How to Think About Climate Change

Beyond the Culture War

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About the Author

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How To Think About Climate Change Beyond The Culture War

Calum TM Nicholson

Abstract

This paper argues that the climate debate in the West has become a proxy battlefield in a broader culture war, characterised by caricature and tribalism. Unlike the ideological divisions of the 20th century, where the problem was at least commonly understood, today's divisions are defined by existential opposition, where each side sees the other as the problem in itself. The paper seeks to model an alternative mode of discourse, beyond polarised sloganeering.

Drawing from disaster risk literature, particularly the case of Peru's 1970 Ancash earthquake, the paper illustrates how 'natural' disasters are never purely natural, but are conditioned by cultural, economic, and political structures. Climate change, too, cannot be understood without a deeper understanding of society itself.

Introduction

It is hardly original to observe that, in the West at least, we live in divided times. Society has neatly polarised, over issues as varied as the wars, immigration, and, of course, climate change.

At this stage, the divisions have become stale, and tired. Each side appears increasingly defined not by what they stand for, but what they claim they stand against, namely whatever caricature they believe the other side to be: the left stand against 'fascism' or its synonyms such as the 'hard right', and the right against 'marxism' and the 'woke'.

In this, there is a marked difference, even from the 20th century. In the 20th, while the two sides in the Cold War proposed very different solutions, they at least agreed on the problem: political economy. To the capitalists, the solution was to see the economy be market-driven; to the communists, it was to see it state-led. Today, the challenge is that there is no agreement on the problem. However, on the current path this is insoluble, as it is because both sides see the problem as each other.

It is hard to escape the vortex of circular reasoning that marks the culture war, which - like some sort of black hole - crushes all culture down, reducing everything to the pulp of politics. But precisely because of this, it is surely obvious to any honest observer that this is a hiding to nothing. At the very least, encountering resistance tends not to soften but harden ideological convictions of all sorts. But more worryingly, the logical result of fighting fire with fire is we end up with inferno.

Having said all this, since the re-election of Trump there appears to be a release of tension from the general culture in the West. A sense of a fever having broken. Or, perhaps, of a storm having blown itself out. At any rate, it is palpable that society is entering a moment when reflection and reconsideration might be as possible as it is necessary.

On the left in particular, after a decade of head-long millenarian intensity, there now appears to be a moment of hesitation, as regardless of whether the advocates of what we might term the 'ideological gentrification' of the left, who colonised it with less granular and more performative middle-class concerns, believing they were right, they now know that in their assumption that they were speaking for the majority, they were undeniably wrong.

As a result, there is now a lull in which we may ask ourselves: what comes after the culture war? Is there a way to debate that does not reduce everything to politics - that does not wage and engage in what we might call total politics? Is there a way to find common ground - to agree on the problems, and indeed, the questions, rather than to simply assume that the problem is each other, or that there are no more questions to be asked, only 'us' who are right on the facts, and 'them' who are wrong?

Answering this question, of how we might find common ground, requires us to illustrate how this might be done. This is perhaps most easily illustrated through the climate debate. Climate change is an interesting case, for at least two reasons.

First, it is a topic through which many of the more consequential pathologies of contemporary Western society coincide: it is at once a topic that is scientistic rather than scientific in its intellectual foundations, technocratic rather then democratic in its political well-spring, millenarian in its cultural reach and resonance, and progressive in its implied politics, and sense of how the world ought to be.

Second, it is subject to a fiercely polarised debate. In keeping with the broader trend across Western culture, the two camps have pejoratively labelled each other: those sceptical of the mainstream consensus on climate change declare those that disagree with them 'catastrophists'. In turn, the sceptics are labelled 'deniers'.

While irreconcilable in their opposition, the two sides nevertheless have symmetrical blind-spots. It is true that members of the sceptic side often have too little faith in the natural science, which on the whole is actually quite good. But it is just as true that the 'activist'/'catastrophist' side have the opposite but equal problem: they have too much faith in the social science.

To explain what is meant by the latter, it is worth considering why we care about climate change in the first place. We care, of course, because we assume two things. First, that climate change will have an impact on society; and second, that this impact will be negative. If it were not for these two assumptions, we would, logically, simply have no reason to be concerned in the first place.

If this argument is accepted, then we can see that to talk of climate change is a discussion not simply about natural science, but also social science; it requires us not simply to understand the climate, but to understand society, and thus, ourselves. What is society? What, indeed, ought society to be? How does society change internally? And how does it respond to extra-societal factors like climate change?

It is on the latter set of questions, to do with the social science not the natural science, that we find the largest and more consequential lacunae in our understanding of climate change. Indeed, we might go so far as to say that even if our understanding of climate change is informed by a rich understanding of the science, it is as — if not more — informed by an impoverished understanding of ourselves.

In light of the polarised nature of the debate on climate, in which both sides have opposite but symmetrical blindspots, this paper aims to offer a third perspective, that allows us to escape the vortex of the culture war, and the inferno of mutual contempt and accusation. It will do so not simply as an end in itself, speaking to and on the climate issue for its own sake, but as a means to a broader end: to offer a template for escaping the polarised debates of the 'culture war', which are not only fruitless and even barren, but corrosive of the deeper bounds that ought not only to bind us in our relations beyond our divisive narrations, but also to leave some things to be ends in themselves, and for our deeper humanity, not merely draft horses in our rancorous era of total politics, which has contoured and contorted the public sphere in the West for the last dozen years.

To begin, however, we must begin with a story of something that took place neither recently, nor in the West, and which has nothing to do with climate change.

Dancers of the Ancash region. (Shutterstock)

The Ancash Earthquake: Five Hundred Years in the Making

On 31st May, 1970, the Ancash Earthquake, registering 7.7 on the Richter scale, hit Peru[1]. It left over 500,000 people homeless, having flattened 160,000 buildings, and killed roughly 70,000 people. Until the 2010 Haitian earthquake, it was the most deadly 'natural' disaster in the history of the Western hemisphere.

Despite it lasting only 45 seconds, in its wake Peruvians began to refer to it as the 'Five Hundred year Earthquake'. This was not a reference to its frequency, nor to how long it would take to rebuild. Rather, it was a reference to how long it had been since Peru had been colonised, a process that changed the societal and economic structure of Peruvian communities to such an extent that they lost their adaptive capabilities in the face of the earthquakes[3] , capabilities that had sedimented over the millennia.

According to Anthony Oliver-Smith, in his seminal paper Peru's Five-Hundred-Year Earthquake: vulnerability in Historical Context, 'for the Andean peoples the conquest not only meant the end of the Inca empire, but it prefigured a cataclysmic demographic collapse and distortion or destruction of their adaptive systems to their environment'[2].

As Oliver-Smith tells it, while the Spanish only arrived in the last five centuries, the Peruvian Andean region had been settled for about 10,000 years. Over this time, the Andeans had recognised that, while it was a fertile region, it was one prone to earthquakes. As a result, they developed a wide range of adaptations. These included a variety of building techniques: the employment of English Bonds (header and stretcher brick faces placed in alternate courses); the use of thatched roofs, thin walls, and one-story buildings. Additionally, the Andeans maintained storehouses containing surplus grain for emergencies, and did not settle otherwise prime locations, such as Arequipa, knowing that, while it lay in a fertile area and on a river, it was also at the heart of the earthquake zone.

Once the Spanish arrived, all this changed. As Oliver-Smith writes[2] :

> Spanish building techniques and settlement design were employed in the reducciones for Indians and the new towns and cities founded by the Spaniards. Unlike the dispersed pattern of Inca towns in which houses were spaced out along long paths, Spanish settlement design favored the traditional grid pattern of perpendicular streets organized around a central plaza. The streets tended to be narrow and the houses adjoining or close together. Many houses in these Spanish towns had a second-story storage area as well, something which few domestic dwellings had in the pre-Columbian times.

Additionally, where the Andeans had used thatch, the Spanish adopted the ceramic barrel roof tile, as they would use in Spain. They abandoned the bonding of walls. They took the grain surplus as tax. And they founded settlements at places like Arequipa, settlements that were then flattened 4 times in the 17th century alone from earthquakes[3], and disrupted the broader institutional structures of the area, for instance taking the grain surplus as tax.

The disaster of 31st May, 1970, therefore marked a confluence of three factors. First, massive 20th century population growth had led to the development of dense conurbations in places such as Arequipa. Second, a society that had become increasingly maladaptive to being in an earthquake-prone zone; third, an unusually powerful earthquake.

The result was as disastrous as it was predictable: when the earthquake hit, the unbonded walls, supporting multi-story buildings, fell out into the narrow streets, killing pedestrians; the heavy tiled roofs collapsed into the houses, killing or injuring those inside; there was little by way of emergency infrastructure to be put to use in the wake of an earthquake; and the population was concentrated in areas subject to extreme seismic activity.

[1] Oliver-Smith, A. (1995), 'Peru's Five-Hundred Year Earthquake', in Varley, A (ed.), Disasters, Development and Environment, John Wiley & Sons, p.75.
[2] Ibid, p.80.
[3] Ibid, p.81

What is the relevance of an earthquake in Peru in 1970 for how we understand climate change today in the West/ Global North?

The great lesson of the Ancash Earthquake is in what it teaches us about disasters. There is an area of scholarship known as 'Disaster Risk Reduction' scholarship. Since about 1980, it has had a central, almost axiomatic claim, which when stated without explanation seems not only provocative, but absurd: 'there is no such thing as a natural disaster'. This is sometimes accompanied by a similarly baffling claim: 'earthquakes don't kill people'.

However, the second phrase has a second part, which explains both claims: 'earthquakes don't kill people; collapsing buildings do'. The point in this is that, short of an extra-terrestrial incident like a comet impact, disasters are not natural. Rather, they are social, political, economic, and historical.

It is worth taking a moment to consider the nature of the natural world, and our relationship to it. Rousseau once argued that it is us, not the classical world, who should be considered ancient, for we are far older than them. There is a wisdom in this, as it is true that we, today, are not living in historic isolation. Rather, we are the recipients and beneficiaries of not just decades, or centuries, but millennia of human experience, with best practices for survival accruing and sedimenting down the centuries, as soil from which new growth can spring.

Scrape away this historical sediment of tradition, of routine, of culture itself, which is the short-hand we use for the sum of all this inheritance, and hardly one of us would survive 72 hours, exposed to the natural world, stripped of clothing, removed from artificial shelter, deprived of our tools. That the natural world is hazardous to us, at all times, and in all places, is not the exception, but the rule. That we are sometimes prone to forget this is a consequence of how successful we have been in our adaptations, in our culture.

All this is to say that hazards are natural. But disasters? They are not. For they mark a point where the fabric of our culture - our traditions, our routines, our technology and tools - has been rendered, or at least rendered unsuitable given the natural hazards to which they are a response and reaction.

There is nothing 'natural', therefore, in 'natural disasters'. Rather, what may at first appear a 'natural' disaster will reveal itself to have strong social, political, economic, cultural, and ultimately historical conditioning elements.

An earthquake is a hazard. But two of identical magnitude, occurring in areas of equivalent population density, will kill and injure different numbers of people depending on a wide range of societal factors, from building standard codes to levels of corruption, and from the geographical suitability of building styles to the state of the emergency response infrastructure. An earthquake in a broken country in the 'global south', like Haiti, will have a far more destructive impact than the same earthquake in a 'global north' country, with a culture adapted to earthquakes, like Japan.

What is the relevance of this argument about earthquakes, and natural disasters, to understanding climate change? It is this: if the disastrousness of an earthquake is conditioned by societal factors, then the same must be at least as true for climate change, for quite obvious reasons.

First, an earthquake is a phenomenon that can be isolated to a particular point in space. It always has an exact epicentre that can be identified. By contrast, when we talk of global climate change, we talk of a statistical average for the entire planet, that is not localised, and thus which is intrinsically abstract from any particular point in space that might be occupied by a person. If linear causality is hard to discern for the former, would it not be at least as true for the latter?

Second, an earthquake occurs as an identifiable and discrete point in time. In the Peruvian example, it occurred at 15:23:29 local time, and lasted 45 seconds. By definition, climate change could not be more different, for it refers to a 30 year rolling average, a time frame that is intrinsically abstract from any particular moment that might be experienced. Again, and this time in the temporal dimension, if linear causality is difficult if not impossible to discern in the case of an earthquake, would it not be at least as true for climate change?

In short, if it is true that the societal impact of an earthquake is determined by political, economic, cultural, and historical factors, would this not be at least as true for climate change? And if this is true, does it not suggest that the preoccupation with climate change not only overplay the rarity of natural hazards, but underplays the relevance of culture in determining disasters?

Metallurgical plant at dawn. (Shutterstock)

The Planetary Frame of Reference

If the arguments above hold, then it raises the question of why and how we have come to conceive of the concept of global climate change in a way that we have, namely a way that not only lacks any particular utility, but even risk distracting us from the elements that are not only more consequential, but which are more within our capacity to act upon and control: cultural and societal elements.

To begin, it is worth noting that, while the planet has always been there, a planetary frame of reference has not. For us today, we take for granted that we think at a planetary scale. But it is worth considering what needs to be in place - conceptually, politically, and technologically - for us to think at this level in any way that has meaning, let alone utility.

First, one has to be aware that we even live upon a planet or globe - something that was hardly realised until Ptolemy in the 2nd century CE, and which only gained wide acceptance in the West by the 17th or 18th centuries, and for which there was only visually confirmation by the 1960s - in order to conceive of global climate change. It is no coincidence that the green movements in the West were kick-started following the publication of the first images of the earth from space[4] .

Second, even if this consciousness of the planet existed, one would need a system of politics that would render the planet a traversable one, and one where the coordination between cultures, and across languages, was even possible. Before the age of European imperialism, this would have been not simply inconceivable, but a meaningless and even absurd proposition.

It is only with the universalising, via the process of decolonisation, of the nation-state system government evolved in post-Westphalia Europe, that the concept of a standardised system of contiguous nations, more or less sharing an administrative 'operating system', with standardised venues for inter-national negotiations and agreements, came into existence. It is only within that framework that talking of 'climate change' would have been politically possibility, let alone practical. In short, the concept of climate change is a consequence of a geopolitical arrangement that is notable for how unprecedented it is in human history.

Third, even if a global consciousness existed, and even if the globe was divided into contiguous nation-states that can communicate and coordinate within a shared system, there is also technology that needs to be in place to allow us to conceive of 'global climate change'.

Obviously, the tools and technology need to exist to conduct the measurements - of temperature, carbon dioxide, methane, ocean level, ocean acidification, soil moisture, and so on.

But no less impactfully, what one means by 'measurement' itself had to be standardised. Celsius was only standardised in 1742, and only adopted internationally by the International Committee for Weights and Measures in 1948; Kelvin was only introduced in 1848, and only adopted by the International System of Units (SI) in 1954; Joules were standardised in 1843, and adopted by the SI in 1948; Mass was standardised in 1795, but only made an international standard in 1889, when a platinum-iridium cylinder was established as the official standard; the pH Scale was standardised in 1909, and taken up more broadly in the 1950s; as for the metric system, it was developed during the French Revolution, but only came into force as the international standard in 1960. Without these standardisations, there is no way in which climate change could even be measured.

Without all three of these elements in place - a planetary consciousness, an international system of contiguous nation-states, the development of measurement technology and the broad standardisation of what they would be measuring - the concept of global climate change, whether anthropogenic or not, would have simply been inconceivable.

But something else, perhaps, needs to be in place, for us to think as we do about not climate change unto itself, but its relationship to us - to society. This is something less geopolitical, or practical, or even ontological. Rather, it is more epistemological, and to a great degree, metaphorical.

Implied in the concern for climate change's impact on

[4] Wetli, P. (2020), '"Earthrise": The Photo That Propelled the Environmental Movement and Led To Earth Day', WTTW: https://news.wttw.com/2020/04/22/earthrise-photo-propelled-environmental-movement-and-led-earth-day

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Implied in the concern for climate change's impact on society is a model of causality, however unexamined.

Namely, there is an assumption that: a) climate change will impact society; b) that this impact is linear - the greater the degree of climate change, the greater the societal changes it will bring about; c) that these changes will be negative.

Whether we realise it or not, this is to adopt a very classical mechanical understanding not so much of climate change, but of society itself. Famously, Newton's three laws of motion hold that:

> *An object will remain in a constant state of velocity unless acted on by an external force;*
> *The change in an object's velocity is proportional to the external force applied to it;*
> *For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.*

If we reflect, we can see that this is how we understand society in the context of climate change. We assume, in a rather unexamined way, that:

> *Society would remain in a constant state unless acted upon by an external force, such as climate change;*
> *That the amount of societal change will increase with the amount of climate change;*
> *That all such change will be met by proportional negative, and thus unwelcome.*

At the heart of this understanding, however, is a fundamental error - a misconception of what society is, and thus, who we are. The error is this: whereas the natural world is a unity - the laws of chemistry and physics apply equally to all things - the social world of humanity is a plurality. We are not mere billiard balls, mechanistically reacting to external forces in linear, predictable ways. Rather, we react in a multitude of ways. That we do is not a fault, but a feature of being human.

As Isaiah Berlin argued, the essential characteristic of society is its very plurality - that it consists of 'competing ways of life, each offering a different account of the intelligibility of things'[5], a point that was perhaps better put by Alexander

[5] Winch, P. (2003). The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy, Routledge, London. P.103
[6] Pope, A. (1994). Essay on Man and Other Poems, Dover Publications, Inc, New York.

Pope[6]:

> *Tis with our judgments as our watches, none*
> *Go just alike, yet each believes his own.*

All three of the mechanistic assumptions, distilled in the adaptations of Newton's three laws, are just that - assumptions. All three presume we know more than we do, and ignore what experience has in fact taught us.

Illustratively, if one dropped a grenade in a room full of chairs, it is true that - with perfect data - one could simulate perfectly, by the applications of laws of physics to the data, how everything would react. Place people within the room, however, and we cannot hope to predict how everyone would react to witnessing the dropping of the grenade, not least because the individuals themselves likely would not know beforehand. Some might run away. Some might freeze. One or two might jump upon the grenade, sacrificing themselves to protect the rest. This is the human condition. We are a plurality, not a unity, in our morals, mores, and forms of meaning. Again, this is not a fault, but a feature of being human. And it is a feature that our prevailing preoccupation with climate change largely excludes. In doing, it is a discussion that, however rich the science, is informed by an impoverished understanding of ourselves.

Towering Arctic iceberg melting. (Shutterstock)

Conclusion: Climate Beyond Science

What are the implications of the above argument, not only for how one ought to engage with the climate debate, but also engage with the broader polarisations in the 'culture war' that has preoccupied the public sphere in the West for the past decade or so?

Regarding the climate debate, the admonition is that we ought to get beyond a debate on the science. Let us presume that the science is reliable, if only so we can avoid the further entrenchment of existing antagonistic positions. It is a fact of life that to tell someone they are wrong is rarely a way to convert them. If one moves the debate from the realm of natural science to the domain of the social scientific implications of climate change, not only does this not require a specialist background and training in climate science, but it also has relevance regardless of what one makes of the science: if one does not trust the natural science, one will by extension have reservations about the social science. But even if one does trust the natural science, it is still possible to question the social science. As Wittgenstein wrote, 'even when all the possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched'.

The social science, therefore, is the common ground, regardless of one's perspective on the natural science itself. Regardless of whether there is a real 'consensus' on the natural science of climate change, there is certainly none on the social science of its implications. We therefore each have not just an opportunity, but a duty, to engage with that debate critically, for friction is a dependable source of illumination.
Regarding the broader culture, and its war in this strange, artless era of 'total politics', the approach to debating climate change, outlined above in this paper, could well be generalised to all the polarising debates, in order to break the stalemates.

In an age of polarisation, in which strains of thinking — as strains of disease — harden rather than soften when they face resistance, the solution is not to double-down on the answers we are wedded to with increasing tribalism. Rather, the resolution lies in pulling back, and asking ourselves: why have we come to ask the questions we do, in a way that sacrifices our relations on the altar of our respective narrations? What is wrong with this picture? And how else might we make our collective lives intelligible?

As Western culture enters this new era of liminality as old shibboleths dissolve, we should take advantage of the opportunity to reflect and reformulate our perspectives. It has long been necessary. Now that it is also possible, as doubt begins to ingress the edifice of received certainties across the culture, we should not waste the opportunity.

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