
BOOK REVIEW

***Rapid Climate Change: Causes, Consequences, and Solutions*, by Scott G. McNall, New York: Routledge, 2011, 104 pages, \$9.95 Paper. ISBN: 978-0415892032.**

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The climate crisis is a problem unlike any that humans have ever faced. The field of environmental sociology has been expanding rapidly in response, with several impressive publications studying climate change recently published by sociologists. *Rapid Climate Change* by Scott McNall contributes to environmental sociology as a brief entry-level reader on climate change. In this short, four-chapter book, McNall summarizes some of the foundational publications in environmental studies, among them: *The Tragedy of the Commons*, *The Limits to Growth*, and the Brundtland Report or *Our Common Future*. Regarding climate science literature as a whole, McNall also stresses how scientists in the field agree on the matter:

There is, among climate scientists, enormous consensus about our changing planet. ... We know for sure that CO₂ build-up causes the Earth to warm and we know for sure that as the planet warms it will speed up processes that reinforce one another. ... These models are becoming increasingly accurate, as more and more data are collected. They are tested based on both their ability to portray accurately what has happened in the past, as well as what will happen in the future. If anything, the models have been conservative, for the Arctic Sea ice has melted much more rapidly than predicted by the IPCC models (2011:9).

This last sentence is significant. Although the most recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Control (IPCC) report is only four years old, it already offers insufficient calculations for just how

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serious the damage is likely to be. These models are conservative because emissions are exceeding the amount the IPCC climate models foresaw, and the climate is changing even more rapidly than the IPCC reports predicted. Therefore, we should expect changes even more extreme than what the IPCC's "worst-case scenario" suggests.

McNall not only shows how prevalent the consensus is among climate scientists, but he also addresses arguments made by contrarians—whom McNall characterizes as pro-growth social conservatives (2011:28)—and explains why they are inaccurate. Among the denialists' arguments are: "The Earth is simply going through a natural cycle and has been warming since the last Ice Age," and "It's sunspots" (2011:10). McNall's responses to these arguments are, respectively: "It is the tilt of the [Earth's] axis... that drives the ice ages... Our climate, then, cannot be explained in terms of natural cycles," and "Solar radiation pulses occur every 11 years and account only for very small variations in temperature" (2011:10). McNall's clear and simple explanation of opposing arguments makes *Rapid Climate Change* useful for readers with little or no prior knowledge of climate change literature, giving it pedagogical value.

McNall's book is well-suited for an introductory sociology course at the college level. Each chapter ends with five discussion questions, making *Rapid Climate Change* useful for teaching a unit on environmental sociology. McNall occasionally shows his stripes as a sociologist by focusing on global inequalities:

Climate change is unlike other problems... because the effects of climate change are unevenly distributed, falling most heavily on the world's poor and on future generations. Our ability to cope with climate change is unequal...The poor of the world are seldom in a position to adapt to climate shocks or environmental disasters ([original emphasis] 2011:15).

Although some of the questions are too simple for college-level students, readers with no prior exposure to climate change literature would find them helpful. At times the book seems too elementary for most college readers: "The Earth is a special place; it is the only planet in our solar system that supports human life" (2011:3). However, the book remains a helpful introductory reader. For

instance, several vocabulary words that may be novel to readers unfamiliar with the literature (e.g., “biomass” and “albedo effect”) are in bold and defined in the glossary. Less experienced students can consult the index and glossary to learn more about the terminology, and to consult three highly informative and illuminating websites that McNall presents in the book’s final chapter, each of which offers a survey to users and measures their personal emissions and impact on the earth.

Although *Rapid Climate Change* clearly outlines the science behind global warming and the deceptive tactics used by climate change contrarians, it also focuses on how we have addressed emissions problems. McNall briefly describes the advantages and disadvantages of carbon taxes or carbon permits in a cap-and-trade system, and how they could be implemented (2011:54). Furthermore, in the segment “California as a Leader,” (2011:30–31) McNall focuses on California’s Assembly Bill 32. This portion of the book provides a specific example of how a state can make a serious effort to reduce emissions when its policymakers understand the ramifications of climate change. This section is of particular importance because it shows (1) that governments are capable of overcoming bipartisan bickering as well as the agenda of climate contrarians, (2) that governments can agree that ecological dangers can potentially wreak havoc on citizens and therefore need to be addressed, and (3) that climate change is a challenge that requires many different strategies to address sufficiently, including higher fuel efficiency standards and investing in renewable energy.

The tone of *Rapid Climate Change* is similar to Al Gore’s *Our Choice* (2009). If readers are diving into climate change literature for the first time, reading *Our Choice* in conjunction with *Rapid Climate Change* would provide a solid overview of the climate crisis. For readers familiar with Gore’s book, McNall’s writing provides a succinct, 100-page overview (without the stunning photographs of *Our Choice*) of what Gore addresses in more detail. *Rapid Climate Change* is less extensive than *Our Choice*, but very convenient for a short introduction that could be easily digested within a few hours.

Rapid Climate Change is a very manageable book and it works well as a preliminary reading for beginning college students, or perhaps younger teenagers with an interest in climate change. It

outlines the science of climate change, the flaws in the arguments of global warming denialists, the actions that have been and could be used to address climate change, sociologically relevant ideas such as inequality, and it has a very useful index and glossary. Overall, this book would help anyone developing an interest in climate change and students in a sociology class that emphasizes environmental sociology or discusses climate change as a social problem.