

## **Navigating Bulkeley's challenge on climate politics and human geography**

Andrew Jones, School of Arts & Social Sciences, City, University of London, Northampton Square, London, EC1V 0HB, UK, [andrew.jones@city.ac.uk](mailto:andrew.jones@city.ac.uk)

**Abstract** Whilst agreeing with the major tenets of Harriet Bulkeley's timely and powerful argument for geographers (and social scientists more generally) to engage with climate change, this response raises three provocative challenges that arise from this intervention: the degree to which the epistemological and theoretical basis to these arguments are radical, the nature of the engagement problem in the discipline and, perhaps most importantly, how these arguments can be translated to a 'progressive politics'. The response argues that there is much further to go in explaining the utility of socio-natural understanding of climate change if those beyond the social sciences and in the wider realm of policy and politics are to be convinced of the power of the approach being advocated. It also argues that geographers are well-positioned to develop the bolder and more interdisciplinary approach needed to achieve the kind of ambitious shift in thinking Bulkeley seeks.

**Keywords:** climate change, nature/ society, radical theory, progressive politics

### **Introduction: a triple challenge**

Harriet Bulkeley has written a timely and persuasive intervention with respect to human geography's role in engaging with climate change. In general, I would agree with her major contention that the subject is 'unable or unwilling' to take up the gauntlet of integrating more social science into global environmental research. Human geographers - like other social scientists - are not critically engaged with the types of knowledge being produced about climate change, or questioning enough of the epistemological framing of climate change as a thing 'out there' to be addressed or mitigated. She argues that the 'governing of climate change is not a clearly circumscribed sphere for intervention', instead seeing it as 'a condition that gives rise to an unfolding set of processes and dynamics'. The diagnosis is that there cannot be 'one finality to the climate problem'. Instead she argues convincingly that what is needed is an understanding that gets to grips with the 'multiple, diverse and complex and becoming and being climate changed communities, corporations, cities and so forth'. It is

the combination of these dynamics that shape what it is that 'climate change becomes'. This call for a critical shift in the disciplines' understanding of climate change is both welcome and, in my view, overdue.

However, whilst I agree with the key tenets of this important intervention, I want to pose at least three provocative challenges to her arguments which might constructively sharpen how the debate is taken forwards. These challenges relate to three intertwined dimensions within the piece: the degree to which the epistemological and theoretical basis of her contentions present a radical critique of the current state of climate change understanding, the extent to which there is a problematic absence of critical engagement with climate change within human geography and, thirdly, the way in which the proposed critical approach to climate change might translate into the 'progressive politics' she seeks. I end with some thoughts on how human geographers might change what they research and communicate in order to overcome these challenges.

### **Radical theories of climate change?**

The first challenge in Bulkeley's critique I think relates to a much wider epistemological and theoretical issue in contemporary human geography. The conceptual lexicon she deploys to reconceptualise climate change is one that recognises the relative and multi-dimensional nature of knowledge, the dynamism of everyday entities like cities and communities, and the problems that underpin a Latourian (c.f. Latour 2012 [1993]) purification between things that are 'social' and things that are 'natural' or 'non-human'. Human geography has embraced such an epistemological framing for approaching two decades, and it has undoubtedly provided a rich conceptual reimagining of the nature of the socio-natural world. Yet, perhaps polemically, I have always felt that social scientists overstated the profundity of such insight. Human / non-human epistemological framings are essential pieces of how we better understand the world in the aftermath of the post- socio-philosophical turn, but my provocation is that they do not provoke as fundamental a recalculation of what exists in the world or what to do about the problems the world faces as academic thinkers sometimes convey. As someone who (in epistemological terms) strongly aligns to the kind of post-informed argument Bulkeley makes, from personal experience when confronted by such arguments politicians, policy-makers, business people, consumers often find the implications less than remarkable. Often such academic discourse is reduced to a sense that social scientists are dressing up what is already known: the world is complex, it is ever changing, the natural world is intrinsically entwined within human society. Attempting to illuminate the

irreducibility of the human / non-human divide does not provoke the equivalent epiphany that some in social science appear to feel is warranted.

I intend this constructively, but it may provoke protest from social scientists who see the fertile and nuanced understanding of, for example, the nature of agency it leads to (c.f. Whatmore 2017). However, the problem is that for many people beyond the social scientific epistemic community that trades in these concepts, it does not provoke a call to arms or a radical break in thinking. For 'climate as condition' to have traction, it needs to convince the non-academic world that it teaches us something not already present within the discourse. And I am fearful in that respect. Many non-social scientists I think would read this argument and suggest that whilst they see the difference, the binary of 'problem' versus 'condition' is a caricature. That much policy, natural scientific discourse, and so on already contains element of the 'condition' concept. In short, reconceptualising something as socio-natural is not (at least entirely) alien to the debate within the academy about the interdisciplinarity nature of the climate change grand challenges or the way in which science engages with the politics of climate change. The consequence, of course, is that the response to the argument for a more critical approach from funding bodies is that they are aware of the need for the kind of socio-natural sensitivity being called for.

This does not diminish the power and pertinence of Harriet's Bulkeley's arguments, but it does give cause to pause on the challenges faced within the discipline of human geography and far beyond it. Before I am challenged about misrepresenting the nuances of a socio-natural perspective, I think human geographers and other social scientists need to be honest about how some of these arguments appear to the eyes of, for an example, a physical science or engineer funding body reviewer. There is a need to be better at explaining what is different about this theoretical approach, what value it adds and how it is radical. The argument is not currently being won beyond certain epistemic communities.

### **Difficulties in defining presence and absence**

My second challenge revolves around the contention that climate change is 'present' but also 'absent' in human geography. I am sympathetic to the underpinning argument here: that human geographers are only engaging with climate change as a secondary object of research or consideration as it relates to some other primary object. The difficulty is that I'm unclear what engagement with it as a primary object would look like in contrast, and whether indeed that might be desirable. I recognise the point that climate change is perceived as environmental, but it is in many ways contradictory to argue that work is not being published

in the right journals. Human geography is diverse, perhaps ‘thinly spread’, and the same arguments could be applied to any number of key ‘grand challenge’ topics – inequality or race for example – I fear. I do not have a systematic analysis to present here but economic geography as a sub-discipline is distributed across dozens of journals, with topics labelled in different ways. My own work with colleagues on service industries and an environmental sustainable transition (c.f. Jones *et al* 2016) has found geographical work engaged across a wide range of journals and interdisciplinary spaces.

The consequence is that with this argument as it stands, I am unsure as to what placing climate change as condition at the ‘core of sub-disciplinary fields’ would entail. In that sense I am unsure what the absence corresponds to beyond a perceived lack of a literature engaging explicitly with critical climate politics. The search for a ‘core’ is an old argument in many of human geography’s sub-disciplines, and can be perhaps measured by the numbers of scholar working on a school of thought or research object. Yet the subject’s history in recent decades (and the pages of this journal) are full of angst about this fragmentation: it can be applied to debates about economic, cultural, social and feminist geographies to name but a few. This argument appears to be run through with a tension in the wider context that the multiple knowledge politics around climate change are by their nature distributed across a vast array of sub-disciplinary concerns. If the core is a critical climate change ‘lens’ being applied, then fine. This is what I think Harriet Bulkeley rightly identifies. If it entails a new critical climate human geography school at the heart of human geography, then I am unconvinced this is a necessary or desirable endeavour. I think therefore this argument needs more elaboration.

### **Translating critical theory into policy and action**

A final – but perhaps for me most important - challenge rests around what critical climate politics within human geography (or indeed social science) ‘is’ and what it aims to achieve in contrast to work caught in the ‘inevitability trap’ undercurrent. I have no doubt that Bulkeley (in following Castree 2015) has considerable merit in the argument that much human geographical work (and wider social science) has this undercurrent, but an undercurrent is not the whole river. The difficulty therefore is that such a contention needs to be (much) clearer what an alternative epistemological framing of climate change looks like *and* the implications this has for the wider world.

Again, I think this argument is haunted by another binary division. I realise that the intention of this division is not to suggest a critical climate politics should be disengaging

from practical applications, but the difficulty rests in the greyness inbetween about how a human geographical critical climate politics does lead to practical action. To gain greater weight, the forward agenda has to be about elaborating how a critical climate research leads to a different practical set of actions to those of the hegemonic epistemological framing. The implication of this as it stands is that research funders and other institutions echew such research because it is critical *per se*, whilst the onus is on critical climate change researchers to demonstrate the value or benefit of overcoming the nature-society binary. What does a critical perspective add by reframing our understanding of climate change *not* as inevitably, as an ‘object’ and at ‘problem’ to be solved?

The limitation here is that the vignettes that follow do not in my view develop this enough. The Berwick wind turbine case study, for example, is an elegant analysis of how the realisation of the turbine has ‘full of calculation, of its capacity and desirability, of the different values it embodies and the ways this value can be recognised’ (ibid.). It demonstrates the richness of accomplishing the governance of climate change, and the complex nature of multi-actor power relationship behind it. But the implication is that this is wholly absent from dominant understandings of climate change by funders and institutions. I think actors from those perspective would argue against that. The Berwick analysis might produce a better understanding of what creating a progressive climate politics looks like but it feels insufficiently different to a simpler account that might be grounded in a more conventional narrative of local political action around climate change as object.

In that sense, the vignettes are helpful but modest and more is needed to support the ambitious and far-ranging arguments of the piece. It is perhaps unfair to ask for more in this intervention, but in reading the conclusion, I was left wanting to know what a wider panacea might look like. I want to know more about what rejecting ‘climate as object’ looks like in a relation to the very big issues alluded to: ‘the nature of growth’, ‘what it means to live the good life’ and what ‘high carbon culture’ has a less visible politics.

### **Future directions**

I end with two succinct thoughts about how the critical project Harriet Bulkeley sets out might be furthered. First, I think there is a need for a bolder interdisciplinary intervention that substantially makes the case for a radical critical climate politics that explains the difference that a socio-natural epistemological framing makes. I don’t mean here a theoretical case that seeks to either educate or convince environmental or physical scientists but rather work that demonstrates how such insight leads to different outcomes, policies, practices and political

action. The second is simply that human geography in my view remains uniquely well-positioned to further this critical climate politics, and should not be too inwardly critical of its real or perceived shortcomings. The excellent work that Bulkeley and others within this field have undertaken has great breath of interdisciplinary insight compared to engagements in social science on climate change, and this strength should be something that is capitalised upon and developed. I am not convinced we should frame the problem so much as ‘making space’ for climate change in human geography in a prescribed way, as being a little more self-aware about the unique and diverse scope that the subject offers to engage with climate critically. For me, that is the better route to achieving the kind of seismic shift in thinking within and beyond the subject that the ambition of Bulkeley’s intervention is grounded upon.

## References

Latour, B. (2012) [1993] *We Have Never Been Modern*. (Harvard: Harvard University Press)

Castree, N (2015) Geography and Global Change Science: Relationships Necessary, Absent, and Possible, *Geographical Research* 53 (1):1–15

Jones, A, Strom, P., Hermelin, B., & Rusten, G. (2016) *Services and the Green Economy*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave).

Whatmore, S (2017) Hybrid geographies: rethinking the ‘human’ in human geography. In *Environment* (pp. 411-428). (London: Routledge)