

Climate Change as Social Drama: Global Warming in the Public Sphere. By Philip Smith and Nicolas Howe. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. vii+242. \$29.99 (paper).

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On a landscape of high-quality science and increasing policy sophistication regarding the intricacies of 21st-century anthropogenic climate change, climate conversations are generally stuck. Explained primarily through the tools of Aristotle’s texts *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*, Philip Smith and Nicolas Howe posit that “although the social drama of climate change has come into being, it is by no means potent or very well organized as a cultural system. It is somewhat disorganized drama marked by incoherence, disengagement, and proliferation as much as compression, commitment and consensus” (p. 53).

As such, in *Climate Change as Social Drama*, the authors embark on a quest to unravel blockages associated with this discursive mess so that climate change can become “a full-fledged, universal social drama that would compel decisive public action and institutional reform” (p. 53). While normative undercurrents here clearly flow into movements toward downstream collective social action, Smith and Howe characterize their contribution as pointing “to the need for a considered effort at balanced communication that respects the dignity of both speakers and audience and recognizes the serious nature of the issue at hand” (p. 207).

Analyses in the book are animated by an array of ‘domains and illustrations—focused primarily in U.S. and U.K. contexts—from thematic takes (like representations of climate conferences) to episodic adventures (like the University of East Anglia email hacking scandal (affectionately dubbed “Climate-gate”). They approach these contemporary cases through “social drama”: they argue that Aristotle’s take on cultural structures, emotional impacts, performance, and claims making helps readers consider climate change more seriously.

It is an ambitious treatise. In my view, the book’s value derives from insights gained along the journey. Smith and Howe do well to place the many universal and predictable themes and elements of social dramas—including actors (protagonists, antagonists, witnesses), rhetoric (*logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos*), motivations, locations, plots, genres, and audiences—in contemporary and dynamic 21st-century climate change contexts. For example, explorations of how youth activists “occupy a precarious position in the civil sphere” (p. 162) provide a refreshing take on important intergenerational dimensions of an unfolding climate change social drama on the stage of international policy negotiations.

While vintage Aristotle helps leverage our interrogation of modern predicaments, I found that the authors’ excessive attachment to the Greek philosopher at times got in the way of optimally productive critique. For example, comedic irony as a carrier of productive climate meaning was soundly

rejected in the volume in the name of lost *ethos*. The authors argued that “Aristotle said that we must speak seriously of serious things” (p. 203) and therefore pegged deficiencies of the abilities of characters like the Yes Men, Reverend Billy, and others to the humorous appeals they selected for their messaging. Smith and Howe also wrote that “words like ‘prank’, ‘hoax’, ‘imposter’ and ‘fake’ invariably accompany accounts of their actions. Such terms do not line up easily with those that Aristotelian theory predicts are more helpful, such as ‘trust’, ‘transparency’ and ‘goodwill’” (p. 204). Their fidelity was clear, but their interpretations—in terms of optimal critical engagement with these themes—were comparatively clouded. Similarly, their cordoning of Aristotelian approaches off from potentially complementary traditions such as cultural studies and cultural politics served to blunt rather than sharpen more effective considerations of dynamics and influences of power. In other words, their own self-imposed limits were limiting.

Furthermore, while their Aristotelian framework provides good insights in a number of cases, at times it also oddly vacillates between critiqueless praise (such as the characterization of Al Gore’s parrhesiast role in *An Inconvenient Truth*; chap. 4) and overly harsh critiques (such as the lambasting of the punch-in-the-*pathos* 10:10 Campaign; chap. 6). It pointed to a shortcoming that the authors prefigured in the first chapter: one of uneven methodology. I agree that qualitative work is “no easy task” (p. 9), however, I do not agree that we resign ourselves to mere laments of “complaints about arbitrary case studies and the selective presentation of confirmatory data [that] haunt all qualitative work in the social sciences” (p. 11). This surrendering stance left much then unexplored: for example, there are stark differences in interpretations of *An Inconvenient Truth* between this book and Matthew Nisbet’s *Climate Shift* report, and this necessitated further interrogation. As such, the evidence behind their strong claims that Copenhagen was “bloated, exclusionary and antidemocratic” (p. 154) in 2009 and the climate negotiations in Cancun the following year generated contrasting “collective empowerment through growing solidarity” (p. 155) really needed more (and clearer) support.

Last, Smith and Howe’s exhortations for change are compelling, but they needed to more fully acknowledge the variety of actors and audiences that are involved in these social dramas. Doing so would help readers understand the complex impacts that are ongoing. For example, they wrote, “We believe there is a real possibility for climate change to emerge as a truly compelling social drama—a cultural form that will change history for *us* before climate-change-the-natural-event changes it radically *for us*” (p. 209, emphasis in original). The broad treatment of “us” here as actor and/or audience could be examined more carefully in order to better understand how assorted players—from competent citizens and audacious activists to willing ignoramuses or cunning obstructionists—shape the theater of contemporary emotional, rational, and intellectual contexts.

Ultimately, I read this book with great interest and enthusiasm. It is well written and well argued; the authors successfully achieve their objective of

“generating scholarly debate” (p. 207). They convincingly contend that “‘tool kits’ are only part of the equation” (p. 29) and then show how context and universal constructions of social dramas combine in compelling ways. The authors are clear from the beginning that this book is written as “a scholarly analysis, not an engaged one” (p. 5), and that is a helpful thing to keep in mind as one reads on. That said, Smith and Howe certainly provide grist for the mill regarding how many involved in today’s social drama understand, discuss, and act on these profoundly consequential climate issues going forward.

The Battle for Yellowstone: Morality and the Sacred Roots of Environmental Conflict. By Justin Farrell. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2015. Pp. xvii+291. \$39.50.

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The Battle for Yellowstone brings the Weberian and Durkheimian approaches of cultural sociology to bear on a classically environmental sociological question: ecological conflict and environmental activism around Yellowstone National Park. Drawing on rich data gathered through ethnographic fieldwork, qualitative interviews, and quantitative content analysis, the book centers on uncovering the moral narratives and logics that underlie environmental struggles at Yellowstone. The book begins with an introduction establishing its theoretical framework, which emphasizes the role of belief in shaping human rationality, relations with the biophysical world, and truth claims. Rather than fading away due to increasing technological and economic rationality in modernity, the author argues that there have been “explosions of the sacred within, and across institutions” not normally considered religious, including environmental science and policy (p. 17).

The first two chapters construct the parameters of the argument. The first traces a history of Yellowstone National Park, through its “discovery” to its recent expansion to the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. This chapter constructs three ideal-types that reflect different moral visions of nature as objectified in the Yellowstone landscape. These are the utilitarian vision of natural resource exploitation, which was characteristic of Euro-American westward expansion and the so-called discovery of the area’s natural wonders; the spiritual vision of nature inspired by the romantic and transcendentalist movements of the mid-19th century, which set into motion the creation of the first national park at Yellowstone in 1872; and a biocentric moral vision that focuses on whole ecosystem health and stems from the land ethic of Aldo Leopold and the science of ecology, which led to the expansion of the federally protected area into the surrounding ecosystems.