

“Earth in Crisis?¹: A Forward-Looking Agenda for Research on the Cultural Causes and Consequences of Climate Change 2010-2020 and Beyond”

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Climate change – most especially global warming and its consequences – is arguably the lynchpin of several intertwined crises facing the world in 2010: global economic insecurity, the human and economic costs of wars in a number of locations, and the pressing poverty and inequality that pervade both the Rich World (North America, Europe, Japan, and Australia/New Zealand) and what we might call the Majority World. That the whole planet is in the midst of a slow-motion ecological catastrophe can be seen in the writings and public interventions of thinkers ranging from mainstream environmentalists such as James Gustave Speth,² leading eco-socialists, for example, John Bellamy Foster,³ influential public figures including Al Gore,⁴ and public intellectuals like environmentalist icon Bill McKibben.⁵ We read about this upheaval every day in the news and on the Web – an infinite stream of reports coming in from the fields of investigative journalism, academic research, scientific panels, policy reports, and spilling over into literature, music, and art. Every ocean, lake, stream, forest, mountain, desert, species, and existing or potential human or animal habitat on earth is already seen as threatened or will likely be soon.

Against critics who dismiss this language of crisis as apocalyptic or millennial, and thus irrational, or, from a different point of view, our characterization of it as “slow motion” (i.e.

unfolding over a generation or more) as not sufficiently alarmist, consider these measured words of the Union of Concerned Scientists' 1992 "World Scientists' Warning to Humanity," endorsed by 1,575 top-ranking members: "Human beings and the natural world are on a collision course. Human activities inflict harsh and often irreversible damage on the environment and on critical resources. If not checked, many of our current practices put at risk the future we wish for human society and the plant and animal kingdom, and may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know. Fundamental changes are urgent if we are to avoid the collision our present course will bring."⁶

Eighteen years after this anxious appeal no fundamental social or economic changes have been registered, at least not changes of the magnitude necessary – namely that of an ecological revolution similar in size and scope to the so-called industrial and agricultural revolutions. Perhaps the recent increase in public and political attention to the possibilities of alternative fuels may suggest that a structural adjustment is underway, but the oil-driven rise of China, India, Brazil, and elsewhere across the global south puts a check on even this modicum of optimism; it signals rather the built-in momentum of global warming, collapsing fisheries, deforestation, and species decline. It seems in other words to confirm the Union of Concerned Scientists' worst fears. The urban life world is also in trouble, as Mike Davis plainly argues in his aptly titled *Planet of Slums* (2006).⁷ In the final analysis, modern oil-driven industrial capitalism is structured for potentially limitless growth by global market competition, and that puts it increasingly at odds with both planetary ecological sustainability *and* social justice, as does expansion of the chemical, nuclear, mining, forestry, and corporate agricultural industries, in spite of their now nearly universal self-identification as advocates of green "sustainability." In the 21st century, one great challenge for the human, behavioral, and economic sciences will be to

respond to this changing planet by seeking better explanations of the underlying cultural causes and consequences of these changes.

In our view, the National Science Foundation should fund the investigation of these changes in a two-pronged program.

First on the agenda should be support for research aimed at understanding the changing *cultural/institutional engines of economic accumulation* in general, the results of which are twofold: on the one hand, an ever increasing quantity of wealth, and on the other, the attendant negative social and environmental externalities, by which we mean unpaid social and environmental costs that are the exact correlate of this wealth production.

These culturally generated externalities are the causes of a major cultural response, the consequences of which we expect to be great – climate change activism, in which people everywhere are engaging with climate change by banding together in new social movements and new social forum-style politics to demand that corporations, nations, and international governing agencies like the UN, World Bank, and IMF address the problem now.

The second prong of the research program we suggest is therefore aimed at documenting and understanding this civil society response – i.e., the social movements and forum politics of climate change activism.

Modern social imaginaries⁸ are cultural engines of economic accumulation

The modern, western form of free enterprise is a driving force behind the globalizing process of privatization by which the most deleterious effects of world economic expansion register in the interlinked social (communities of labor) and ecological (communities of nature) domains. But economic institutions are nested together in society with the relatively autonomous institutions of rights-based free speech public spheres and democratic–republican polities (the

state) – a three-fold institutional nexus that social scientists and theorists have identified as the cultural dynamo of modernity, and which we believe should be the focus of renewed research. Only an integrated analysis of these crucial institutional engines of modernization will be able to adequately address the linkage of accumulation (wealth) and its externalities (the unpaid social and environmental costs of accumulation),⁹ marked by the proliferation of global slums and poverty and the frightening specter of global warming.

A major challenge for holistic research of this kind is thrown up by the barriers of disciplinary traditions, and especially the artificial divisions between the disciplines themselves. The program we propose is more than interdisciplinary – it is pan-disciplinary, and must be so because it begins from the cultural sociological standpoint of *Earth in Crisis*, and orients everything toward determining *how and why* this is the case, rather than devolving into intra-disciplinary debates, however interesting and relevant those may be to economists, sociologists, or political scientists at a lower level of strictly disciplinary analysis. Environmental scientists need to be working with sociologists, mediologists, anthropologists, historians, economists, political scientists, cultural studies scholars, and educational theorists to get at the reasons why carbon-fueled culture in many places, each with its own stamp, offers such stiff resistance to reform, and how climate activism has managed to achieve the global profile it has while still ultimately falling short of achieving its daunting goal of an adequate global response to climate change.

Social movements for climate change as political cultures of opposition and resistance

The second dimension of the program we recommend focuses on the various social movements that address the negative social and environmental externalities of globalization. Of these, studying climate change activism is the most important, because of its implications for

looming interrelated problems of food security, water supplies, resource wars, economic instability, immigration, health epidemics, and deteriorating governance, both national and global, among a whole host of others.

The entire spectrum of responses to climate change is a natural area for deep interdisciplinary research collaborations between natural and social scientists. Some scholars will want to focus on the efforts of private interests to protect their fortunes, for example the sustained campaign by energy corporations to undermine climate science, while others will study the negotiation of a comprehensive climate treaty – perhaps humanity’s most pressing future need, from the halting process started at Kyoto in 1997 to the virtually stalled outcome of the recent summit in Copenhagen in December 2009 (which one of us – John Foran – attended). The NSF should keep its resources trained on these contentious and very consequential public sphere conflicts and political negotiations as they continue to develop over the coming decades.

Our proposal therefore focuses on the demand for a just, binding, and scientifically grounded global climate agreement,¹⁰ or set of agreements, that will in some measure be the fruit of social movements on the global, regional, national, state/provincial, and local levels. These movements interact with governmental negotiation processes and climate change science in important ways that research needs to continuously document and analyze. At present, there are hundreds of social movements and NGOs, large and small, playing important roles in this process and collectively promising to transform the global politics of climate change in ways that research needs to keep track of and appraise. Some of the most visible of these are the Global Climate Action Network (<http://www.climatenetwork.org/>), 350.org (<http://www.350.org/>), Friends of the Earth International (<http://www.foei.org/>), the world’s Green parties (<http://www.greens.org/>), and the World Social Forum (<http://www.forumsocialmundial.org/>).

Many of these groups and their members were active in Copenhagen – at the huge marches and demonstrations in the streets, but also inside the Bella Center where non-governmental organizations were present as official delegates, and at the impressive ten-day alternative Klimaforum09¹¹ with its full schedule of workshops and plenary speakers that generated analyses of substantial sophistication and real promise.

We believe that social scientists should study the origins (social, cultural, political), developmental trajectory, animating visions, tactics and strategies, growth or decline, and possible futures of these movements. To do this, we need to mobilize the best social science tools we have and use them to fashion powerful new conceptual frameworks. For example, Foran's perspective on political cultures of opposition and resistance studies how people make political sense of the worlds that constrict them.¹² The origins of such political cultures lie in the *experiences* of people, in the grievances they endure and the emotional and political responses they fashion using every available cultural and historical tool they possess. For example, when collective *discourses* like environmentalism or feminism are available in the form of consciously articulated ideologies, would-be social actors take them up and put them to work locally, and in this way they tend to diffuse through activist groups into local settings and circulate between social movements. Popular *idioms*¹³ or folk understandings – what might be called 'rich stories'¹⁴ – are also available for use, providing new social actors as well as seasoned activists with locally understood, everyday terms of fairness, justice, or autonomy. When these take hold in a large enough part of society, often through the work of some kind of radical/progressive *organization or network*, a social movement can gain enough committed followers to take decisive action. The forging of a strong and vibrant political culture of opposition is thus a collective accomplishment, carried through by the actions of many people.

Political cultures of opposition and resistance exhibit further characteristics of interest:

In any given society, there usually exist multiple political cultures of opposition, for people do not necessarily share the same experiences, speak the same idioms, or respond to the same formal ideologies. Effective social movements find ways of bridging such differences through the skillful creation of a common goal – for example, when First Peoples, labor activists, and environmentalists agree that “the corporations must be held responsible,” that voters must “throw them [the politicians] all out,” or that “the foreign powers must leave.” When this happens, a movement’s chances of success are considerably increased.¹⁵ There is an extremely moving video interview of a young participant at Copenhagen that eloquently shows some of the key elements of what we mean.¹⁶ We recommend that readers listen to it with care: it is the voice of climate activism for the 20-teens, and it illustrates how emotions, discourses, idioms, and networks can fold together in the making of a powerful emergent political culture of climate change resistance.

Conclusion

We feel it is time to lay the groundwork for a large new research project on global climate struggles as they unfold. Bringing together and understanding the interactions among grassroots social movements from below, key non-governmental organizations, and nation-state policymakers and leaders could result in a far more hopeful outcome to the question of an “Earth in Crisis.” Studying the cultural causes of climate change and the institutional forces behind resistance to future-oriented climate reform are crucial starting points for this research, which could with NSF guidance contribute much to our understanding of political activism, and to the climate change movements themselves, in the process thereby perhaps contributing to world economic, social, and ecological sustainability. Established science tells us that global warming

is here – but not why society is so resistant to positive change. The program we propose seeks first of all to sharpen our understanding of the institutional logic and durability of carbon-fueled industrial culture, and through this to improve the chances that climate change activism and movements will succeed in calling up a political constituency strong enough to force the necessary change toward sustainable economic, social, and political practices. Surely this must be counted as one of the most important research agendas for the coming decade or more.

Key References

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- Nagel, Joane, Thomas Dietz, and Jeffrey Broadbent. 2010. *Workshop on Sociological Perspectives on Global Climate Change*. Washington, DC: National Science Foundation and American Sociological Foundation.
- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). 2007. *Climate Change 2007: The Physical Science Basis*. Edited by Susan Solomon, Dahe Qin, Martin Manning, Melinda Marquis et al. New York: Cambridge University Press.

1. We have taken part of our title from that of a course offered by the Open University in the U.K.: “Earth in crisis: environmental policy in an international context.” The scope of this course, with which John Foran had an association, can be seen at <http://www3.open.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/course/du311.htm> and at <http://www.open.ac.uk/courses/tasters/du311/>.

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2. See James Gustave Speth, *The Bridge at the Edge of the World: Capitalism, The Environment, and Crossing from Crisis to Sustainability* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

3. John Bellamy Foster, *The Ecological Revolution: Making Peace with the Planet* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2009).

4. Al Gore, *An Inconvenient Truth: The Planetary Emergency of Global Warming and What We Can Do About It* (Emmaus, PA: Rodale Books, 2006), and *An Inconvenient Truth* (Paramount, 2006).
5. Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 1996), and *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet* (New York: Times Books, 2010).
6. Union of Concerned Scientists, “1992 World Scientists’ Warning to Humanity,” accessed at <http://www.ucsusa.org/about/1992-world-scientists.html>
7. Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2006).
8. Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).
9. For an example of such theoretical and empirical work, see Richard Widick, *Trouble in the Forest: California’s Redwood Timber Wars* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), and “What is Driving our Modern Social Imaginaries? Turning to Cultural and Environmental Sociology for Answers,” *Perspectives: Newsletter of the ASA Theory Section* 31 (2) (2009).
10. The science tells us that even the widely accepted goal of limiting the rise in global temperature to 2 degrees Celsius by 2080 has only a 50 percent chance of averting irreversible climate change and the attendant floods, droughts, storms, and sea rise that will kill, displace, or impoverish millions of people world-wide.
11. See the thoughtful report at <http://09.klimaforum.org/>
12. The concept is most fully developed in Jean-Pierre Reed and John Foran, “Political Cultures of Opposition: Exploring Idioms, Ideologies, and Revolutionary Agency in the Case of Nicaragua,” *Critical Sociology* 28 (3) (October 2002): 335-370, and in Foran’s current work, including “Taking Power or Re-Making Power? Observations on the New Political Cultures of Opposition in the Americas” (under review), and “From Critical Globalization Studies and Public Sociology to Global Crisis Studies and Global Justice Work: A Manifesto for Radical Social Change,” forthcoming in *New Global Studies* (October 2010).
13. The now classic 1985 debate between historian William Sewell and sociologist Theda Skocpol brought out the usefulness of both formal ideologies and popular cultural idioms for the understanding of the ways in which people think and feel politically: Theda Skocpol, “Cultural Idioms and Political Ideologies in the Revolutionary Reconstruction of State Power: A Rejoinder to Sewell,” *Journal of Modern History* 57 (1) (1985): 86-96.
14. On the significance of “stories,” or cross-generational political imaginaries, see Eric Selbin, *Revolution, Rebellion, Resistance: The Power of Story* (London: Zed Press, 2010).
15. This is shown for the major revolutions of the twentieth century in John Foran, *Taking Power: On the Origins of Revolutions in the Third World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University

Press, 2005, and he is trying to demonstrate it again in *Taking Power or (re)Making Power: Movements for Radical Social Change and Global Justice* (book in progress).

16. This powerful speech can be viewed and heard at <http://yesmagazine.org/planet/were-not-done-yet>.