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Climate for Change, or How to Create a Green Modernity?

Ulrich Beck

Abstract

The discourse on climate politics so far is an expert and elitist discourse in which peoples, societies, citizens, workers, voters and their interests, views and voices are very much neglected. So, in order to turn climate change politics from its head onto its feet you have to take sociology into account. There is an important background assumption which shares in the general ignorance concerning environmental issues and, paradoxically, this is incorporated in the specialism of environmental sociology itself – this is the category of 'the environment'. If 'the environment' only includes everything which is not human, not social, then the concept is sociologically empty. If the concept includes human action and society, then it is scientifically mistaken and politically suicidal.

Key words
cosmopolitanism ■ reflexive modernization ■ social vulnerability ■ sociology of climate change

I

WE HAVE to attack head-on the key question: Why is there no storming of the Bastille because of the environmental destruction threatening mankind, why no Red October of ecology? Why have the most pressing issues of our time – climate change and ecological crisis – not been met with the same enthusiasm, energy, optimism, ideals and forward-looking democratic spirit as the past tragedies of poverty, tyranny and war? This is my question which I shall discuss in eight theses.

First thesis: The discourse on climate politics so far is an expert and elitist discourse in which peoples, societies, citizens, workers, voters and their

interests, views and voices are very much neglected. So, in order to turn climate change politics from its head onto its feet you have to take sociology into account.

For years climate scientists have been presenting compelling reasons for why global warming must finally be met with decisive action. Stern (2007) has added the missing economic argument. The costs of taking measures against global warming today are minor, he argued, in comparison to the costs of doing nothing. In future, doing nothing could rob the global economy of 20 percent of its performance – annually. Thus the new rationale is that what the world invests in climate protection today will be repaid with compound interest in the future. To this Giddens now adds *The Politics of Climate Change* (2009). This robs the opponents of the political counter-argument as well as the counter-argument of costs. Now there are no excuses left!

But is there really no excuse left? Let's be clear about this: the economics and politics of climate change presuppose the *greening of societies*! Without a majority of very different groups of people, who not only talk about but act and vote for the politics of climate change – often against their own personal interest – climate politics is doomed. Only if we find answers to the urgent and somehow tabooed question – where is the everyday support *from below*, the backing of everyday people of different classes, different nations, different political ideologies, different countries, which are affected differently by and perceive climate change differently, supposed to come from? – only then will the politics of climate change no longer be an elitist 'cloud-cuckoo-land'. The 'missing *sociological* link' is *not* the 'should-bes' and 'could-bes'. If only good intentions were enough! The hardcore sociological question is: Where is the support for ecological changes supposed to come from, the support which in many cases would undermine their lifestyles, their consumption habits, their social status and life conditions in what are already truly very uncertain times? Or, to put it in sociological terms: How can a kind of cosmopolitan solidarity across boundaries become real, a greening of societies, which is a prerequisite for the necessarily transnational politics of climate change?

II

Second thesis: There is an important background assumption which shares in the general ignorance concerning environmental issues and, paradoxically, this is incorporated in the specialism of environmental sociology itself – this is the category of 'the environment'. If 'the environment' only includes everything which is not human, not social, then the concept is sociologically empty. If the concept includes human action and society, then it is scientifically mistaken and politically suicidal.

In the search for a sociology of climate change, Max Weber's famous quotation[1] comes to mind: '*bis der letzte Zentner fossilen Brennstoffs verglüht ist*' ('until the last ton of fossil fuel has burnt to ashes'). This is more than merely a metaphor. In Weber's view industrial capitalism generates an

insatiable appetite for natural resources which undermines its own material prerequisites. There is an 'ecological subtext' waiting to be discovered in Weber's writings, a Max Weber for the 21st century and the era of climate change. Or, to put it differently, an early theory of reflexive modernization: the victories of modern capitalism produce, unseen and unwanted, the global crises of climate change, its combined natural-social, unequally distributed catastrophic consequences for all of humanity. This early example of ecological enlightenment can teach us a few things.

It is not true (as many environmental sociologists lament, e.g. Lever-Tracy, 2008) that mainstream sociology ignores escalating climate change. There are indeed inspiring insights and conceptual models for a sociology of climate change to be found in the writings of sociology's classic authors, in Weber, Marx, Dewey, Mead, Durkheim, Simmel and in others. Like Weber, Dewey (1988) spoke of American capitalism's 'waste' and possible 'exhaustion' of natural resources. This demonstrates that the founders of sociology did have an idea of an unintended dynamics of capitalist modernization which changes and threatens its own foundations and its frame of reference: they had an idea of *non*-linear, *dis*continuous change, a change of change, of the 'uncertain times' signifying 'meta-change'. But there is one important shift of focus, of framing, which seems to be lost in 'environmental' sociology. It is not the 'environment' but modern society itself which is being transformed by the unseen consequences of the insatiable appetite for natural resources.

This horizon of a highly ambivalent process of modernization got lost in the post-war generation of classical sociologists. Bell dismissed 'limits to growth' and the 'apocalyptic hysteria of the ecological movement' (1999: 487). He and Talcott Parsons asserted that modern society 'lives more and more *outside nature*', that is, our environments are technologically and scientifically mediated, and so resource problems will be managed by technological innovations and economic trade-offs (see Davis, 1963; Parsons, 1965; Rostow, 1959).

Indeed, the post-war modernization narrative presupposes the separation between 'natural' and 'societal' forces (with the latter taken as what has to be tackled in order to prevent a catastrophe); but climate change actually demonstrates and enforces exactly the opposite, namely an ongoing extension and deepening of combinations, confusions and 'mixtures' of nature and society. It makes a mockery of the premise that society and nature are separate and mutually exclusive. And precisely this paradigmatic shift from 'either–or' to 'both–and' is the leading perspective from which a growing number of social theorists since the 1980s began to work in criticizing and rejecting post-war modernization theorists (Latour, Urry, Adam, Giddens, myself and others).

There is an important implication: using the concept of 'climate politics' too much *castrates* climate politics. It ignores the fact that climate politics is precisely *not* about *climate* but about transforming the basic concepts and institutions of first, industrial, nation-state modernity.

So what is climate change all about? 'It's reflexive modernization, stupid!' (Latour, 2008) or, to put it in the form of a question: 'How to create a greening of modernity?'

III

If we want to locate climate change at the heart of sociology *and* politics, we have to link it internally to the power and conflict dynamics of social inequalities: where does the power of and resistance against climate politics come from?

> *Third thesis*: Social inequalities and climate change are two sides of the same coin. One cannot conceptualize inequalities and power any longer without taking the consequences of climate change into account, and one cannot conceptualize climate change without taking its impacts on social inequalities and power into account.

There is no longer any doubt that climate change globalizes and radicalizes social inequalities inside national contexts and on a global scale; so, too, does climate politics. It separates winners from losers, small groups of supporters from large groups of opponents, and it does so across all divides. In order to research them more thoroughly it is necessary to break with the misleadingly narrow framework, restricted to 'gross social product' or 'income per head', into which the problem of inequality is usually forced. Accordingly, research must concentrate on the fatal conjunction of poverty, social vulnerability, corruption, the accumulation of dangers and the loss of dignity on a global scale. The region worst affected by all of this – apart, that is, from island states such as the Maldives which will disappear under the waves – is the Sahel zone south of the Sahara. In the Sahel the poorest of the poor live on the edge of the abyss and climate change threatens to push them – who are the least responsible for it – over the edge.

The new sociology of social inequality can no longer detach itself from the globalization of social *equality*. Even if inequalities are not growing, the expectations of equality are increasing and, in the process, are de-legitimizing and destabilizing the system of national-global inequalities. 'Developing nations' are becoming more westernized and reflect the West back to itself, so that the 'equality' of environmental destruction leads to the self-destruction of civilization. The overlap, one might also say, the collision of growing global expectations of equality (human rights) and growing global and national inequalities, on the one hand, namely with the radically unequal consequences of climate change and the consumption of resources, on the other, could soon sweep away this whole set of premises of a nationally confined inequality, just as Hurricane Katrina swept away the houses of the poor in New Orleans.

The new sociology of social inequality can no longer rely on the premise that national and international arenas are distinct. The equation of social with national inequality, which methodological nationalism adopts, has become a source of error par excellence.

And the founding premise of sociology, namely the distinction between social and natural inequality, has become untenable. Life situations and life chances, previously assessed within the horizon of an inequality confined to the nation-state, are being transformed into *survival situations* or *survival chances* in world risk society. The category of vulnerability becomes central here. Whereas some countries or groups are able to some degree to absorb the consequences of tornados, floods and so on, others, the non-privileged on the scale of social vulnerability, experience the collapse of societal order and the escalation of violence (Beck, 2009: ch. 10).

Anyone who thinks these three components in conjunction encounters a paradox: the more norms of equality are acknowledged globally, the more insoluble the climate problem becomes and the more devastating the social-ecological inequalities. Not a cheerful prospect! But it is precisely this incorruptible realism open to the world which is designated by my concept of the 'cosmopolitan vision'. It's not a matter of any official rhetoric of world fraternity, but of sharpening perceptions in everyday life, in politics and in scholarship, for the unbounded explosive force of social inequality in the age of climate change.

Yet all of that is only half the truth.

IV

> *Fourth thesis*: Climate change exacerbates existing inequalities between the poor and the rich, between the centre and the periphery – but simultaneously dissolves them. The greater the planetary threat, the less the possibility that even the wealthiest and most powerful will avoid it. Climate change is both hierarchical and democratic. Climate change is pure ambivalence: it also releases a 'cosmopolitan imperative': cooperate or fail! This could be translated, transcreated in reinventing green politics.

The current, seductive naïve catastrophic realism is mistaken. Climate risks are not identical with climate catastrophes. Climate risks are the anticipation in the present of future catastrophes in order to prevent them. This 'present future' of climate risks is real; the 'future future' of climate catastrophes, on the other hand, is (still) unreal. Yet even the *anticipation* of climate change sets a fundamental transformation in motion in the here and now. Ever since it has ceased to be disputed that the ongoing climate change is man-made and has catastrophic consequences for nature and society, the cards in society and politics have been dealt anew – worldwide. That's why climate change by no means leads directly and inevitably to apocalypse; it also affords the opportunity of overcoming the nation-state narrowness of politics and of developing a cosmopolitan realpolitik in the national interest. Climate change is pure ambivalence.

To the extent that a world public becomes aware of the fact that the nation-state system is undermined by global risks (climate change, global economic crises, terrorism), which bind underdeveloped and developed nations to one another, then something historically new can emerge, namely

a cosmopolitan vision in which people see themselves both as part of an endangered world and as part of their local histories and survival situations.

Accordingly, climate change – like ancient cosmopolitanism (Stoicism), the *ius cosmopolitica* of the Enlightenment (Kant) or crimes against humanity (Hannah Arendt, Karl Jaspers) – releases a '*cosmopolitan momentum*'. Global risks entail being confronted with the global other. They tear down national borders and mix the local with the foreign, not as a consequence of migration, but rather as a consequence of 'interconnectedness' (David Held) and risks. Everyday life becomes cosmopolitan: people have to conduct and understand their lives in an exchange with others and no longer exclusively in an interaction with their own kind.

V

Nevertheless, talking about climate change is normally depressing. It seems necessarily to concern the dark side of a 'negatively globalized planet' and 'there cannot be local solutions to globally originated and globally invigorated problems' (Bauman, 2007: 25ff). Thus the dominant mood and reaction of millions of well-meaning green souls is to flagellate themselves for their former aspiration to dominate nature, to repent for their past hubris, to look for ways to defuse the 'bomb of overpopulation' (as if newborn babies could ever be a 'weapon of mass-destruction'), and to swear from now on to leave as invisible a footprint as possible under their feet.

In order to overcome this negativity and to unlock the power resources and strategies of counter-action we must concentrate on the institutionalized 'relations of definition'.

> *Fifth thesis*: Regulation begins much earlier and deeper with the question: how to overcome organized irresponsibility, that is, with the question of accountability, compensation and proof. What were for Marx 'relations of production' in capitalist society are, for risk society, 'relations of definition'. Both concern relations of domination. Among the relations of definition are the rules, institutions and capabilities which specify how risks are to be identified in particular contexts (for example, within nation-states, but also in relations between them). They form the legal, epistemological and cultural power matrix in which risk politics is organized.

Redesigning regulation, thus changing relations of definition power, can be explored through the following clusters of questions (and those hold for climate change as well as for financial regulation). Who determines the hazardousness of products, dangers and risks? Where does the responsibility lie? With those who produce the risks, with those who benefit from them or with those who are the victims of risk management? Who lays down the causal norms which decide when a cause–effect relation is to be recognized? What counts as 'proof' in a world where knowledge and non-knowledge of risks are inextricably fused and all knowledge is contested and probabilistic?

Who is to decide on compensation for those who are afflicted – within one nation-state or between them? How does a new contract between the

managers of risk and the victims of risk in world risk society become possible? And what can the West learn from the postcolonial world about a precautionary way of life and work?

Keeping these questions in mind, it becomes clear that risk societies, in virtue of the historical logic of their national and international legal systems and scientific norms are prisoners of a repertoire of behaviours which completely bypasses the globality of ecological crises. Thus these societies find themselves confronted with the institutionalized contradiction according to which threats and catastrophes, at the very historical moment when they are becoming more dangerous, more present in the mass media and hence more mundane, increasingly escape established concepts, causal norms, assignments of burdens of proof and ascriptions of accountability. Climate change politics often concentrates on the post-hoc consequences and ignores the conditions and causes which produce and reproduce the climatic (and other) problems as 'unseen side effects'.

VI

> *Sixth thesis*: The political explosiveness of global risks is largely a function of their (re-)presentation in the mass media. When staged in the media, global risks can become 'cosmopolitan events'. The presentation and visualization of manufactured risk makes the invisible visible. It creates simultaneity, shared involvement and shared suffering, and thereby creates the relevance for a global public. Thus cosmopolitan events are highly mediatized, highly selective, highly variable, highly symbolic local and global, public and private, material and communicative, reflexive experiences and blows of fate.

To understand this, we have to draw upon the picture of 'Mediapolis' so minutely and sensitively painted by Silverstone (2006) and the picture sketched much earlier by Dewey (1946). There Dewey defends the thesis that it is not actions but their *consequences* which lie at the heart of politics. Although he was not thinking of global warming, BSE or terrorist attacks, his theory can be applied perfectly to world risk society. A global public discourse does *not* arise out of a *consensus* on decisions, but rather out of *disagreement* over the *consequences* of decisions. Modern risk crises are constructed out of just such controversies over consequences. Although some insist on seeing an overreaction to risk, risk conflicts do indeed have an enlightening function. They destabilize the existing order but can also be seen as a vital step towards the construction of new institutions. Global risk has the power to confuse the mechanisms of organized irresponsibility and even to open them up for political action.

This view of 'enforced enlightenment' and 'cosmopolitan realism' opens up the possibility that the 'manufactured uncertainties' and 'manufactured insecurities' produced by world risk society prompt transnational reflexivity, global cooperation, coordinated responses against the background of 'cosmopolitan communities of risk', so the same processes may also prompt much else besides. My emphasis on *staging* follows from the

fact that my central concept is not 'crisis' but 'new global risk'. Risks are, essentially, man-made, incalculable, uninsurable threats and catastrophes which are *anticipated* but which often remain invisible and therefore depend on how they become defined and contested in 'knowledge'. As a result their 'reality' can be dramatized or minimized, transformed or simply denied, according to the norms which decide what is known and what is not. They are, to repeat myself, products of struggles and conflicts over definitions within the context of specific relations of definitional power and the (in varying degrees successful) results of staging. If this is the core understanding of risk, then this means that we must attach major significance to media staging and acknowledge the potential political explosiveness of the media.

How does this correspond to empirical facts? As Cottle (2009) argues, the release in early 2007 of the latest International Panel on Climate Change report proved to be a transformative moment in the news career of climate change (IPCC, 2007). At first climate change featured relatively infrequently in scientifically framed news reports, then it was contested by a small group of news-privileged climate change sceptics, and finally it came of age as a widely recognized 'global risk' demanding responses from all the world's nations. If IPCC predictions and those of more recent scientific modelling come to pass over the next couple of decades, then climate change may yet prove to be the most powerful of forces summoning a civilizational community of fate into existence.

The Western news media's spectacular visualization of climate change, presenting dramatic and symbolic scenes collected from around the world, has undoubtedly helped to establish the latter's status as a widely recognized global challenge and serves to illuminate a third-generational modernity staged as global spectacle. Here the news media do not only function in terms of a global focusing of events; rather, the news media adopt a more performative stand, actively enacting certain issues as 'global risks'. Images which function in a more indexical sense to stand in for global processes of climate change now regularly feature across the news landscape. And here some sections of the news media have sought to champion climate change awareness, often through visually arresting images which aim to register the full force and threat produced by global warming around the world. In images such as these, the abstract science of climate change is rendered culturally meaningful and politically consequential; geographically remote spaces become literally perceptible, 'knowable' places of possible concern and action. This performative use of visual environmental rhetoric is not confined to selected newspapers; interestingly enough, it has become mainstream. In this way the threat and reality of global climate change has been 'brought home', especially in the West, as possibly 'the' global risk of the age.

On the other hand, the continuing pull of the national within the world's news formations and discourses cannot be underestimated. This is, of course, true in the case of wars. Wars continue to be reported through

spectacles tinted by national interests. However, as climate change moves into a new phase of national and international contention, countries, corporations and citizens are also negotiating their respective roles and responsibilities, whether in respect of national policies of mitigation and adoption, or through governmental support of developing countries confronting the worst effects of global warming. Here, too, actions and reactions are often reported in and through national news prisms and frames of reference.

However, the narrative of global risk is misinterpreted as a narrative of the Western 'emergency imaginary' (Calhoun, 2004). It is *not* a 'singing into the apocalypse', and it is *not* simply a 'wake-up call to reality'. Rather it is about expectation and anticipation, it is about a narrative to *dream differently*. 'Emancipation' is the key word. Either the ecological concern manages to be at least as powerful as this hunger for modernization or it is condemned to repeated failure.

VII

> *Seventh thesis*: Paradoxically, it is the global ecological risks themselves which have triggered the death of 'environmental' politics. The '*Gretchenfrage*', the key question which green politics confronts is, to paraphrase Goethe: '*Wie hältst du es mit der Moderne*'? What is your stance on modernity and economic growth? Does modernity stand for sin against nature? Or does it stand for the courage to invent and pioneer an alternative modernity? An alternative modernity will have to include a new vision of prosperity which will not be the economic growth held by those worshipping at the altar of the market. It will define wealth not in gross economic terms but as overall 'well-being'.

Wealth will be redefined as that which provides us with the freedom to become unique individuals, the freedom to live together with others being equal and different. It will embrace our creativity and power to invent new institutions, new ways of production, new ways of consumption, both sensitive to globalization of waste. And it stands for a cosmopolitan vision for developing countries: any successful effort to stabilize the climate will destroy the distinction between environmental protection, economic development and global equity.

China, India, Brazil and African societies will not agree to any international approach that constrains the economic aspirations of their people – nor should they. The reflexive modernization approach starts with the intersection of prosperity and ecological concern and puts it into a cosmopolitan vision: whereas post-war prosperity in the Western world created the conditions for ecological concern, ecological concern today must create the conditions for prosperity in the developing world. Thus a cosmopolitan vision of ecology will turn the environmental movement's conditional support for economic development on its head: developing economies will be sustainable precisely to the extent that the West invests in their development and adopts for itself a new definition of wealth and growth in encounter with the global other.

If you see an opposition between modernity and nature, then you see the planet too fragile to support the hopes and dreams for a better world. And then you will have to envision and enforce a kind of international caste system in which the poor of the developing world are consigned to (energy) poverty in perpetuity. The politics of limits will be 'anti' – anti-immigration, anti-globalization, anti-modern, anti-cosmopolitan and anti-growth. It will combine Malthusian environmentalism with Hobbesian conservatism.

In the name of indisputable facts portraying a bleak future for humanity, green politics has succeeded in de-politicizing political passions to the point of leaving citizens nothing but gloomy ascetism, a terror of violating nature and an indifference towards the modernization of modernity. Everything happens as if green politics has *frozen* politics into a kind of immobility.

The category of 'the environment' – along with the ancient story of humanity's fall from nature – is (I repeat) politically suicidal. Through their stories, institutions and policies, many (though not all) environmentalists constantly reinforce this sense that nature is something separate from, and something victimized by, human beings. This paradigm defines ecological problems as inevitable consequences of human violations of nature. Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger ask us to reflect on the verbs associated with environmentalism: 'stop', 'restrict', 'reverse', 'prevent', 're-regulate' and 'constrain'.

> All of them direct our thinking to preventing the bad, not creating the good. . . . To describe the challenges of climate change as problems of pollution is a mistake. Global warming is as different from smog in Los Angeles as nuclear war is from gang violence. . . . [Global warming] is better understood as a problem of *evolution*, or revolution, not pollution. (2007: 7ff)

In the technocratic iron cage of environmental politics carbon emissions are becoming the measure of all things. How much carbon does an electric as opposed to a manual toothbrush produce (94.5g vs. 0g)? How much does an electrical as opposed to a mechanical alarm clock produce (22.26g vs. 0g)? In the Christian conception of salvation, milk and honey flow in paradise; but on earth milk is supposed to lead straight to environmental death. The 'climate killer' cow produces a couple of hundred litres of methane gas per day, the equivalent of almost a kilogram of carbon per litre of milk. From now on, even divorce is answerable not only before God but also before the environment. Why? Married households are more ecologically sound than single households.

Nordhaus and Shellenberger are clearly focusing on the main blocking point: as a matter of realism green politics is presented as a question of *learning our limits*. However – and this is the paradox – it is this very notion of limits that has limited or even paralysed green politics. What the authors want is to 'break through' the limits, as Latour (2008) argues.

The history of modernization is full of paradoxes; I have reviewed many of them in my work. The most important, however, is the one which opens up the horizon for a renewal of politics in the face of global risks: *industrial modernity has become the victim of its own success*. It has become involuntarily open to fundamental critique and multiple futures. Thus Western modernity's belief in linear progression contradicts the ongoing self-disenchantment of Western modernity. Contrary to the social theories of Durkheim and Weber, Horkheimer and Adorno, Parsons and Foucault, I maintain that, in the light of climate change, the apparently independent and autonomous system of industrial modernization has begun a process of self-dissolution and self-transformation. This radical turn marks the current phase in which modernization is becoming reflexive, which means: we have to open up to global dialogues and conflicts about redefining modernity. But this, of course, is anything but easy. It has to include multiple extra-European voices, experiences and expectations concerning the futures of modernity.

VIII

> *Eighth and final thesis*: Cosmopolitanism is not only an urgent moral and political issue. Cosmopolitanism is a power multiplier. Those who think exclusively in national terms are the losers. Only those who learn to see the world through cosmopolitan eyes will be able to avoid the decline on the one hand, and, on the other, to discover, try out and acquire the new options and opportunities for power which could make a difference. The sense of eman-cipation and power that arises from overcoming national barriers is what could – potentially – awaken enthusiasm for a greening of modernity.

Cosmopolitan players therefore hold a few trump cards over their merely national opponents. Thus they can demonstrate just who are the experienced cosmopolitan 'lions' and who the national 'foxes'. The cosmopolitan turn opens up the transnational arena of political action. This is at least one way in which realistic answers can be found to the climate problem and other matters of global concern to people on a daily basis. Even those who have been steamrollered by modernity need a cosmopolitan vision in order to transform their vulnerability, step by step, into strength.

Let me conclude by employing a metaphor for this – I confess – roman-ticism. No doubt humanity could succumb to the error of the caterpillar. This caterpillar of mankind is in the process of emerging from its cocoon, but it laments the latter's disappearance because as yet it does not suspect the existence of the butterfly it is becoming. On the other hand, it could also happen that we trust too much in hope, as expressed by the German poet Hölderlin, that what saves us grows with the dangers we face. Then the impetus to make the effort necessary to become a butterfly would be dissipated.

The question whether sociology itself is at the point of emerging from its cocoon, whether it is a caterpillar on its way to becoming a butterfly, is one I do not yet dare to answer.

Notes

This article is based on a public lecture given at the LSE in February 2009.

1. See Weber (2002: 123ff, 245f, quoted in Antonio, 2008).

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