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Climate Change as Social Drama: Global Warming in the Public Sphere, by **Philip Smith** and **Nicolas Howe**. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 242 pp. \$29.99 paper. ISBN: 978-1-107-50305-2.

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The evidence that global warming stems from human origins is overwhelming. It is often said that the only scientific statements to find greater professional assent are Newton's laws of motion. Scientists have outlined the complex physical processes that create our anthropogenically-adjusted climate. They routinely warn of the dire consequences of failing to act before it's too late. Some have announced the Anthropocene, a new age in which our species has effects akin to geological agents. This gives rise to the prospect that humans are ushering in the Sixth Mass Extinction Event. Unlike all previous mass extinctions, this one – should it happen – will be on us. The scientific consensus is that the time to act is now. As Smith and Howe note, "the window of opportunity for dealing with the problem is limited" (p. 1).

Enter one of the great paradoxes of our time: this moment of pressing existential threat is met with wholesale public apathy. The standard story is inclined to explain this (away) as a straightforward matter of communication. The unified message of scientific experts is not getting through to the lay public, hence our passivity. We simply do not know the truth of the matter. This is blamed on the distortions of the denial industry, those "merchants of doubt" with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo.

Yet social science research in western societies routinely shows that most of us do know the truth of the matter. We accept the reality of climate change. We realise that action must take place. And we

fail to adjust our lifestyles accordingly. To paraphrase Charles Dudley Warner, every scientist talks about our changed weather, but nobody does anything about it. Why not?

It has long been recognised that environmental issues are liable to problem displacement. They can be “solved” by shifting them to different times, places and media. To give some examples, this displacement can go from the present generation to future ones, from one country to another, from soil pollution to water pollution. At present, the public are not seeing climate change as a personal problem. Indeed, this book acknowledges the unique challenges that arise when we are the enemy (p. 125). Far better to convert it into an issue for those in other places or other times. Future generations will bear the brunt of it. Note to guilty self: perhaps a technological fix will be found. Besides, in this age of austerity, many of us perceive more immediate problems in the realms of education, healthcare, employment. Guilt be gone.

Smith and Howe argue that calls for more evidence are fundamentally misplaced. Persuasion and conviction, the types of things that lead to mobilisation, hinge on something different from the stuff of scientific reports. Cultural analysis is required if we are to unravel the webs of meaning that people are enmeshed in. Here their novel contribution is to suggest that climate change is more than a scientific fact or a political problem, it is also a social drama. Indeed, if we see climate change as such, replete with characters, sets, plots and genres, we stand a chance of shifting the status quo, to go from knowing about the issue to actually doing something about it. This new way of looking at the problem relies on an old thinker: Aristotle.

The utility of two of Aristotle’s works are foregrounded, *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*. The former outlines the universal fundamentals of staged drama, the actors and their relationships, motifs and essential components. The latter identifies the types of claims-making performances that resonate with audiences. While there is a world of difference between the plays of classical antiquity and

contemporary social life, the authors assert that a fundamental point of comparison still holds: '*the world of public affairs is very much one that is constructed by players, narrated by observers, and read by audiences in a dramatic mode*' (emphasis in original, p. 36).

It is not simply a matter of what is said, but also of who says it and how it is received. A compelling performance requires *logos* (logical argument), *ethos* (a speaker of good moral fiber) and *pathos* (audience receptivity). Science typically relies on *logos*, but in the plausibility stakes Aristotle recognized that *pathos* and *ethos* are more important still. For him, credibility and morality are fused. To be believable, a speaker must show good sense (*phronesis*), good will (*eunoia*) and good character (*arête*). When these have not been on display, as when the University of East Anglia's Climate Research Unit had its emails hacked and leaked, the results have been catastrophic for the cause. In this instance the science became superfluous. Focus fell on the motivations of the scientists instead.

Smith and Howe show us many more examples besides. Another way into this is to contrast the politician Al Gore with the artist Antony Gormley. For a time, Gore was an object of ridicule. Seemingly a perennial loser – the “inventor” of the internet – the only poll he seemed to top was America's Most Boring. The rhetorical triumph of *An Inconvenient Truth* was to recast him as a person of great virtue. Enter Al Gore as leader, visionary, hero. His elite background was elided. Instead a likeable and humble character inhabits the screen. He has been down but he has picked himself up and he has stayed true to his vision of warning the world about the world's warming. Here emerged, then, a person of great moral character, someone who could convince us that anthropogenic climate change is factual, pressing and solvable.

Gormley, however, was someone with a successful background, a world-renowned sculptor who strayed into the global warming debate. He penned a much-commented upon piece in *The*

Guardian, the substance of which sought to establish his newly-green credentials and to make art more sustainable and sensitive to its surroundings. In this case the audience was not so receptive. His own environmental track record, and the value and purpose of art, were called into question, and his intervention was written off as a cynical attempt at greenwashing, nothing other than a branding exercise.

Smith and Howe conclude that mobilisation requires convincing genres and characters. Everything boils down to the question of trust. Tragedy and satire speak to futility. Romance, with its emphasis on heroism, triumph in the face of adversity and eventual social integration, fits the bill. 'Only if we embrace romance and its associated world-transforming, solidaristic opportunities can we avoid a hot, unjust, and dangerous future' (p. 40). Activists would be well advised to deploy their rhetoric thoughtfully and display the proper ethos. Science is helpful but, as the cases detailed in the book show, it needs to be supplemented by the alignment of action, ethos and location. In climate change's social drama, place matters twofold, as shaper of shared memory and as something precious to be spared from disaster. While Smith and Howe are correct to note that we await "the Tahir or Tiananmen Square of climate change" (p. 168) thanks to them we know the sorts of performances required of us when we get there.