

Book Review

Why We Disagree About Climate Change: Understanding Controversy, Inaction and Opportunity

Mike Hulme (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 2009 392pp, pbk £16.99

Mike Hulme is Professor of Climate Change in the School of Environmental Sciences at the University of East Anglia (UEA) in the UK. He is also the founding director of the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research in the UK and he has advised numerous UK government, European Commission and United Nations initiatives. In short, he is an individual that stands across the climate change issue and can be considered an authority on its science. This strength in Professor Hulme's scientific knowledge is reinforced in the preface to the book where he outlines how his focus for c20 years of his career was on "Quantitative Analysis" (p.xxx), a period that realised, in his words, "his major analytical contribution to the science of climate change" (ibid). The preface continues on the journey through his career ending at a sixth stage, Professor Hulme has titled "cultural enlightenment" (p.xxxiii) a period that coincided with his study of history at university. While this journey through Professor Hulme's career is interesting, what is revealed to this reviewer through this autobiographical exposition, and likely to any social scientist reading the preface, is what we have here is a scientist who recognised that there is no singular truth and many narratives can be weaved. Thus Professor Hulme's self titled 'cultural enlightenment' brings forward an image of the scientist who has suddenly had the screen pulled away and understands that other individuals might have valid viewpoints and the answers brought forward by the experiments with the magic boxes are not the sole and whole truth. To reinforce this enlightenment Professor Hulme offers the homily that we must "recognise that disagreeing is a form of learning" (p.xxxiv) and that we need to "re-situate culture and the human spirit at the heart of our understanding of climate" (p.xxxvii).

For the social scientists that arguably form the bulk of the readership of this journal, this revelation from a scientist is perhaps warming to the heart. However, this revelation that there is an inherent plasticity in the narrative of any phenomena is hardly new to us, as many if not all of us have recognised this 'truth'. Unfortunately this revelation sets a tone that this reviewer found difficult to get past, as the

hypothesis one forms is that the book is about to argue there are different viewpoints. If the sign of a good book is meeting expectations then the book delivers, it does exactly that - it argues there are different viewpoints.

The book contains ten chapters. The first discusses the social meanings of climate and attempts to explain what climate is. This chapter explores the etymology of the word climate and argues that dictionary definitions of climate do not suffice. Through this chapter there would appear to be a settling on a pithy explanation that "climate is what you expect, weather is what you get" (p. 9) and some diversions with regards to American, Chinese and Soviet government attempts to control the climate. The essential point of these diversions being to outline that it is foolish to try to master climate – the scientist recognises the illusion and futility of mastery.

The second chapter explores how climate change came to be part of public consciousness. It outlines a history of our understanding of carbon dioxide and how in 1938 a scientist named Guy Stewart Callender presented scientific evidence that linked together carbon, the greenhouse effect and rising concentrations of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. From this reviewer's perspective the key element of this chapter is the presentation of data from a Hawaiian observatory that tracks the increase in atmospheric carbon dioxide.

Following these two opening chapter the seven core chapters of the book examine climate change from the standpoint of science, economics, religion, psychology, media, development and governance. The science chapter outlines the work of the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) and how the key difficulty for science is that "science is being used to justify claims not merely about how the world is but who or what is or is not desirable about how the world should be" (p.74). The economics chapter goes through the basics of Herman Daly's arguments regarding ecological economics and the Stern review regarding climate change economics, resulting in the questioning of whether perpetual growth on a finite planet is practical. The chapter on religion outlines how we believe in different religions but to Professor Hulme's view there is one essential truth in religion and that is a notion of stewardship and thus no matter what we believe we must have "a kind heart and a sense of community, which [he calls] universal responsibility" (p.149). Chapter six explores how our different psychological makes ups result in us

having different risk profiles and evaluating risks differently. The media chapter outlines how no message ever offered is neutral and, in bold type for full effect, "one of the reasons we disagree about climate change is that we receive multiple and conflicting messages about climate change and so we interpret them in different ways" (p.215). This trick of putting statements in bold is repeated in the next chapter on development and the one after on governance, where, for example he states "one of the reasons we disagree about climate change is because we understand development differently" (p.251). As a reviewer one senses that perhaps Professor Hulme is beginning to spot there is a certain repetition in his argument. It is also worth noting that Professor Hulme argues that that a key critique of sustainable development is its anthropomorphism? (p.249) - an interesting perspective that is unfortunately not developed.

The final chapter, chapter ten, is titled 'Beyond Climate Change'. This chapter offers some of Professor Hulme's musings such as he "believes that "human beings are more than material objects and that climate is more than a physical category" (p.326) and that nature and culture are embedded categories, whereby there is no nature unless it is interpreted by culture and there is no culture disembodied from nature. Consequently we need to ask "what is the human project ultimately about?" (p.337) Further Professor Hulme outlines (with reference to Bruno Latour's work on Actor-Network Theory) that in "having allowed science to strip climate of its cultural anchors and ideological meanings...we have been slow to recognise that understanding climate change and responding to it demands a reengagement with the deeper and more intimate meanings of climate that have been lost" (p.355). Thus we should "use the idea of climate change to move beyond the separate categories of the physical and cultural" (p.357). To close his book Professor Hulme outlines that climate change is not a separate category to society and thus to counter western enlightenment thought "our engagement with climate change and the disagreements that it spawns should always be a form of enlightenment" (p.364). Thus he ends his book with a nice double turn on the term enlightenment.

In sum, when reviewing the book, one of the pen notes this reviewer made was a question "Who is this book written for?" In answer to that question, I do not think it is written for a social scientist; rather the individual that comes to mind is the

youthful idealist who has an unwavering belief in numbers and singular truths, a young Mike Hulme perhaps?