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## Introduction

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The footprint of climate change is now clearly visible within the culture industries. Museum exhibitions are held, newspaper headlines constructed, novels are written, films are screened and various art forms are provoked by and around the themes of the changing climate and its societal implications. This explicit cultural dimension, alongside the complex scientific, economic, social and political facets of climate change, is attracting increasing academic attention (Hulme 2009; Crow and Boykoff 2014). Yet despite the growing interest in climate change across the social sciences, the cultural domain is often reified, limiting its scope to these cultural industries and thus treating it as a separate sphere of social life analyzed in isolation from other dimensions of the climate problematic. Equally problematic are analyses that tend to relegate the cultural dimensions of climate change to a relatively simple set of factors that can be used to explain the more important questions of, for example, how and why individual behavior will or will not shift in relation to energy consumption, or why actors take certain positions within the international negotiations. In this book, we seek to take a different approach, one in which the cultural responses to climate change are considered as also economic, social and political. In short, we seek to explore the cultural politics of climate change.

In this book, we want to build on initial attempts to think about climate politics as cultural politics. Adopting this perspective requires that we think of the nature and workings of power as always and already cultural, and of culture – the meanings, artifacts and practices that animate society – as intimately political. Previous such attempts include works on social practices surrounding energy use (Shove and Walker 2010; Shove and Spurling 2013), some of the literature on carbon market politics (Descheneau and Paterson 2011; various contributions to Newell and Boykoff 2012; and contributions to Stephan and Lane 2014), some of the work on media and communications (Crow and Boykoff 2014) and cultural representation more broadly (Boykoff et al. 2010). Nevertheless, we aim to go beyond the important and useful contribution of these works in a number of ways.

Why turn to this emerging scholarship? To date, much of the research on climate change from within the social sciences has focused on the global scale: the role of nation states and nonstate actors with an active presence in the international domain, and on the most obviously greenhouse-gas-emissions intensive sectors of the economy, such as energy and transport. Across this now extensive body of work, research has shown that climate change is a “super-wicked” problem (Levin et al. 2012), beset by barriers of various kinds and deeply challenging to resolve. At the same time, existing dominant approaches to climate change politics tend to focus either on policy, behavior or technology as the means through which these barriers are understood, as well as through which solutions are derived.

Policy frames how societal interventions are organized: it reduces the question of politics to one of intervention by already established and uncontested governmental authorities. Yet despite over twenty-five years of efforts to understand and shape the social response to climate change through these means, we still lack sufficient understanding of how climate change has come to be understood and acted upon and the ways in which further progress can be made.

Social responses to climate change are often read through the dominant, methodologically individualist presumptions of disciplines such as economics, psychology and public administration. As Shove (2010) shows, many approaches drawn from such disciplines adopt what she calls the ABC approach: attitudes, behavior and choice. These approaches tend to assume that the relevant sort of question for social science analysis is what motivates individual behavior and thus seeks to intervene to shape individuals’ attitudes and the choices they make. As an alternative to behavior change, technology is often invoked in policy debates: if it is impossible to get people to change their behavior, we should focus instead on radical technological change that reduces emissions even while individual behavior remains unchanged (e.g. Barrett 2009).

There are of course other accounts of climate politics that read the current entrenched situation – and the possibility for transformation – in a different way. At the most general level, those on the anticapitalist left have made numerous interventions arguing that climate change “changes everything” (Klein 2014; see also Lohmann 2006; Pelling et al. 2011). The growth dynamic and corporate domination of capitalism and/or the inequalities and financialization specific to neoliberal forms of capitalism mean that it must be overthrown in order to produce an effective decarbonization. Such accounts typically focus on the emergence of climate justice movements of various forms as *the* moment of (heroic?) disruption, *the* historical subject that can produce this transformation.

Disruption is central to two other accounts of climate politics. First, the transitions literature, couched in terms of complex systems theory, routinely invokes the disruptive potential of small changes. For example, as some emerging niche

technologies and practices operating within existing systems get taken up in the mainstream over time, they change the character of those systems. The decentralized character of some renewable energy technologies is sometimes taken as paradigmatic here – at one level it is simply a change in the fuel mix, but it also enables a redistribution of the ownership of electricity generation, and entails a sociotechnical reorganization of the relationship between production and consumption of electricity.

Second, economic accounts of climate change think through the process of technical change entailed in decarbonization, drawing on Schumpeter and his notion of creative destruction; this would be a process of abandoning existing infrastructure and generating investment cycles centered on new, low-carbon technologies. These accounts recognize (and sometimes celebrate) the disruptive character of this process, including the losses for involved incumbents (such as coal miners or oil companies).

As a step forward from this disruptive theorizing, we suggest that a cultural politics perspective is particularly valuable in coming to grips with precisely why our high-carbon world is so entrenched, so difficult to move – but at the same time it also provides important hints about the sites at which things might become less viscous and more open to possible low-carbon futures. Many current accounts that call for providing the right price signals, the right institutions, or the right information to achieve low-carbon futures miss the depth of social change that decarbonization involves. They fail to deal with the ways in which what we refer to in this volume as *devices*, *desires* and *dissent* – the materialities, subjectivities and resistances through which power and everyday life are organized and practiced – structure the possibilities of transformation that decarbonization entails.

Attending to these dynamics means that rather than regarding the key challenge of addressing climate change as one of removing various kinds of barriers to action, in this volume we emphasize the sheer amount of work involved in low-carbon transitions. We seek to illuminate the interconnections between the devices and desires of a high-carbon society, and the ways in which dissent emerges both in relation to high-carbon norms and in response to initiatives aimed at changing the status quo. Drawing on a range of critical traditions in social science – from political economy, actor–network theory (ANT) and governmentality to radical democracy – the book opens up new directions of inquiry as to how the cultural politics of climate change comes to matter, and with what implications.

The contributions to this book move away from the dominant accounts of climate politics as taking place in the corridors of power – in international negotiations, corporations, and government bureaucracies. Instead, we travel to less well-known destinations in the arenas of carbon markets, urban planning, behavioral change campaigns, business practices, building standards, renewable energy

technologies, and community-level housing schemes. Together, the cases in this book provide insights into some of the most important (but often overlooked) sites through which society's response to climate change is coming to be realized – homes, workplaces, markets, infrastructure systems, and local economies. Understanding the ways in which climate change comes to be culturally and politically embedded across such sites provides new insights as to the kinds of interventions required to accomplish a low-carbon transition. They challenge dominant approaches that focus on improving policy design, promoting technological innovation and encouraging behavioral change. The book thus engages with the more deep-rooted and systemic ways in which our high-carbon lives are sustained and enables new avenues through which we may invest in low-carbon futures.

In the remainder of this chapter, we explore these issues in greater detail. We begin in the next section by exploring the ways in which the cultural dimensions of climate change politics have previously been explored and make the argument for the need for new perspectives. Working from this basis, in Sections 1.2 and 1.3 of this chapter we develop the framework for inquiry that informs this volume. It is based on the analytic triad of devices, desires, and dissent. We first explore each of these in turn and their potential for developing an analytics of the cultural politics of climate change, before turning to consider how the articulation between devices/desires, desires/dissent, and dissent/devices shapes the dynamics of the cultural politics explored in the chapters in the rest of the book. In the final section, we offer some initial thoughts as to the overall implications of taking a cultural politics perspective, issues to which we return in the concluding chapter.

### **1.1 Cultural Politics of Climate Change: Toward New Perspectives**

Culture and climate change politics are not new topics in the social sciences. However, much existing debate either focuses exclusively on cultural dimensions of climate change or tends to relegate the cultural to an issue of little importance. For a growing number of scholars, these approaches are inadequate. Researchers have pointed to the ways in which cultural practices and sites come to be organized and orchestrated in relation to questions of the economies and politics of climate change (e.g. Lovell 2014; Methmann et al. 2013; Shove and Spurling 2013). In this book, we expressly want to examine the ways in which the cultural and the political are intimately interrelated, and to deepen our understanding of their mutual constitution. To explore how and why this is important, we take our point of departure from existing notions about the relation between culture and politics. We suggest that, for the most part, such approaches have tended to focus on the cultural aspects

of climate politics either in terms of how and by whom information is communicated, in terms of how climate change is represented through images, or in terms of the ways in which narratives and imaginations are constructed in order to mobilize different kinds of climate politics.

The largest volume of work is that which focuses on how cultures of climate change are expressed and organized through forms of information and communication (e.g. Moser and Dilling 2007; Sheppard 2012; Crow and Boykoff 2014). Much of it is preoccupied with the immediate normative or policy-oriented question of how to trigger shifts in public opinion. In this arena, often reliant on what is termed an *information deficit* model of social action, policy and research communities have sought to understand how different cultural attributes and forms of communication might be used in order to trigger behavior change among individuals. This, for example, has been the case in governments seeking to design new approaches for communicating climate change to the public. It is often underpinned by traditions of thought emerging from psychology and economics. The interest in “nudge” – a theory of how behavioral change can be achieved through changing so-called choice architectures – is one example (Jones et al. 2014). There is now a substantial literature critical of the information deficit model’s assumptions about the cultural and political aspects of communication (see, e.g., contributions to Crow and Boykoff 2014). Nevertheless, such critiques can be built upon, if the scope of cultural-political analysis is broadened beyond notions of communication per se.

One strand of work that concentrates on cultures of climate change in relation to information and communication has focused on the domain of the media. It interrogates the ways in which climate change is culturally produced by newspapers, television, and social media, through narratives and frames. This is an account of the cultural dimensions of climate change that fits with the common-sense, popular use of the term, in which terms such as *culture industries*, invoked in our opening paragraph, make sense. While competing accounts exist of the relationship between information, the media, and individuals, this literature also tends toward an understanding that more of the right kind of knowledge is critical in creating the conditions for action on the part of individual agents.

In drawing attention to information and communication as a site of cultures of climate change, this literature has pointed to the ways in which different discourses are being mobilized by multiple and competing interests. Yet this is often underpinned by a thin account of culture and also, almost always, by a thin account of politics. It limits culture to a specific, institutionalized domain of social life, and regards the content of culture – media narratives and imagery – as instrumentally produced frames, either reflecting specific interests (such as oil companies) and thus acting ideologically (e.g. Gunster and Saurette 2014), or normatively invoking the notion of a classical Habermasian public sphere, where communication can

occur in a fashion that enables critical citizens to act (Stevenson and Dryzek 2014). In this last mode in particular, such work tends to subscribe wholeheartedly to liberal democracy's rhetoric of citizen sovereignty as the basis for contemporary political life in ways that diminish the range of means by which politics is thought to function. Even more importantly, in relation to the generation of action around climate change, it is also in many instances demonstrably wrong. New information is neither sufficient nor necessary to generate changes in practice (see Mylan, Chapter 10 in this volume, for one demonstration of this), and sometimes, in fact, it reinforces and sediments resistance to climate action, as contemporary research on the politics of climate denial shows effectively (see, variously, Norgaard 2011; Oreskes and Conway 2011).

A second set of research focuses on the relation between culture and politics through the imagery and semiotics by which it is represented. In this approach, culture is understood and used principally as a means to explore the sorts of prevalent and marginalized ways that climate change and its associated processes are socially constructed – how meanings are made in relation to climate change. For some working in this tradition the media (broadly conceived to include formal media outlets, but also advertising, campaigns, and so forth) is a site of research (e.g. Gunster 2012; Manzo 2012). This wider interpretation of the sites of culture and the ways in which climate change is manifest broadens the scope of where and how we conceive of the cultural dimensions of climate change politics.

By attending to the ways in which meanings are attached to climate change, and the processes through which they are constructed, this work begins to engage with the relation between cultural construction and the production of values and identities at the level of the subject. Yet such work remains rather narrowly conceived in terms of how specific climate change narratives are constructed and mobilized – think of the classic image of a polar bear on a small ice floe – and with this retains a sense that action at the level of the individual will be forthcoming through developing new constructions of the problem of climate change. Culture remains limited to the question of representation and meaning-making: in Boykoff et al.'s (2010) definition: “By cultural politics we mean those oft-contested and politicized processes by which meaning is constructed and negotiated across space, place and at various scales” (136). Head (Chapter 6 in this volume) shows persuasively that if we are to focus on such meaning-making, it needs to be also about the semiotics and affective politics of responses to climate change, not just about climate change and its impacts.

More importantly, perhaps, for the question posed at the beginning of this chapter, it is hard to understand how the semiotics of climate imagery, on its own, can be powerful enough to overcome the kinds of high-carbon inertia we seek to understand. For example, highly attractive visualizations of alternative



possible urban worlds (as, for example, in Sheppard 2012) might trigger the desire to bicycle, grow food, and so forth, but this remains only one small aspect of where the political will to address climate change can be forged and does not help us understand the material, infrastructural dynamics that enable or (more commonly) constrain the possibilities of realizing such futures. Our account of cultural politics therefore needs to go beyond the question of meaning and to become more fully embodied, more material.

Similarly, a third way that culture is considered in relation to climate change remains focused on semiotics and meaning but extends the scope to consider how such practices of meaning-making are linked to forms of ideology. Cultural climate politics here is about the competing visions of both high- and low-carbon worlds as well as between different versions of each. For example, these include those who see technocentric futures versus those who focus on society-led transitions; those who are capitalist in orientation and those who are avowedly anticapitalist; approaches that emphasize a more neoliberal response in contrast to those that are more social democratic in their perspective. Climate politics operates via the clash of these imaginaries. This rich account of politics emerges from the contestation between different agonistic constructions of the climate change problem and its solutions (Mouffe 2005; Machin 2013; Klein 2014).

Nevertheless, all three approaches to the cultures of climate change remain concerned with an interpretation of culture as largely a mediated, socially constructed phenomenon to which individuals may or may not subscribe, rather than attending to the ways in which culture is embodied in the material world and in the constitution of subjectivities and forms of resistance. Such a focus on broad social imaginaries means that this interpretation of culture is often abstracted from questions of the “obdurate” qualities of material infrastructures and objects (see Quitzau and Hoffmann, Chapter 9 in this volume). Where such forms of obduracy are acknowledged, they are usually taken for granted as part of the production of particular interests. So, for example, in Naomi Klein’s (2014) work, while climate politics is understood in terms of competing imaginaries, as exemplified in her subtitle, *Capitalism vs. the Climate*, the detailed cultural material life of high-carbon capitalism is reduced to a question of corporate interests and strategy.

While these approaches have provided valuable insights into the “more than economic” ways in which the culture of climate change has come to be expressed and made to matter, we suggest they remain based in a limited reading of the cultural that in turn constrains the ways in which we might think about climate’s cultural politics. Most notably, across all three bodies of work, culture is interpreted as a mediated set of social interactions, providing the forms through which climate change is represented or constructed. Such a reading both confines the cultural to

the social world and considers climate change as a cultural issue only when it is explicitly rendered as such.

In seeking new directions for this field of research, we find that engaging with alternative interpretations of culture from within the traditions of anthropology provides some helpful alternatives. Across this discipline, which has made culture its defining concept, the notion of culture is always simultaneously semiotic and material – as, for example, is seen classically in Geertz’s (1973) account of a Balinese cockfight, where the fight is symbolic of social relations of hierarchy and competition between men, and also materially reproduces or changes those social relations. Drawing on these traditions, we define culture broadly in this volume to include “the meanings that we give social life and material objects, and the concrete practices that they enable and depend on for their sustenance” (Best and Paterson 2009, 4).

Not only is this a richer definition of culture, but it also attends to politics in a more explicit manner. In this perspective, culture is explicitly recognized as (re)produced through the assembling and mobilization of material objects and the kinds of actor networks and sociotechnical configurations through which they are constituted. This in turn widens the scope of where we might expect to find the cultures of climate change – beyond mediated discourses of various kinds – and draws us into the sites through which both high-carbon societies and their low-carbon alternatives are produced and maintained. Examples along these lines are in Strauss et al.’s (2013) look at a wide variety of ethnographic explorations into how energy is imagined, used, and contested across a range of cultural contexts, from electrification and transformation of the rural and colonial, from Indigenous Alaskan communities to everyday life in New York. The authors do not just excavate those sites in great detail; through the concept of *energyscapes*, they follow energy in motion across physical and social spaces, revealing its shifting technological, social, and cultural values. In another example, Roberts and Edwards (2010) make an analysis of what they call the “petro-nutritional complex,” in which the connections between obesity and climate change have the same origin in our globally oil and car-dependent society, and both are seen as political, not personal, problems. They zoom in on “obesogenic environments” – spaces that encourage people to eat more, be more unhealthy, and not do enough exercise – as sites that need to be disrupted and redesigned, for example in terms of walkability. Such ways of thinking open up questions concerning what constitutes the political in order to engage with the ways in which authority, power, contestation, and conflict are manifest through the production and practice of climate change.

This volume starts by putting these issues at the heart of its analysis. It seeks to develop an account of the cultural politics of climate change that attends to the



ways in which it is made material, the forms of subjectivity that it engenders, and the kinds of resistance it involves.

## 1.2 A Framework for Inquiry: Devices, Desires and Dissent

In seeking to develop an alternative approach to the cultural politics of climate change, we need not only to draw on a deeper tradition of how culture can be understood, but also to reposition the role of culture in current explanations about the nature of social responses to climate change. We do this by turning to a range of different disciplines and concepts derived from what could be called the critical social sciences – those that seek to deconstruct/problematicize normalized social categories such as the individual, agency, the state, politics, power, and so on, in order to produce insights into the dynamics of the social/material world – in order to offer an alternative set of perspectives. We find a useful starting point for analysis to be through thinking about three concepts: devices, desires, and dissent, and the set of relations between them.

The notion of *device* is used here to refer to the particular objects, technologies, and techniques (or, perhaps more precisely, the assemblage of specific constellations of objects and techniques) through which everyday life in high-carbon, decarbonizing, and low-carbon societies is organized. The concept draws attention to the material techniques, artifacts, and infrastructures through which the cultural politics of climate change is manifest. *Device* stands in for the kinds of technologies and techniques deployed by governmentality approaches, or obligatory passage points, actants and *agencements* within ANT.

We use the term *desires* to denote the affective and visceral dimensions of social life – hopes, fears, joy, and anguish – and their embodied expression. More than values or beliefs, desires transcend individuals and are constituted socially and materially through forms of subjectivity, such as the “caring mother” or the “diligent worker.” These desires orchestrate people’s experience of climate change itself, but also – and perhaps more importantly – they underlie devices manifest in the conduct of high-carbon ways of living, and shape how the devices intended to promote new forms of low-carbon practice are entrained, ignored, and rejected. Such desires are not held or discarded at the level of the individual, but, rather, are constitutive of different forms of subjectivity, and may coexist in complex and conflicting ways.

In turn, our concern with *dissent* entails exploring the contestation around these devices and desires – to connect questions of culture explicitly to the clash of visions and power central to the understanding of politics. We use the term to examine the ways in which forms of resistance and disengagement emerge through the working of climate’s cultural politics. While resistance implies active forms of

rejecting either high- or low-carbon forms and practices, dissent captures also the more mundane, incremental, and provisional ways in which power is contested (as in Scott's 1987 classic analysis). Rather than operating in isolation, the dynamic interaction of these elements of cultural politics produces the challenges and potential of low-carbon transitions.

This analytical set of categories – devices, desires, and dissent – allows us to engage with the concerns in mainstream debates about climate policy in terms of how and by whom responses should be organized and realized, but in a manner that enriches our understanding of the nature and practice of cultural politics. While these simple categorizations belie the complexity of the actual workings and experience of the cultural politics of climate change, we find it helpful analytically to consider how they may relate in specific ways, so that we may unpack how such politics are being produced and practiced in a range of different sites and registers. In the next sections, we develop how we conceive of each of these concepts in more detail, before turning to the more critical question of the ways in which they come to be entwined and recursively constituted in relation to one another.

### *1.2.1 Conceptualizing Devices, Desires, and Dissent*

We use the term *devices* to refer to specific technologies (e.g. bicycles), assemblages of technologies (e.g. transport systems), and techniques of government in the Foucauldian sense (e.g. accounting procedures). Within traditions of ANT and social studies of technology, artifacts and assemblages have been conceptualized not as passive participants in the working of everyday life, but as actants, essential to the ways in which life is orchestrated and given meaning. Likewise, for scholars of governmentality, the techniques through which power is mobilized and resisted are central to the realization of governmental programs and the forms of conduct through which they are made material.

We use the term to capture this diversity and to emphasize their active qualities – how they intervene in the activity of agents, both individual and collective. Devices are things designed to shape activity in specific ways. So, unlike the usual way in which technologies are positioned, devices are not thought of as neutral. At the same time, they are not simply tools; they do have definite effects, but not always those that their designers intended. They act in the world but in an often unpredictable and complex manner. If the notion of devices expands significantly on the concept of technology, then, when combined with desires, devices expand on the notion of behavior.

Practice has increasingly been used to provide an account of human activity alternative to individualist, rationalist conceptions involved in the notion of behavior. The notion of *practice* (from Bourdieu 1977) has most prominently been used