

Why we disagree about climate change

Climate change is not “a problem” waiting for “a solution”. It is an environmental, cultural and political phenomenon that is reshaping the way we think about ourselves, about our societies and about humanity’s place on Earth.

My new book, *Why We Disagree About Climate Change*, dissects this idea of climate change – where it came from, what it means to different people in different places and why we disagree about it. It also develops a different way of approaching the idea of climate change and of working with it. This essay offers a synopsis of my arguments.

Just as the transformation of the world’s physical climates is now inescapable, so too is engagement with the idea of climate change now unavoidable. It is an idea circulating anxiously in the worlds of domestic politics and international diplomacy.

It is an idea circulating with mobilising force in the worlds of business, of law and of international trade. It is an idea circulating with potency in the worlds of knowledge and invention, of development and welfare, of religion and ethics and of public celebrity. And it is an idea circulating creatively in the worlds of art, of cinema, of literature, of music and of sport.

A powerful scientific consensus

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has constructed and presented a powerful scientific consensus about the physical transformation occurring to the world’s climates. This is a reality in which I believe. But there is no comparable consensus – no single perspective or vantage point – that allows us to understand what this kaleidoscopic idea of climate change means for us and our descendants.

Engaging with climate change takes us well beyond the physical transformations that are observed, modelled and predicted by natural scientists and assessed by the IPCC. We need new ways of looking at the phenomenon of climate change – an idea circulating and mutating through our social worlds – and new ways of making sense of the many different meanings attached to the idea of climate change.

Professor Mike Hulme argues that climate change is not a technical issue but a challenge to reinterpret relationships

I deliberately present climate change as an idea to be debated, adapted and used, as much as I treat it as a physical phenomenon that can be observed, quantified and measured. These two ways of seeing climate change are very different.

We have slowly, and at certain times and in some places reluctantly, realised that humanity has become an active agent in the reshaping of physical climates around the world. As we have done so our cultural, social, political and ethical practices are reinterpreting precisely what climate change means.

Far from simply being a change in physical climates – a change in the sequences of weather experienced in given places – climate change has become an idea that now travels well beyond its origins in the natural sciences. And as this idea meets new cultures on its travels and encounters the worlds of politics, economics, popular culture, commerce, international diplomacy and religion – often through the interposing role of the media – climate change takes on new meanings and serves new purposes.

Through my 25 years of work as a professional climate change researcher, university educator and public commentator, I have become fascinated with what has happened to this idea of climate change. I have wondered why climate change has become “the mother of all issues”, the key narrative within which all environmental politics – from global to local – is now framed.

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I have also wondered why controlling climate change – limiting our emissions of greenhouse gases – seemingly remains just beyond our reach. For example, in the 12 years since the Kyoto Protocol was signed, global emissions of greenhouse gases have accelerated rather than reduced.

I have examined these questions using the concepts, tools and languages of the sciences, social sciences and humanities and the discourses and practices of economics, politics and religion. From these different vantage points it becomes possible to see that the idea of climate change carries quite different meanings and seems to imply quite different courses of action depending on whom one is and where one lives.

Science may be solving the mysteries of climate, but it is not helping us discover the meaning of climate change. Indeed, climate change means so many different things to different people. These meanings cannot be read from the pages of the scientific assessments made by the IPCC, nor can they be extracted from the results of the computer models that simulate global climate and tentatively predict its future path.

Revelatory conversations

Our discordant conversations about climate change reveal at a deeper level all that makes for diversity, creativity and conflict within the human story – our various different attitudes to risk, technology and well-being; our different ethical, ideological and political beliefs; our different interpretations of the past and our competing visions of the future.

If we are to understand climate change and use it constructively in our politics, we must first hear and understand these discordant voices, these multifarious human beliefs, values, attitudes, aspirations and behaviours.

To illustrate what I mean, let me cite four contemporary and contrasting ways of narrating the significance of climate change,

just some of the more salient discourses currently in circulation.

Climate change is used as a battleground between different philosophies and practices of science and between different ways of knowing. Arguments revolve around the accuracy of data, the validity of models and the integrity of scientists.

The subject is also used as justification for the commodification of the atmosphere and, especially, for the commodification of the gas carbon dioxide. Arguments revolve around the adequacy of markets for addressing environmental concerns.

Climate change is used as the inspiration for a global network of new or reinvigorated social movements. Arguments revolve around the hyper-consumption and unsustainability of western lifestyles.

Also, climate change is used to reveal threats to ethnic, national and global security. Arguments revolve around the role of the state, the military and the UN in diffusing these threats.

A more interesting story

These perspectives – and many more besides – suggest that rather than starting with (scientific) ignorance and ending with (scientific) certainty, telling the story of climate change is in fact much more interesting. It is the unfolding story of an idea and how this idea is changing the way that we think, feel and act.

Not only is climate change altering our

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physical world, but the idea of climate change is altering our social worlds. And this idea is reaching farther and farther across these social worlds. Rather than asking: “How do we solve climate change?” we need to turn the question around and ask: “How does the idea of climate change alter the way we arrive at and achieve our personal aspirations and our collective social goals?”

Different kind of problem

I argue that climate change is not a problem that can be solved in the sense that, for example, technical and political resources were mobilised to “solve” the problem of stratospheric ozone depletion or asbestos in our buildings. We need to approach the idea of climate change from a different vantage point.

We need to reveal the creative psychological, spiritual and ethical work that climate change can do and is doing for us. By understanding the ways climate change connects with foundational human instincts of nostalgia, fear, pride and justice we open up a way of resituating culture and the human spirit at the centre of our understanding of climate.

Human beings are more than merely material objects and climate is more than merely a physical category. Rather than catalysing disagreements about how, when and where to tackle climate change, we must approach the idea of climate change as an imaginative resource around which our collective and personal identities and projects can and should take shape.

Creative deployment

As a resource of the imagination, the idea of climate change can be deployed around our geographical, social and virtual worlds in creative ways. The idea of climate change can stimulate new thinking about energy and transport technologies. It can inspire new artistic creations in visual, written and dramatised media. It can invigorate efforts to protect our citizens from the hazards of climate.

The idea of climate change can provoke new ethical and theological thinking about our relationship with the future. It can arouse new interest in how science and culture inter-relate. It can galvanize new social



movements to explore new ways of living in urban and rural settings. And the idea of climate change can touch each one of us as we reflect on the goals and values that matter to us.

These are all creative applications of the idea of climate change, but they are applications that do not demand global agreement. Indeed, they may be hindered by the search for such agreement. They thrive in conditions of pluralism and hope rather than in conditions of universalism and fear.

Danger of despair and panic

As we move from one rhetorical climate deadline to another, there is a real danger that a hyperventilating condition of despair and panic will lead society into making either hubristic and authoritarian responses to climate change.

Before we realise it, we may see Paul Crutzen's howitzers pumping shell after shell of aerosols into the stratosphere to wage an almost literal war on climate change.

We may find new versions of Stalinist authoritarianism emerging in our political systems as we keep missing our chimerical numerical targets. After all, what sanction does the UK Climate Change Committee have when the government misses its 2018-2022 emissions target?

We should be using the idea of climate change to reveal, animate and mobilise the latent human values of temperance,

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compassion and justice. And we should be promoting actions that contract the time and space scales that separate purposeful actions from their visible benefits.

In practice this involves action and change that is local and rooted in a sense of place and community, where the benefits are both tangible and immediate – improved air quality, enhanced local mobility, greater energy and food sufficiency.

Remote end point creates difficulty

The problem with trying to “stop climate chaos” – and believing that we can – is that the end is too remote in time (50 years or more) and distant in place (an abstract global climate) for it to have any psychological purchase.

Benefits of change need to be now and they need to be visible. We can use the idea

of climate change to animate such change, but it will not bring utopia on Earth, nor will it stabilise climate. Climate change will not be “solved”.

Continued change inevitable

The world's climates will keep on changing, with human influences on these physical properties of climate now inextricably entangled with those of nature. Global climate is simply one new domain that reveals our embeddedness in nature. But so too will the idea of climate change keep changing as we find new ways of using it to meet our needs.

We will continue to create and tell new stories about climate change and mobilise these stories in support of our projects. Whereas a modernist reading may once have regarded climate as merely a physical boundary condition for human action, we must now recognise climate change as an overlying, fluid and imaginative condition of human existence. ●

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