



## The 'third way' for climate action\*

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**review of:**

Anthony Giddens (2009) *The politics of climate change*. Cambridge: Polity (PB, pp. 264, £14.99, ISBN 978-0-7456-4693-0)

During the last two decades, there has emerged a substantial literature on climate change that deals with its various aspects from the very science of climate change to its economics, with widespread ramifications (see Cowie, 2007; IPCC, 2007; Stern, 2006). In his book, *The Politics of Climate Change*, Anthony Giddens sets out with the task of chalking out a political framework, which he believes is needed in order to deal with climate change. Giddens, who is a key proponent of 'third way' politics, interestingly begins with the assertion that 'we have no politics of climate change' (4). Hence he attempts to apply a political logic to the crisis of climate change, which, in my mind, is an invaluable starting point, given the manifold political struggles that have been fought over this topic over at least the past two decades.

The first thing that catches our eye is the blurb on the book cover by former US president Bill Clinton, one of the poster boys of 'third way' politics (the others being Tony Blair and Gordon Brown). In order to better understand this book and to put it into perspective, we need to first understand Giddens' political project and what the 'third way' is all about. In broad terms, the 'third way' refers to a middle path between socialism and capitalism. Supporters of the 'third way' see it as a political movement much needed in times of globalisation, which has brought about a sea change in traditional social, economic and political constructs (Giddens 1999; Whiteford, 2003: 41; Botsman and Latham, 2001: 17). Giddens (1998), and other proponents of the 'third way', suggest that it is a political movement intended to break free from the two extremes of traditional reformist socialism, on the one hand, and neo-liberalism, on the other. Giddens (1999: n.p.) defines 'third way' politics as 'an endeavour to apply left-of-centre values, those values being social solidarity, inclusion, protection of the vulnerable, not countenancing too-large inequalities in society'. On the whole the 'third way' looks like an attempt to create a political framework that addresses the concerns of

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social justice and equality embedded in an economic system based on the logic of free markets. At a certain point, defining the objectives of the 'third way' can become difficult as it tries to walk a thin line between economic growth and social inclusion, free markets and government intervention, socialism and capitalism (Hamilton, 2001: 2; Hargreaves and Christie, 1998: 1).

Giddens begins *The Politics of Climate Change* by asking why anyone would still want to drive an SUV (the SUV being used as a metaphor) for even a single day longer (1). He dedicates the first two chapters of the book to giving a fairly good overview of the various debates and standpoints on climate change and the interrelated issues of the geopolitics of energy use and energy security. In spite of the growing evidence of the threats of climate change and the resulting catastrophes, the reason why people still drive SUVs is, according to Giddens, because unlike other threats, climate change seems to be quite abstract. Giddens calls this 'Giddens' paradox'. It is because of this paradox that not much action has been taken on climate change, as most people seem to be waiting for the threats to be visible, unaware that by then it might be too late to salvage the situation (2). But this paradox, which Giddens has named after himself, is not a truly novel concept and has been under discussion in environmental studies for the past twenty years (Monbiot, 2009; Pielke, 2009; Castree, 2010: 156). In fact, the more fundamental question that arises is whether we can simply consider 'Giddens' paradox' as solely responsible for inaction on climate change. In recent years the effects of climate change are getting more evident by the day in the form of extreme weather events like droughts, floods, changes in seasonal patterns, and outbreaks of diseases and so forth. Hence, to simply attribute inaction to the fact that the effects of climate change are abstract would be too simplistic. There is a need for critical analysis of the stronger forces at play that define the social, political and economic structures we live in and which are responsible for the so-called SUV attitude of living.

Having discussed climate change and energy security, Giddens moves on to the green movement. In his introduction, Giddens makes an emphatic acknowledgement of the green movement as he talks of its success in bringing the issue of climate change to the limelight of the mainstream (6). But suddenly he takes a U-turn and narrows down the green movement to a case against capitalism and markets (49, 50). In fact, throughout the book Giddens is more critical of the green movement than of the polluting industries (Pielke, 2009; Graham-Leigh, 2009; Perrow, 2010: 413). One of the main reasons for this is that he believes that the principles advocated by the green movement are not quite applicable to the crisis of global warming because global warming is a more multi-dimensional issue than problems of local pollution. It is quite true that global warming is a multi-dimensional problem, but that does not make local pollution completely insignificant. In fact, global warming is the outcome of the accumulation of local pollution. For farmers in India, for instance, global warming is not necessarily the problem they are interested in thinking about. But they are concerned with the local pollution that affects their crop. In Giddens' opinion green values like 'conservatism' or concepts of being 'close to the nature' can stand in the way of measures like building nuclear power plants or wind farms in the countryside (55). It is quite interesting that, on the one hand, Giddens does acknowledge that global warming is a multi-dimensional issue and not as simple as local pollution; but at the same time, when it comes to action on global warming, he ignores the very key issues of climate justice and human rights

imperatives while suggesting that the greens might be a hurdle to action on global warming.

Furthermore, Giddens offers his critique of the concept of sustainable development, pointing out that the concept is perhaps an oxymoron, and 'it is more of a slogan than an analytical concept' (63). Giddens instead chooses to use the two words 'sustainable' and 'development' separately. According to him, the term 'sustaining' is important in ensuring that the environment is protected. Once again, Giddens offers a very simplistic view on sustainability, ignoring the complexity of the concept. Sustainability is not just about the environment or ecology, but about an equilibrium among environment, economic growth and social well-being and the interactions among different actors involved in this complex web (Wheeler, 1998). Giddens also questions the terms development and over-development, but again at a very superficial level. He recognises the fact that industrial countries should focus more on emissions reduction and less on development, whereas poorer countries need to develop as the rich countries have, even if it may raise emissions for a particular period of time, after which they could converge their efforts to reduce emissions together with the developed countries (64). But what this section lacks is the analysis of how development has been defined so far. It does not question the model of development, which to a great extent has been responsible for the current environmental crisis. Furthermore, this section lacks a rigorous analysis of the unequal power relations between the developed and developing countries and the interdependencies through which the process of development takes place.

Towards the end of the first half of the book Giddens introduces a range of concepts, which he argues are necessary for understanding and implementing the politics of climate change (68-72). The first concept is that of the 'ensuring state'. The ensuring state, according to Giddens, will play the role of the state as a 'top-down agency', but will also act as facilitator to get diverse groups of society together to achieve 'bottom-up' solutions and ensure that desired results are achieved. The second concept that Giddens raises is 'political convergence', which is about having public policies that overlap with achieving the goals of containing climate change. Similarly, the third concept of 'economic convergence' refers to the 'overlap between low-carbon technologies and business practices and lifestyles with economic competitiveness' (69). The fourth concept is 'political transcendence', where Giddens asserts that the issue of climate change is not a 'left-right' issue and should thus transcend all forms of party politics. Along with these, Giddens also introduces other concepts such as 'foregrounding', 'climate change positives', 'the percentage principle', 'the development imperative', 'over-development' and 'proactive adaptation' (71-72).

There is not enough space here to discuss all of these concepts; so let us focus on what I regard as the most important concept: 'political transcendence'. It is this concept that brings us to the heart of Giddens' political project and the core of the political framework that Giddens is trying to advocate. Throughout the book, Giddens is stressing that climate change is not a 'left-right' issue and should go beyond it. What exactly is meant by this transcendence? Giddens (1994, 1998) creates a specific distinction between early or simple modernity and late modernity. According to Giddens, early modernity was characterised by mechanisms like governments or the bureaucracies of the nation-states, which worked to give social members a 'meaning in

life'. But with globalisation in the late modern era the traditional roles of the mechanisms under the nation-state have diminished and to a great extent disappeared. But this detraditionalisation has created 'empty spaces'. In order to fill these empty spaces the individual has to be more 'reflexive' and 'create his own biographies', which Giddens (1998) calls 'life politics' (see Mouzelis, 2001: 2). Hence for Giddens the idea of 'left' and 'right' was more relevant in early modernity, but in today's globalised world we are faced with challenges that require a new framework which goes beyond the rhetoric of 'left' and 'right' (Giddens, 1999). Hence, the need for a 'third way'.

In order to get a better understanding of the relevance of 'third way' politics we need to understand Giddens' distinction between the 'left' and the 'right'. The role of the 'left' in early modernity was to bring about equality as it is a necessary pre-condition for fulfilling larger goals of societal welfare and economic prosperity. Hence the 'left' held the role of an emancipator in early modernity. This role, however, would be out of date in this era of globalisation where there is a need to create new life-styles and new individual identities (Mouzelis, 2001: 3). Giddens seems to suggest that the role played by the 'left' in the era of early modernity might be misplaced in today's dynamic economic structures and, in fact, may prove to be anti-growth in an age where everyone has a burning desire for growth and economic prosperity.

So, is the idea of 'left' and 'right' then no longer relevant? In this age of a globalised, neo-liberal world we see 'unprecedented social mobilization' which is continuously attacking the idea of 'localism' (Mouzelis, 2001: 7). New capitalist social relations are constantly being constructed to further create avenues for capitalist accumulation (Harvey, 2003; De Angelis, 2007). This process is including as well as excluding individuals from the so called 'imagined community' of the globalised world (Mouzelis, 2001: 7). If we consider that the politics of the 'left' is a politics of emancipation – one that tries to bring about social equality – then this ideology of 'left-right' is even more apt today where we are seeing massive protests around the world against corporate greed in the form of, for example, the Occupy movement.

The entire idea of 'left-right' becomes even more relevant in the case of the environment. According to Mouzelis (2001) this era of globalisation and 'reflexive modernisation' is being coupled with the end of the typical construct of the idea of 'nature'. Modernisation is constantly diminishing the meaning of nature and natural processes. Earlier we thought that these were out of our control, but now we recognise that they can be altered and governed by humans. Giddens gives an overview of technological progress so far, which could possibly help us combat climate change, touching upon some very sensitive and contestable issues of nuclear energy and carbon capture and sequestration (CCS) (131). He maintains that there will be an important role for governments in this case to promote and subsidise new forms of technologies, which would initially not be able to compete with fossil fuels. Moreover, governments will also have a role in ensuring that the new low-carbon technologies help to generate employment in the economy (143). But the question that we really need to ask, in my view, is whether the climate crisis can be fixed by technological means alone. Technological fixes can offer at best temporary solutions or delaying tactics to avoid having to address the underlying problems in our social and economic structures.

The other concepts of the 'ensuring state', 'political convergence' and 'economic convergence' evolve from the idea of going beyond the 'left-right' of politics. According to Giddens, the role of the ensuring state is to create synergies between businesses, civil society and individuals in order to help collective solutions being reached, rather than the implementation of a top-down approach where the state dictates solutions to problems. The idea of political and economic convergence suggests that governments around the world should work towards formulating public and economic policies converging with the goals of climate change mitigation. According to Giddens, these concepts will hold the key to dealing with the vital issues of climate change adaptation and mitigation (163). Although these concepts might sound elegant, they have two flaws in my view. Firstly, Giddens does not lay down a road map as to how these concepts would be realised in actuality, in real world situations and under given constraints. Secondly and more importantly, Giddens fails to analyse the power play between actors (i.e. the state, businesses and civil society) that will eventually translate into public and economic policies. Giddens seems to be quite ambitious when he aims for a framework of the ensuring state, in which he envisages that the state, businesses and NGOs work together in harmony. Today's reality often looks quite different, at least from where I am writing in India. I see little harmony, but a lot of struggling, lobbying, bribing, profiting, dispossessing. For example, the market mechanisms for climate change mitigation in place today are a result of lobbying by the state, businesses and pro-business NGOs (Coelho, 2009: 203-213), while poorer communities have to face the brunt of the negative environmental, economic and social impacts of carbon market projects (see Böhm and Dabhi, 2009).

The last two chapters of the book deal with the UN climate change negotiations, carbon markets and the geopolitics of climate change. Firstly, Giddens gives a brief history of climate change negotiations from Rio (the Rio Earth Summit) to the Bali negotiations and a brief account of the role of the EU in these negotiations. Giddens is quite critical of Kyoto style negotiations as he feels that such initiatives involve more talk and not enough action (192). A part of the chapter is also dedicated to carbon markets and their mechanisms (particularly the Clean Development Mechanism). Giddens believes that mechanisms such as those of the carbon markets are unlikely to deliver the desired results of emissions reductions. Here, again, Giddens hits the point, but he is somewhat superficial in his analysis of the failure of carbon markets. He does not attempt to get into the structural problems of carbon markets and their mechanisms (see Böhm and Dabhi, 2009; Gilbertson and Reyes, 2009). The failure of carbon markets is not simply restricted to over-allocation of pollution allowances; it is a deeper problem of an approach which assumes that a market fix can solve the emissions problems. Similarly to the technological fixes, market fixes like carbon markets are arguably delaying tactics to avoid confronting the core issue which is our fossil-fuel dependent society (Lohmann, 2006). Tools such as the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) simply transfer the ecological crisis to the Southern countries so that the Global North does not have to compromise its way of life. While Giddens is quite critical of his colleague, Sir Nicholas Stern, for avoiding the topic of politics in the Stern Review (201), he, too, fails to approach the issue of climate change with a more rigorous analysis of the politico-economic power play between the North and the South.

The last chapter of the book deals with the geopolitics of climate change. Here Giddens tries to elaborate on the current situation of world politics, specifically in the context of energy security, and how this shapes the politics of climate change. Discussing the strategic differences between countries, Giddens very rightly points out that multilateral international climate change negotiations are bound to fail as there is an immense clash of interests (for example at the Copenhagen Summit in 2009). Giddens cites the case of the Doha round of negotiations within the WTO, which failed to progress on trade negotiations, but, on the other hand, saw the rise of many bilateral agreements between nations (221). Hence Giddens lays a lot of stress on regional or bilateral policies. Basically, Giddens is trying to argue that multilateralism is not dead, but that it will have to return in a new form which can enable co-operation between nations in order to meet the goals of containing climate change.

At the end of the book the question that arises is do we really lack a politics of climate change, as Giddens states at the beginning of the book (4), and is the 'third way' an effective political framework for action? The 'third way' is surely an elegant political framework, but at the same time it also sounds unrealistic and utopian. Ideally, political parties should go beyond the rhetoric of 'left' and 'right' on the issue of climate change. But climate change is not a standalone problem. It is not simply caused by one factor. It is a result of a variety of social, economic and political problems. Moreover, the more fundamental question that needs to be asked is whether global warming is *the* problem? Climate change or global warming is like a fever. It is not the problem but a symptom of the structural problems in our social, economic and political structures. And the 'third way' seems to ignore these structural problems in its attempt to address the problem of global warming. Looking at how climate change has come to the forefront of debates from a historical perspective, right from the days of the Rio Summit to the Durban Climate Conference, I feel that it might perhaps be a little naïve to say that 'we have no politics of climate change'. The way climate change negotiations have been shaped since the days of the Rio Summit (1992) is a direct result of political frameworks adopted by governments and the political struggles that have been fought out by civil society and social movements. Yes, the political framework is not homogenous and uniform, but heterogeneous political frameworks and certainly manifold political struggles do exist and have so for a long time. The question really is whether we can have a 'steady state' established without confrontation between opposing forces, as Giddens' 'third way' approach suggests. I have my doubts.

On the whole, the book is not as impressive as the blurbs on the book cover suggest. Most of the concepts that Giddens has introduced throughout the book are not new, they have been rephrased and adapted to the question of the politics of climate change. The book does touch upon some vital issues but fails to go deeper to provide a unique analysis (beyond what we know already) of the politics of climate change and practical ways forward. The book is also marred with a number of contradictions, which I have pointed out in this review. On the whole, this book is an easy read and can be a good starting point to get an understanding of the various debates on the politics of climate change in Europe and specifically in the UK, while it seems to be somewhat blind towards the global political realities, particularly faced by the people of the Global South.

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