

Book Review: Climate Change and Post-Political Communication: Media, Emotion and Environmental Advocacy by Philip Hammond

*In this well-written and engaging book, **Climate Change and Post-Political Communication: Media, Emotion and Environmental Advocacy**, Philip Hammond draws together a range of interesting perspectives on the politics of climate change. However, these ideas are employed in the service of a flawed thesis which risks misrepresenting the scientific evidence and recent political history, warns Christopher Shaw.*

Climate Change and Post-Political Communication: Media, Emotion and Environmental Advocacy. Philip Hammond. Routledge. 2018.

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Philip Hammond's book, *Climate Change and Post-Political Communication: Media, Emotion and Environmental Advocacy*, argues that political elites have used climate change as a cause to provide a post-political agenda to fill the void left by the end of the Cold War. In the post-political age, it is no longer necessary or even possible to question the prevailing order. Agency in the post-political world is circumscribed and limited to a turning inwards towards individual therapeutic acts. Celebrities and journalists, in narrating their own conversion to the environmentalist cause and demonstrating penance for the damage done, provide models for ordinary people on how to respond to climate change. Hammond considers the grief and emotional responses modelled by these celebrities (including Leonardo DiCaprio, Emma Thompson, Al Gore et al) to be a political dead-end.

The idea that humanity's fate might be determined by nature is unconscionable for many social and cultural theorists. So Hammond does not have much time for scientific knowledge, nature and the physical world. At one point he writes that 'it is a funny kind of science that would seek to shut down arguments from those who deny the scientists' projections' (57). This is a telling statement, which reveals the weakness that lies at the heart of Hammond's argument. In actual fact, scientists have spent countless hours engaging with the scientific debates surrounding climate change projections, rather than seeking to 'shut down arguments'. Would we think it a funny kind of science that, after careful study, rejected flat earth theories or concluded that there are no fairies living at the bottom of the garden?

In the first chapter, Hammond explains that the emergence of environmentalism at the end of the Cold War offered elites a new grandiose project to subdue political disputes. Hammond (in fact contradicting his claim that climate change is a substitute for fighting the Cold War) traces the emergence of environmentalism as an issue of interest to politicians to US President Richard Nixon's promotion of the environmental agenda and creation of the Environmental Protection Agency in 1970. Apparently, this was motivated by the desire to find an apolitical cause to unite a divided nation, at that time obliterating the people of Vietnam (21). But the slaughter of the Vietnamese people was being carried out as part of the Cold War. So it seems that environmentalism and building a liberal hegemony can co-exist concurrently as part of the political elite's agenda, and it was not necessary to wait for the end of the Cold War before moving on to environmentalism.



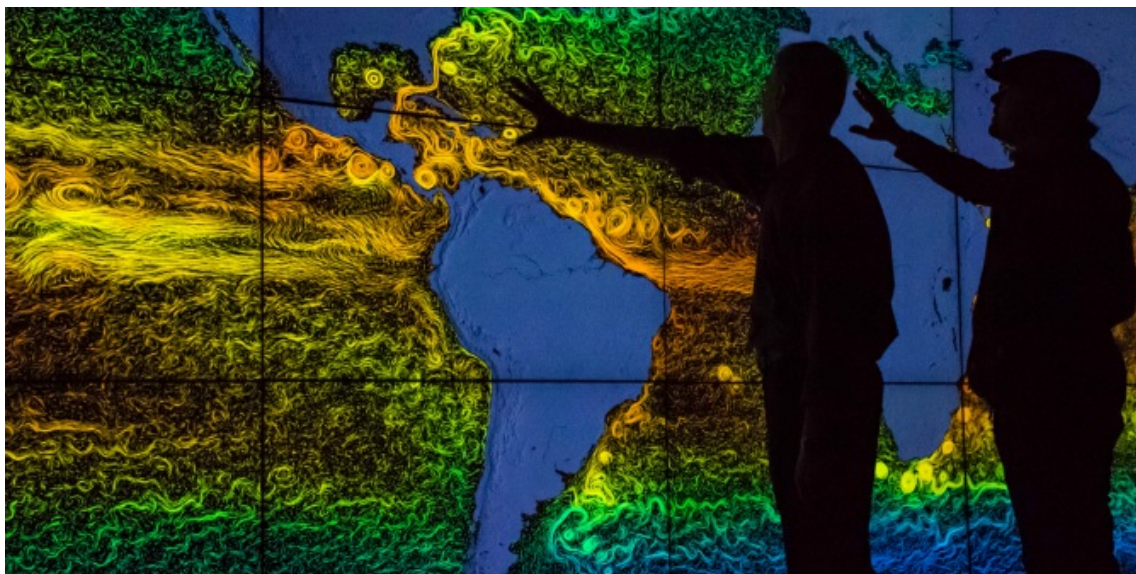


Image Credit: Leonardo DiCaprio visits Goddard Space Flight Center to discuss Earth science with Piers Sellers, April 2016 ([NASA Goddard Space Flight Center CC BY 2.0](#))

Hammond then discusses former UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's speeches on climate change. He argues the timing of the speeches she gave in 1989 and 1990 demonstrate the validity of his claim that climate change was just a substitute for the now-absent threat of communism (27). Hammond suggests that the real purpose of these speeches was to articulate a new rationale for international cooperation, a new global post-political order that was demanded by the threat of climate change (31). It was not, argues the author, the result of leaders responding to political pressure from below.

Let us just quickly attend to this key element of Hammond's argument. Hammond does not recognise the possibility that climate change is real and (apropos Jürgen Habermas) a legitimization crisis for the industrial growth paradigm. His argument cannot see that the neoliberal embrace of environmentalism is not motivated by the search for a new crusade at the end of history, but is a panicked response to the inescapable evidence that we are pressing up against non-negotiable ecological limits. The actions and speeches of political leaders, which Hammond takes at face value, are better understood as an elite capturing of the definition of the problem, so that they can take ownership of defining what counts as a suitable solution.

Thatcher's climate change speeches were very much driven by political pressure from the people. At the time Thatcher was making those speeches, environmentalism was actually climbing up the public agenda rapidly, and polls showed (and continue to show) [a majority wanted economic growth to be sacrificed in order to save humanity. In 1989 the Greens in the UK won 15 per cent of the vote in the European Parliament elections](#). That was what motivated elites to pick up the environmental banner: it was a process of co-opting the debate to protect the legitimacy of the Western liberal order in the face of public pressure for change. At the time of these speeches [Thatcher also had herself filmed picking up litter](#): a symbolic act designed to tame the environmental monster, and reconstruct the issue as something that could be solved through a minor modification to individual behaviour, suitable for the post-political world. However, by the late 1990s, there was a massive and growing worldwide protest movement against the social and environmental damage being wrought by neoliberalism. There were [200,000 demonstrators at the G8 conference in Genoa in 2001](#): a huge revolutionary movement brought to a sudden end by the new security regime post-9/11.

Hammond is on safer ground in Chapters Three and Four. Here, he explores the relationship between celebrity media consumption and climate change. These chapters include a summary of key theories to explain patterns in the quality and quantity of news stories on climate change. Hammond pays particular attention to indexing theory to demonstrate that media coverage on climate change is driven by the attention given to the issue by political elites. He goes on to argue that recent celebrity documentaries (e.g. DiCaprio's [Before the Flood](#) (2016), and Thompson's [Save the Arctic](#) short film (2014)), but also Al Gore's 2006 documentary [An Inconvenient Truth](#) show acts of self-examination, self-criticism and therapeutic action, which are designed to function as an example to the rest of humanity. In addition, these films and programmes are what political leaders look to in order to understand what the public are thinking about climate change.

Chapter Five responds to claims that these indications and exhortations to engage with climate change at the emotional level can lead to political action. Instead, Hammond argues that this kind of activity reduces the public to spectators and constitutes an attempt to fill the politics-shaped hole with emotional therapeutic sentiments (121). This is a sound enough argument, but I expect Hammond would be just as dismissive of documentaries demanding a political response, if the politics concerned were informed by the irrefutable ecological demands of the climate science. For what it is worth, my own political activism is informed by knowledge of the climate change science, which was in part gleaned through emotional mainstream media reports and films. My research has given me the opportunity to speak to many young people, who report similar political responses to emotional appeals.

Overall, *Climate Change and Post-Political Communication* collates some interesting and valid ideas that will be of interest to those looking for an overview of social theory on the communication of climate change. However, the argument which Hammond uses to connect these perspectives – that climate change is a construct used by political leaders to sustain the post-political order – is not borne out by even the most cursory consideration of the science of climate change and recent political history.

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Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.