian of "orthodox" views. He states this background by way of introducing one of the central points of his book, and its start: that we construct our understanding of climate change in a social setting, indeed that the science and economics of climate change are themselves not fixed and certain but depend instead on the interpretation of individuals who judge them. That admission sets up a rich and complex discussion of how we know and understand the world, and one that is ultimately unsatisfying - if your reason for reading it is to find the answer of what we should do about climate change.

**Interpretations of climate change**

Climate has a meaning that differs depending on our upbringing, religion and ideology, which imbues attitudes when we start to discuss how it changes. It roots in the Greek klima suggests an empirical orientation: bands of weather that broadly match. Contrast that with the Inuit word sila, which means both weather and spirit. There's a long history of ascribing cultural values based on climate. Racism itself has intellectual roots in climate prejudice, Hulme suggests. Western cultures, inspired by the Enlightenment and a faith in science, have sought to conquer the weather. The Romantics, in rejecting rationalism and a positivist view of science, idealized nature.

But most scientists during the 20th Century became much less certain about the chances that science would lead to ultimate truths. Instead, they case their predictions in terms of probabilities, "Bayesian beliefs," in Hulme's words, that collect knowledge using an "organized subjective" approach (2009:86). He uses as a case in point the scientific debate surrounding the successive estimates by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change about the impact on sea levels of the melting Greenland ice shelf. Perhaps a better route to consensus is to place greater weight on the formally expressed, qualitative views of scientists, that is, on expertly elicited Bayesian beliefs. In so doing, Hulme gives assistance to the postgraduate student struggling to understand why their tutors keep on discussing ontology and epistemology in research philosophy. He describes positivism and its shortcomings in tangible ways, and transforms social construction into a concept that makes sense without the stifling language of postmodernism.

Gaining a consensus on science matters only if that knowledge is then interpreted through the lens of the values we hold. And here Hulme's argument moves into territory
more likely to shift than the Greenland ice sheet. Economic value can be calculated, of course. But the long time horizons associated with the impact of climate change make the calculus highly sensitive to the discount rate applied to future benefits. He makes vivid the trade-offs between the value of saving the planet for the future and saving the poor today and describes the "social cost of carbon" in terms that economists and ordinary people alike will comprehend.

But economics is not the only one way we assess value. "One of the reasons we disagree about climate change is because we believe different things about our duty to others, to Nature and to our deities," he writes (2009:144). Religious and secular notions of duty and blame can point us to different interpretations: while many religions see mankind having a stewardship role over nature, others are more fatalistic, and some evangelical Christians welcome the apocalyptic visions of a climate catastrophe. The remedies to climate change also draw dividing lines in beliefs. Take carbon trading as a mechanism to reduce the production of CO$_2$. To many people, turning the atmosphere into a tradable commodity seems like commercialization of the greatest commons we have.

We differ about climate change, too, because of the things we fear, Hulme argues. For some people – inhabitants of low-lying Pacific island nations and residents along the crumbling coastline of Norfolk in England – the fear of the effects of climate change is immediate and even existential. For many others, climate change is a bad but distant thing. Fear now means crime, disease or hunger. In this we see a difference between analytic and affective reasoning at work. If we have time to think, we won't easily be spurred into action. If we feel, however, reactions can be instinctive.

Responses to climate change

For many climate activists, the challenge has been to turn that analytic understanding into affective response. Statements by political leaders, dramatized in the media, amplify the message of risk. Hulme presents a graphic showing an exponential rise in the frequency of the use of the words "climate change" and "terrorism" in the same sentence of news stories in major UK newspapers from 2000 to 2007, as the iconography of the 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington crept into the language of climate activists. The communication of risk, he says, is one of the causes of our disagreement about climate change: we receive multiple and conflicting messages. "No message is neutral," he writes (2009:225), drawing on communication theory with the notion that the "frame" we use to view events shapes the
meaning we ascribe to them. Framing climate change as market failure, as Stern did by calling it the "greatest and widest-ranging market failure ever seen", suggests that entrepreneurs, economists and businesses need to take the lead in correcting it, Hulme says. Others, including Stern himself would disagree with him in part, arguing that market failure is precisely the reason for government to take the lead through regulation and legislation.

But Hulme is right in noting that framing the debate in market terms directs attention away from other understandings of the meaning of climate change. "Framing climate change as a challenge to individual and corporate morality … suggests that different cohorts of actors should be mobilised," he writes (2009:227). Hulme cites Shanahan (2007) discussing six different ways that climate change is framed in the public debate: 1) "scientific uncertainty" encourages those who don't want to change; 2) "national security" engages those who don't want to but now see the need; 3) "polar bears" capture wildlife lovers; 4) "money" engages politicians and the private sector; 5) "catastrophe" grabs those worried about the future; and 6) "justice and equity" those with a strong ethical leaning.

These differing views lead to differing responses to the symbolism of climate change and therefore to attitudes towards the trade-offs between climate change and economic development. Do we develop now at the expense of future generations? This is the central issue concerning China's reluctance to join any effort to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The fear of China's development lies behind the reluctance of the United States to join as well, a rather different "national security frame" than the one Shanahan suggests. Do we not develop at all? Do we undevelop, retreating to earlier, less carbon-intensive ways of living? Do we, Hulme asks, risking the wrath of the politically correct, seek to limit population?

And how do we decide what to do? The governance of climate change is like little else we have faced in the past, though perhaps like much of what we face in the future. This is a global issue, though the power to act lies with national governments and global corporations. Supranational institutions have questionable political legitimacy and lack the ability to command resources from those who have. The Montreal Protocol of 1987 that banned chlorofluorocarbons is often cited as a model of how climate change could be handled. But CFCs were an issue marked by scientific near-certainty and marginal economic significance. One clear view of its importance rapidly emerged, independent of cultural interpretations and social constructions. The hope that the Kyoto Protocol on climate change would glide along its path was misguided.
**Beyond climate change**

Climate change is a "wicked" problem, not a "tame" one, he says. Tame problems may be complex, but they have well-defined paths to their solutions; wicked problems don't. As a result, climate change will have "clumsy" solutions, involving multiple, sometimes contradictory goals, pursued simultaneously by different actors in different ways. They can work; they can also work against each other. "But if this is all climate change means to us - a (wicked) problem continually awaiting a (clumsy) solution - we have limited our imaginations," Hulme writes (2009:340). We need, he says, to look beyond climate change.

Hulme constructs four "myths" in the literary sense - stories - which describe how we understand the climate: Eden, A pocalypse, Babel and Jubilee. Eden sees a return to nature, A pocalypse an end to life as we know it. In Babel we build our way to the solution - that is, through technology. These three are false paths: the first impossible, the second dreadful, the third with its invocation of geo-engineering "requires an inordinate degree of faith" (2009:353). The fourth, though, Jubilee, is different. It suggests turning the discussion of climate change to the language of ethics, building on the "instinct for justice" (2009:254), and the word "instinct" is one he has not chosen lightly. All four draw on Biblical and mainly Old Testament metaphors, a sign perhaps of the orthodox Christian in Hulme seeking to reframe the debate. What is missing is a final chapter that elaborates that notion of Jubilee and how the language of ethics can be developed into a basis for decisions. Had Hulme done so, however, readers might well have found even more reasons to disagree.

**Conclusion**

As should by now be apparent, this is not a "how to" book on fixing climate change or even a "best practice" book about ways some people think we could. Its "recipe", if we can call it that, is critical reflection, coming to understand how we think and why we disagree. This lesson could as easily be applied to any of the intractable problems we face. A non-executive director of a company might use its "solution" as a way of solving the agency problem in corporate governance without trampling on the stewardship inclinations of the managers the company employs. What the book teaches us perhaps is the lesson often ascribed to H.L. Mencken: that for every complex problem there is a solution that is elegant, simple, and wrong.

Climate change will always be with us, even if we change it. Stabilizing the climate involves dealing with the most complex and most adaptive system we know, save perhaps
the human mind. That's not an observation that will help a director reach a decision about which action to take when, or how to report it. But if the solutions, such as they are, must be "clumsy", then route to them will probably lead us into disagreements. This book will help us understand better why we disagree.

References


