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Peer reviewed

Review: The Politics of Climate Change

By Anthony Giddens

Reviewed by Yves Laberge
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Giddens, Anthony. *The Politics of Climate Change*. Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009. viii, 264pp. ISBN 9780745646930. US\$22.95, paper.

Professor Anthony Giddens is arguably the most famous contemporary sociologist living in Great Britain, with perhaps his colleague Ulrich Beck. At this moment, I cannot think of a more influential living author in this field, at least in Western Europe, with his many works on social theory, intimacy and modernity. Giddens's most recent book, *Politics of Climate Change*, is his first work entirely related to environmental studies, and it is a timely reflection: "not a book about climate change, but about the politics of climate change" (p.16). This whole issue is critical for citizens, societies and governments because as the author puts it, "we have no politics of climate change" (p.4).

In *Politics of Climate Change* Anthony Giddens reviews the main issues related to emissions control with a welcome dose of sociological thinking; he begins by revisiting the types of sceptics who challenge the idea of climate change (pp.22-28) and he analyzes the attitudes of the groups that predict "the end of the world" (p.29). However, there are optimistic observers as well. Right from the start, in order to understand why nothing seems to change in terms of environmental policies, the author defines his concept of the "Giddens Paradox": "since the dangers posed by global warming aren't tangible, immediate or visible in the course of day-to-day life, however awesome they appear, many will sit on their hands and do nothing of a concrete nature about them" (p.2). All nine chapters abound with recommendations about what to do, at least in terms of policies, in order to reduce emissions globally: "Incentives must take precedence over all other interventions, including those which are tax-based" (p.106).

Topics are varied and countless: the public perceptions of risk — which "are often at odds with reality" (p.32), the energy efficiency, the "Greens," the Carbon Markets. Of course, many chapters (like Chapter 4) focus on policies in Great Britain, but most readers will probably be able to compare the UK with other regions (p.80). While it would be difficult to agree with everything and every idea brought in this work, most readers will appreciate the vivid discussions and the ideas that are debated. Perhaps some passages about the evolution of diesel consumption in Australia and Canada would need quotes or sources, not just numbers and data (p.182). The last chapter which predicts military conflicts as potential results of the future scarcities of energy is only hypothetical and somewhat misleading (p.203).

In sum, while *Politics of Climate Change* is not Giddens's best work, it is definitely a thought-provoking work that should not be read only by sociologists or undergraduates in environmental studies; I believe policymakers and scholars in political science would benefit from its reading as well. We find efficient formulas, clear demonstrations, and useful examples. Here, Giddens' style is always clear and straightforward, without jargon. Like any essay, the author freely uses the first person and expresses frankly his own opinions and beliefs: "I do not want in any sense to downplay such risks; like many others, I am a reluctant convert to nuclear power, at least in so far as some of the industrial and developing countries are concerned" (p.133). On a lighter tone, as an unpredicted challenge for the readers of this journal, Anthony Giddens also expresses (in a minor remark) his reluctance for some words related to nature; he writes: "the word 'green' is in such widespread use that I have no hope of dislodging it" (p.6).

One last thing: I felt uncomfortable with the author bringing right from the start his "own" concept of the "Giddens Paradox." Why in the world did Professor Giddens need to label this idea with his own name? For posterity?

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