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BSA Climate Change Study Group Seminar

Event Report by Catherine Butler and Tom Roberts (Jan 2011)¹

Climate Change, Consumption and Daily Life: The Role of the State

This seminar convened by the Climate Change study group asked six speakers to engage participants in discussion on the theme of the role of the state in climate change, consumption and daily life. The event was jointly organised by Dr Catherine Butler (Cardiff University), Dr Tom Roberts (Kent University) and Dr Carly McLachlan (University of Manchester) and hosted by the Tyndall Centre at the University of Manchester. Dr Catherine Butler and Dr Tom Roberts were joined in giving presentations by Dr Matt Watson, Professor Nick Pidgeon, Professor Kevin Anderson and Dr Philip Boucher. The day was focussed around three themed sessions each involving two talks designed to create a basis for discussion on different aspects of the overarching theme.

In the first session *The Politics of Change*, Professor Anderson began proceedings with his talk entitled 'Real clothes for the Emperor: a paradigm shift in responses to climate change'. He gave a thought provoking talk which saw him argue that the contemporary failures to address emissions lead us to stark choices about how we view the problem – 'to continue with the delusion that emissions can be controlled through rhetoric, financial fine-tuning and piecemeal incrementalism; to view the future as one of futility and despair; or to acknowledge that the greatest obstacles to real change are an absence of honesty and imagination alongside a fear of change itself'. He concluded his talk by arguing that despite the scale of the challenge 'early harnessing of human will and ingenuity may yet offer opportunities to deliver relatively low-carbon and climate-resilient communities'. In particular he pointed to the potential for changes in the ways we live to be enacted quickly (relative to the time scales required to build new infrastructures) and made the argument that only a small percentage (1%) of global inhabitants would need to make such changes in order to have a significant impact on emissions. Dr Tom Roberts followed Professor Anderson with a talk entitled 'Climate Change Mitigation and Social Contracts: Do we need to rethink our approach to environmental decision making?'. In his talk Dr Roberts problematised democracy and democratic processes of participation in the context of climate change decision-making where the timescales for action are short and necessary decisions are likely to be contested.

In the ensuing discussion questions were raised about the nature of contemporary democracy and whether the relationship between scientists, politicians and citizens needs to change in light of the impending climate crisis. For related reading see: Roberts, T. and Mander, S. (in review) Climate Change Mitigation and Social Contracts: A Case Study of Carbon Capture and Storage. *Journal of Energy Policy*. Anderson, K. L. and Bows, A. (2011) Beyond

dangerous climate change: emission pathways for a new world, *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A: Mathematical, Physical and Engineering Science*, 369: 20-44.

In the second session ***Participation and Democracy*** Professor Pidgeon and Dr Boucher delivered talks focused around controversial socio-technological approaches to tackling climate change. Professor Pidgeon kicked off the talks with a presentation entitled 'Deliberating Climate Response: Notes from the field', which focused on deliberative public engagement processes undertaken in relation to geoengineering – the deliberate large-scale manipulation of the planetary environment to counteract anthropogenic climate change. Professor Pidgeon began by introducing the forms of geoengineering currently recognised in scientific thought, broadly divided between solar radiation management and carbon dioxide removal. He then moved on to discuss key findings from deliberative workshops undertaken with members of the UK public, including the conditionality of public support and particularly the importance of distinctions between scientific research “in the lab” and implementation in real world contexts. Dr Boucher gave the second talk in the session on biofuels and their role in low carbon transitions. In his presentation entitled ‘Biofuel Regulation: A non-transition amid a narrowing debate’ he began by introducing his research which examined the resurgence of biofuels in the EU context and the emergence of subsequent controversies. He argued that, during a period of resurgence for biofuels, ‘biofuel development appeared, to some, as a silver bullet solution to concerns about the environment, energy security and rural development without requiring significant transitions in infrastructures or consumer practices’ (Boucher, 2011: 2). Building from this he moved to open up questions around the implications of such approaches for consumption and the potential for the state to lean toward politically easier ‘solutions’ that do not require more significant transitions in daily life.

The concept of non-transitions was a theme that united the two talks as both geoengineering and biofuels represent proposals for tackling change that do not require changes to current consumption patterns. This was discussed as problematic both in terms of the potential for these socio-technical developments to offer real solutions to climate change and in terms of, what has been called in the geo-engineering context, the moral hazard for state action i.e. that such proposals may detract attention from the imperatives that climate change poses to change current systems of production and consumption. The discussion included questions about approaches to public deliberation and the politics of reporting participation, the notion of non-transitions, and nation states taking decisions that are global in their reach. For readings relating to these talks please see: Boucher, P. (2011) The role of controversy, regulation and engineering in UK biofuel development, *Energy Policy*, in press available online at: <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0301421511009529>. Parkhill, K.A and Pidgeon, N.F. (2011) Public engagement on geoengineering research: preliminary report on the SPICE deliberative workshops. Technical Report (Understanding Risk Group Working Paper, 11-01). Cardiff University School of Psychology. Available online at: <http://www.understanding-risk.org/>

Following lunch the third and final session of the day ***Practice and the State*** saw talks from Dr Watson and Dr Butler that explored the ways in which the state intervenes in consumption and daily life. Dr Watson spoke first on the topic of ‘Theories of practice and governing for transition in daily life’. He began by introducing some of the core components of a practice oriented conceptual approach for thinking about consumption and daily life. He continued

opening up discussion around the ways that thinking in practice theoretical terms orients us to think about interventions and the role of state differently. He argued that it does this in a number of ways: 1) by comprehending the dynamics of what people do as a range of elements converging within practice, a broader range of points of intervention is revealed; 2) by understanding bundling of practices, possibilities are revealed for intervening in one practice to effect change in another; and 3) by appreciating systemic inter-relations it becomes clear that we can seek intervention points with *systemic* effects. He concluded by arguing that currently dominant (state) conceptions of government act to place the state outside of the problem and limit the extent of state responsibility and latitude for action. Dr Butler followed with her talk entitled 'Climate change, governmentality and the social reproduction of practice'. In her presentation she combined concepts from the governmentality tradition and practice theory to provide an interpretation of the role that the state plays in daily life. She began by arguing that current state interventions in climate change see the role of government in daily life depicted as one of governing through choice, situating responsibility within individuals who are encouraged through indirect means to make (correct) choices. This directs the focus toward things such as state provision of information, and positions the state's role as one of enabling individuals to 'do' differently. She moved to contrast this depiction of state activities with a conceptualisation of the state as deeply implicated in processes of social reproduction. Dr Butler continued arguing that when we see the state as much more active and deeply embedded in the shaping and configuring of daily life we come to understand its role in social change very differently. She concluded by suggesting the potential need for a far more critically reflexive state that reviewed its own role in shaping social practice and sought to develop change through alterations to the more subtle ways in which it already always intervenes in and shapes practice.

In the discussion delegates raised questions about the potential relevance of empirical analyses in other key areas of sociological research (e.g. health, gender) for interpreting and thinking about issues of socio-environmental change and societal transitions. Further discussion was had around the possibilities for application of the sociological conceptualisations of action and change highlighted in the talks in policy and wider practice. Readings relating to these talks are: **Watson, M.** and Shove, E. (2008). Product, competence, project and practice: DIY and the dynamics of craft consumption. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 8(1), 69-89. Shove, E. Pantzar, M. and Watson, M. (2012) *The Dynamics of Social Practice: Everyday life and how it changes*, Forthcoming by Sage. Butler, C. (2010) *Morality and Climate Change: Is leaving your T.V standby?* *Environmental Values*, 19(2): 169 – 192, available online at: <http://psych.cf.ac.uk/contactsandpeople/researchfellows/butler.html>

In existing research the role of the state in achieving transitions toward more sustainable forms of practice features in a number of different ways. This event brought a focus on the role that the state can, do or should play in relation to climate change, consumption and daily life. As a theme in sociological analysis this represents an interesting and important line of enquiry for current and future analyses.

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