
Climate Change and Storytelling: Narratives and Cultural Meaning in Environmental Communication

Book reviews

Annika Arnold

Palgrave Macmillan

New York, NY

2018

ISBN 978-331969382-8

Review DOI 10.1108/DPM-06-2018-305

363

One of the troubling aspects of climate change seems to be associated with the overproduction of studies, papers, study-cases, books and PhD thesis, but at the same time, governments failed to reach a global consensus to reduce the emission of greenhouse gases to the atmosphere. To some extent, the particular interests of nation-state outweigh the needs of sharing efforts in mitigating the effects of climate change. It is equally important not to lose the sight of the fact that the real causes of climate change still are in a discrepancy. Deniers, to set an example, reject the idea that human intervention is responsible for the global warming, while environmentalists place into question the role of capitalism and economic growth toward sustainability (Clapp and Dauvergne, 2011).

This context opens the doors for books such as *Climate Change and Storytelling*, which interrogate on the discursivity of climate change as well as its effects on the communicative process. Annika Arnold, Faculty Staff at the University of Stuttgart, who needs to say, is the author of this valuable book, starts from the premise the worldviews are cognitively organized according to the biography of the subject, which intersected with a specific culture. From a qualitative method, Arnold explores the opinion of experts and involved staff worried by the climate in the USA and Germany. Her main goal consists of calibrating a coherent understanding of the role of culture and communication in the perception of climate change. In the introductory chapter, she holds that far from being a guidebook of practical recommendations respecting what ought to be done, the book reflects the structure and dynamics of storytelling.

The second chapter offers selected views and positions, which come from authoritative voices of social science regarding climate change. With a focus on risk perception, Arnold interrogates on how people perceive and finally react to the danger of climate change. She reveals—like the paradox of Commons—that while people may perceive risks, they often do nothing to change their behaviors, believing they shall never reach or at the least because of the lack of concrete aftermaths for daily life. What is more important, the knowledge on climate change is principally disseminated by the mass media. This creates a gap between popular opinion and experts. Arnold acknowledges that the attention given by the media coincides with a great chaos, which is engendered by the countless visions and interpretations juxtaposed at the screens. These contradictions, even among experts, instill higher levels of anxiety and fear, which nourish an “alarmist repertoire.” This begs a more than interesting point, what is the role of cultural sociology in the mid of this mayhem?

As Arnold puts it, the diversity of narratives and representations revolving around this deep-seated issue exhibit a fertile ground for the arrival of cultural sociology. Here a paradox surfaces. On one hand, cultural sociology is conceived as external to natural sciences, and therefore, ineffective to struggle against climate change. On the other hand, the crisis of environmentalists comes from their impossibility to understand that nothing can be perceived outside the culture. Of course, the climate exists no matter human perception, but to what extent a risk can be seen as alarming or not depends on the cultural background.

The third chapter discusses the different approaches to narrative analysis—within cultural sociology, to launch toward a common understanding on the importance of cultural narratives. To put this slightly in other terms, narrative analysis helps analysts to grasp “formal structural properties” respecting the social functions. By assessing or dealing with stories, one might understand as to how lay-people frame and respond to events. In the different sections integrating this chapter, she exerts a criticism on the already-established models in the narrative analysis—like Smith, Labov and Waletzky and so forth. In this respect, she enumerates the limitations of these theoretical positions, offering a new fresh alternative, which to the mind of this reviewer sounds interesting. Arnold’s model includes two important issues glossed over by her colleagues, oddly the idea that multiple discourses alternatively coexist into the same group, as well as the passage from one to another narrative does not hinge on the group but its contextual background. As she overtly writes:

The interplay between those narratives and their characteristics is pivotal to a social analysis as it provides insights of the structure of public discourse. A comparison of different narratives that have emerged in the analysis thus promises to reveal how these different stories influence one another and which consequences possible interdependence have for their stability and reliability (Arnold, 2018, p. 77).

What this above cited excerpt suggests, the disparity of reactions, which are associated to the autonomy of nation-state, do not correspond with the urgency or the peligrosity of climate change, but—given in her terms—by the ever-complex convergence between culture and adaptation. Some nations, which are not facing direct consequences may feel “global warming” is a fake, while others retain serious concern on the topic.

The fourth and fifth chapters display and discuss critically the outcomes of an applied research conducted in the USA and Germany. Originally, Arnold presents the pertinent justifications and details on how the interviews were accomplished, discussing interviews according to the interplay between economy and environment. At a closer look, the environmental concern is given by the fact that the nature of climate change derives from economic reasons. While the rationality of west plays a leading role helping poor nations toward a sustainable economy, the economy is part of the problem, above all when it is not regulated. In the same way, experts agree, without any governmental intervention, stakeholders show the minimum efforts to fix the trouble. Only the political decisions can health the planet. However, no less true is that economy gives further opportunities for nations if some mainstream values of the society are changed. Though both agree that climate change represents a political challenge, nonetheless, there are some differences between American and German interviewees. While the former signals to the nature of this phenomenon as a political problem which echoes a partisan ideology, a struggle between democrats and republicans, the latter preferably refers to the trust in technology and innovation as valid alternatives to climate change. The economic factors and the responsibilities of richest countries are vital in Germans. The partisan distinction indicates that the political parties, far from reaching the necessary agreement, fight to impose their own agenda. These contrasting positions, which today prevail in the USA, work like a religious belief neglecting scientific facts. Deniers, many of them inserted in the Republican Party, neglects that climate change resulted from human intervention while Democrats (advocates) urged to take the lead in the promotion of global policies against climate change. Paradoxically, American advocates praise the efforts and advance of others nations in the theme. A third narrative is of paramount importance, which enunciates that “the planet, after all, should concern us as a moral topic, no matter what the effects of global warming, a point Americans and Germans agree”.

In fact, Arnold's argumentation overlooks the position of some radical voices which alerted on the spectacular nature of climate change, not as a real problem but as a form of entertainment. In one of my recent book, which is entitled *The Rise of Thana Capitalism and Tourism*, I explained that capitalism tends to commoditize risks in order to package and disseminate them in the form of cultural products, just ready to be mediatically consumed. That way, the conditions which replicate the problem (risk) are never reversed (Korstanje, 2016). To put this bluntly, whenever slums and poverty became to be a tourist attraction, poverty—as the main commodity of many slums—enlarged. This point is still missing in the book.

After further discussion, this book provides with a clear conceptual diagnosis that helps understanding how the different narratives operate further positive changes in the communicative process. To my end, this represents a valuable endeavor that allows the formulations of concrete policies to avoid panic, indifference or anxiety. Though the economic factor plays a crucial role in the political debate, evincing that economic rationale may be a solution to the problem. Second and most important, the obtained information validates the assumption that the cultural background exerts a great influence in how narratives are finally articulated; doubtless, this is a high-quality work that will shed light on communicative issues in the years to come.

Maximiliano E. Korstanje

Department of Economics, University of Palermo, Buenos Aires, Argentina

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank Maximiliano Korstanje for providing an in-depth and careful review of *Climate Change and Storytelling*.

In this reply, I want to address an aspect which Dr Korstanje states is missing in the study: the perception of climate change as a spectacle, as a mere form of entertainment. This is an interesting and fruitful point that provides a fitting additional topic to the analyses on two levels. First, on an empirical level, the study describes, among others, an economic rationale that depicts climate change as an economic opportunity, for example by investing in renewable energies. The notion of using climate change as a vehicle for entertainment and thus turning a profit from the ecological crisis fits quite well in this narrative. In fact, a myriad of blockbusters, podcasts, documentaries and media events have emerged over the last years, thus underscoring this point. I might disagree with Dr Korstanje when he likens this case to his work on the development of slums against the backdrop of the tourist industry. Movies and documentaries have comparatively none or only very little ecological impact; however, in terms of shaping public perception these entertainment industry products can have a familiarizing effect, people getting accustomed to the pictures of polar bears on melting ice floes, and thus, climate change might have an even bigger struggle to provoke an appropriate reaction. Thus, Dr Korstanje makes a valid and crucial point for the empirical side of the study.

On an analytical level, cultural sociology seems to be especially well equipped to take on the endeavor of understanding the structure and function of entertainment products within the climate change discourse. In fact, Philip Smith and Nicolas Howe do so in their study *Climate Change as Social Drama*, where they provide a cultural reading of climate change, based on—among other analyses—a deep dive into the mechanisms of Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* and the logics of climate change art and artists.

"Classic" social scientific research on climate change can profit from cultural readings like these as they provide a deeper understanding of the structural logics, by which such abstract phenomena are perceived and filled with meaning.

Smith, P. and Howe, N. (2015), *Climate Change as Social Drama: Global Warming in the Public Sphere*, Cambridge University Press, New York, NY.

References

Clapp, J. and Dauvergne, P. (2011), *Paths to a Green World: The Political Economy of the Global Environment*, MIT Press, Cambridge.

Korstanje, M.E. (2016), *The Rise of Thana Capitalism and Tourism*, Routledge, Abingdon.