

Giddens and the Developing Nations Examine Global Warming

The Politics of Climate Change, by Anthony Giddens . Malden, MA: Polity, 2009. 264pp. \$69.95 paper. ISBN: 9780745646923.

Evaluating Climate Change and Development, edited by Rob D. van den Berg, Osvaldo Feinstein . New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2009. 438pp. \$49.95 cloth. ISBN: 9781412810432.

Charles Perrow

Yale University

charles.perrow@yale.edu

Books on climate change are coming out at an increasing rate, and in my mind we cannot get enough of them. I see climate change as the problem that trumps all others for the next few decades. Indeed, predicted warming increases will exacerbate most of our other major problems such as HIV/AIDS, pandemics, malnutrition, income inequality within and between nations, gender inequality and so on. So we should be glad to see an eminent sociologist, Anthony Giddens, authoring a book on global warming; sociologists have neglected the topic. As the first by a major sociological theorist, Bill Clinton's blurb correctly calls it a "landmark study."

Giddens is quite alarmed, and has written an engaging, readable primer on the problem with much fascinating detail about Britain and Europe that it is hard to find elsewhere. He is provocative, and his chapter on the geopolitics of climate change is Giddens at his penetrating best. But, being Giddens, the book is a mixture of the facile and the penetrating, is hedging rather than taking tough stances, does not consider some important issues, and has some serious inconsistencies.

An important inconsistency is evidenced on the first page. Greenhouse gas emissions that threaten us are "produced by modern industry," but in the next sentence he says that the source of the dangers is the vast majority of humanity who are "doing a little, if anything at all, to alter their daily habits." Since 20 percent of humanity have contributed 63 percent of emissions it is clearly not the "vast majority" that should change their ways but the rich minority. I would argue that it is not our daily habits that are responsible for the mammoth externality of industry freely dumping tons of carbon into the air. He notes that while many people think that we should mobilize on a level comparable to fighting a war, "there are no enemies to identify and confront" (p. 2). I don't think a key enemy, industry, has quite disappeared with all its greenwashing (Perrow forthcoming

2010).

The interests of industry are sometimes mentioned in the book, but not as frequently as individual choices, or what he calls, modestly, “Giddens’s paradox.” Hardly qualifying as a paradox, it says that when the dangers are not immediate and apparent “many will sit on their hands and do nothing of a concrete nature about them” (p. 3). Curiously, he nevertheless faults the approach of those who would educate and arouse the public through focus groups or small community groups. “I am quite hostile to such endeavors . . .” (p. 106) and cites Giddens’ “paradox” as the reason.

It is true that most citizens do not research industry’s contribution and do something concrete about it, but that is what we have governments for—regulating the commons. Ban smoking in public places, for example, or regulate toxic emissions. The dangers of many forms of pollution are not immediate or apparent, but we pay salaries to government officials and research agencies to foresee and forestall them. Business and industry succeed in shaping the daily habits that he blames. There are “enemies to identify and confront,” and that is government’s duty.

Of course the public must be mobilized to overcome the resistance of polluting industries to legislative action. In the United States they resist by lobbying Congress, and Congress is not likely to act unless there is a well-informed and aroused public that pressures them. Since reducing emissions will be both inconvenient and costly to the public, a great deal of education is needed about a complicated and distant threat that will be visited on distant places first. Science is doing its best to get the information out, and it seems to have worked to some degree with Democrats in the United States, but not with Republicans. A large campaign by coal and oil companies to resist regulating harmful emissions began in the mid-1990s when, according to a poll, the difference between Democrats and Republicans as to whether global warming (GW) was occurring, was only four percent. By 2008 it was 34 percent, and concern among Republicans with GW actually declined over the last decade and their belief that it was being exaggerated rose from 37 to 59 percent (Jacques, Dunlap and Freeman 2008; McCright and Dunlap 2003).

Giddens is apparently unaware of this research, and it is not surprising for he staunchly maintains his long-held position that big issues are not left-right issues. His best evidence that GW is not a left-right issue is the bi-partisan support that two important climate change bills have had in the British Parliament. But on the other hand, he notes that it is the left-leaning European countries that have done the most, so the division is strong in Europe, and certainly in the United States.

Throughout the book he jabs at, but avoids going to the mat with, big business

and conservative politicians. After noting their opposition to climate change initiatives, on the next page we learn that industry lobbies are “quite frequently divided” about climate legislation, and thus “one should guard against the easy demonizing of the industry lobbies, and of big business more generally that pervades much of the environmental literature” (p. 120). (What division exists is between the “indoor” firms such as electronics and consumer goods, along with the gas industry, and “outdoor” firms such as coal, oil, autos and heavy industry. Neither group favors, as Giddens does, a straightforward tax on carbon.) Optimistically, he believes that “the power of business [can] become deployed to climate change objectives . . . even in the short term as long as governments act together with enlightened corporate leaders” (p. 93).

The green movement receives more scorn than business and industry. It is blamed for defining themselves “in opposition to orthodox politics” when we need integration; just what is valuable and not valuable in their philosophies “has to be sorted out” (p. 6). The green movement, he says, is largely responsible for the popularity of the “precautionary principle,” which he describes as incoherent (p. 53), and he jibes that it is dismissed by environmental economists “as so much mumbo jumbo” (p. 49). He is also critical of the notion of “sustainable development,” saying that the concept is “something of an oxymoron” (p. 68) thus writing off the possibilities of development that is nearly emission-free, while elsewhere praising renewables. [I am indebted to him for his brief mention of MacDonald’s impressive book, *Green, Inc.* (2008), which proves to be an implicit structural analysis of what sociologists call “goal displacement” in the huge NGOs concerned with conservation and pollution.] He cheers on the “ecological modernization” school (green technologies and life-style changes) without noting its critical limitations (York and Mancus 2009; York and Rosa 2003). In keeping with that message he has a powerful section on “overdevelopment,” wherein the GDP is soaring but broad measures of social welfare such as the Genuine Progress Indicator are flat or declining since 1975 (p. 67).

However, he says no approach is going to work that is based mainly on deprivations, e.g. “taking fewer baths.” Instead, we must create a positive model of a low-carbon future (gratuitously adding that it won’t be a green vision). Characteristically, he recommends a mixture of the idealistic and the hardheaded. In this vein he proposes many grand and reassuring concepts to address the issues. One is that of an “ensuring state.” This is more than an enabling state; it must ensure results. “Political convergence” is when upgrading the urban environment also reduces emissions; “economic convergence” occurs when innovations to reduce emissions are also profitable for the innovator. With “energy security” you get both political and economic convergence. The “development imperative” means that the poor nations can be free to pollute until they are developed.

In Chapter Four these generalities and his optimism collide with his valuable on-the-ground account of the United Kingdom's attempt to cope with GW. He lays out the increasingly progressive legislative acts, supported by both parties, including two major acts dealing with climate change in energy security, legislation that it is hard to imagine ever passing in the United States. Then he details the obstacles to following through on this legislation, and the failure of previous legislation to have much of an impact. Emissions in the United Kingdom have declined somewhat primarily because it shifted from coal to natural gas in energy production, ironically a legacy of Margaret Thatcher whose privatization of energy reduced the power of coal miners, making the shift to gas easier. Among the problems he sees is that both of the government acts are about scenarios to avoid but are empty of enabling solutions. Solutions will be largely in the hands of a weak committee that has only had an advisory role. The history of taxes upon fuels is not encouraging since they have become detached from environmental goals and become just another tax with the income used for other purposes. He shows that it will be hard for government to direct new and existing taxes towards positive actions. The stated objectives of the two acts conflict with government policies that will result in the expansion of Heathrow airport and the doubling of projected flights, and numerous other failures, such as the failure to electrify the railway network, to prevent rising carbon and fuel prices from hurting the poor, the failure to hold power companies to their obligations regarding renewable energy, possible support for a huge new coal plant, and failure to address the adaptation challenges of frequent heavy flooding. It is a sobering and trenchant analysis: Giddens at his best.

Since it is the developing world that will suffer most from the effects of climate change, it is appropriate to examine their prospects for adaptation. Evaluating Climate Change and Development, part of a World Bank series, has little of the guarded optimism of Anthony Giddens and the details are satanically depressing. While there has been an impressive reduction in worldwide poverty, largely due to China (and at the expense of soaring emissions), there are still over one billion hungry people living on less than one dollar a day. In the second half of the last century, excluding China, the number has gone up rather than down (largely due to population increases). Inequality among nations and within nations has soared.

Robert Picciotto, a professor at King's College in London, has an excellent, hard-hitting overview of climate change and development in Chapter Two. He notes that outside of China the poverty rate in developing countries has gone up instead of down; the "policy incoherence" (p. 25) means that the low- and middle-income countries are funding unsustainable consumption levels in the United States; the developed countries have imposed high tariffs precisely where the developing countries are most competitive, including cereals, sugar, fish, fruits, and vegetables, clothing and footwear (p. 28). The rich countries' fishing

subsidies have caused massive damage to the fishing communities in poor countries. These subsidies amount to between \$15 and \$20 billion a year, enough to fund all the adaptation programs the World Bank estimates we will need. (The Stern Review estimates are over three times that: \$64 billion annually will be needed, about double the recent aid levels.)

Picciotto makes an important point that no one else mentions. The rich world has set up development programs such as the Millennium Development Goals but they “demand far more of developing countries than they do of developed countries” (p. 35). The developed nations set policies for adaptation and mitigation, and vast resources have been mobilized to monitor progress in developing countries. But there are no resources to evaluate and monitor the West’s policies regarding the developing world. Will they work where there is extreme poverty or internal warfare; do they require buying the West’s goods; do they favor resource extraction?

But it is not surprising where this former World Bank economist finds the solutions. He, along with all the other contributors, insists on empowering people and bottom-up solutions. But his actual recommendations belie this approach. Instead, they include “risk management theory,” “cost-benefit analysis,” “probability theory,” “the economics of risk mitigation measures,” “markets for rights” and bundles of contracts. It all comes together in “option theory,” signifying that the “existing tool kit is well stocked” to deal with the problems (p.39). Since that toolkit has been around in the International Monetary Fund (never mentioned in the book) and the World Bank for at least 20 years, one wonders if the tools that produce “option theory” are actually responsible for making things worse for the developing countries. I suspect Picciotto dare not say so even if he were to suspect it.

The book is the result of a conference of over 200 experts in Alexandria, Egypt in 2008. Of the 47 contributors to the book, 12 are from the developing world, giving the volume some credibility. The disengaged United States has only two contributors, Canada one. The other 32 are from European governments or agencies and international organizations.

The leading sponsor of the conference was the Global Environment Facility (GEF), which started out as a pilot program of the World Bank and is now the largest public source of financing on global environmental projects for the developing countries and economies in transition.

The book is obviously addressed to a very specialized audience able to recognize the blizzard of acronyms of agencies and programs concerned with slowing climate change, adaptation, and development. It is primarily a book of recommendations, suitably bullet-pointed or listed in tables, and they are general,

hortatory, admonishing, and obvious. Occasionally they are contradictory. For example, Chapter One asserts that focusing upon the smallholder farmer is the key to protecting the environment, poverty reduction and food security, a frequent theme. But five pages later in the chapter we are told that the increase in food production that is necessary requires “industrial methods, not small farmers” (p.9). The high level of programmatic earnestness drains away when we read of what happens on the ground in the valuable case studies. The earnestness is not given credibility by an abundance of specific, practical recommendations. Political realities and interests are only occasionally mentioned and rarely taken into account. You would not know from the discussion in Chapter 22 on Sudan and Darfur that any violence was present, let alone oil interests.

Chapter Three by Joyerta Gupta, discusses the Clean Development Mechanism of the Kyoto treaty that allows industrial countries to offset their emissions by funding clean energy projects in developing countries and promoting sustainable development. Giddens is quite skeptical of its benefits in his brief account; Gupta’s chapter gives us the pessimistic details. She finds little evidence of sustainable development; instead, she reports in valuable detail on the bureaucratic complexity of development programs and the ambiguity surrounding the word sustainable. Her contribution is all the more impressive since she is evaluating generous Dutch programs and is a professor in a Dutch university. “There may be a tendency towards a race to the bottom” in development programs, she suggests (p. 61). The major benefit of first world programs may be only in popularizing the idea of climate change in developing countries, she woefully concludes.

Despite the economic toolbox that Picciotto mentions, few of the hundreds of programs are adequately evaluated or even well-documented. Nor is there any agreement regarding the social costs of global warming. Howard White, in Chapter Seven, documents many of the problems. Other chapters show just how difficult it is to measure effectiveness—whose effectiveness? What kind: economic, social, or trans-generational? Ivan Dario Valencia, of the National University of Colombia, is one of the few to analyze policy traps critically, in Chapter 17. No one is bold enough to analyze them as what Lee Clarke called “fantasy documents,” and admit their vacuity (Clarke 1999).

Chapter Ten examines climate change mitigation evaluations in great detail and finds all but four percent of the evaluations for the Global Environment Facility woefully lacking. In particular, almost all projects lacked a prominent link to climate change. In addition to the GEF there is funding from the World Bank, and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). Chapter 11, by Howard Stewart, Juha Uitto and Michael Wells examines the UNDP. The dismal results of this survey are probably related to the fact that, not surprisingly, “climate change mitigation projects are often seen as being of marginal relevance to developing

countries' development agendas." The authors struggled with "incoherent" financial information and performance monitoring systems with little usable information on goals, results or outcomes (p. 155). They have an interesting discussion of the tensions between the GEF and the UNDP, the former favoring mitigation and the latter favoring poverty reduction (but neglecting adaptation). "Alleviating poverty through enhanced energy access is a fundamentally different issue from climate change mitigation and the two issues can seldom be addressed effectively through the same means and mechanisms" (p. 168). Adding a third goal, adaptation, increases the dilemmas; few programs will serve all three goals of poverty reduction, mitigation, and adaptation, and there will be conflict among the three goals.

The enumeration of the problems, and the distance between the "oughts" and the actualities, perform for us a salutary and sobering purpose. The Third World has had it. None of the economic modeling is going to do much good, organizational successes are rare and tiny (a hamlet in Tibet), and reliable information on a dozen critical matters is not available and unlikely ever to be available (adequate measures of emissions, evaluations of projects, baseline data, descriptions of what has actually been done, measurements of program costs and social costs, etc.). Adding our rich countries' trade policies to our emissions policies will sink the Third World, and the rich may go down with the Third World a decade or two after them.

© American Sociological Association 2010

References

←

Clarke Lee

1999. *Mission Improbable*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

←

Jacques Peter J.,

Dunlap Riley E.,

Freeman Mark

2008. "The organisation of denial: Conservative think tanks and environmental scepticism." *Environmental Politics* 17:349-385.

←

MacDonald Christine

2008. Green, Inc. Guilford, CT: Lyons Press.

←

McCright Aaron M.,
Dunlap Riley E.

2003. "Defeating Kyoto: the conservative movement's impact on U.S. climate change policy." *Social Problems* 50:348-373.

←

Lever-Tracy Constance
Perrow C.

(2010). "Organizations and global warming." Chapter Four in *Handbook of Society and Climate Change*, edited by Lever-Tracy Constance. New York, NY: Routledge.

←

York Richard,
Mancus Philip

2009. "Critical human ecology: historical materialism and natural laws." *Sociological Theory* 27:123-149.

←

York Richard,
Rosa Eugene A.

2003. "Key Challenges to Ecological Modernization Theory: Institutional Efficacy, Case Study Evidence, Units of Analysis, and the Pace of Eco-Efficiency." *Organization Environment* 16:273-288.