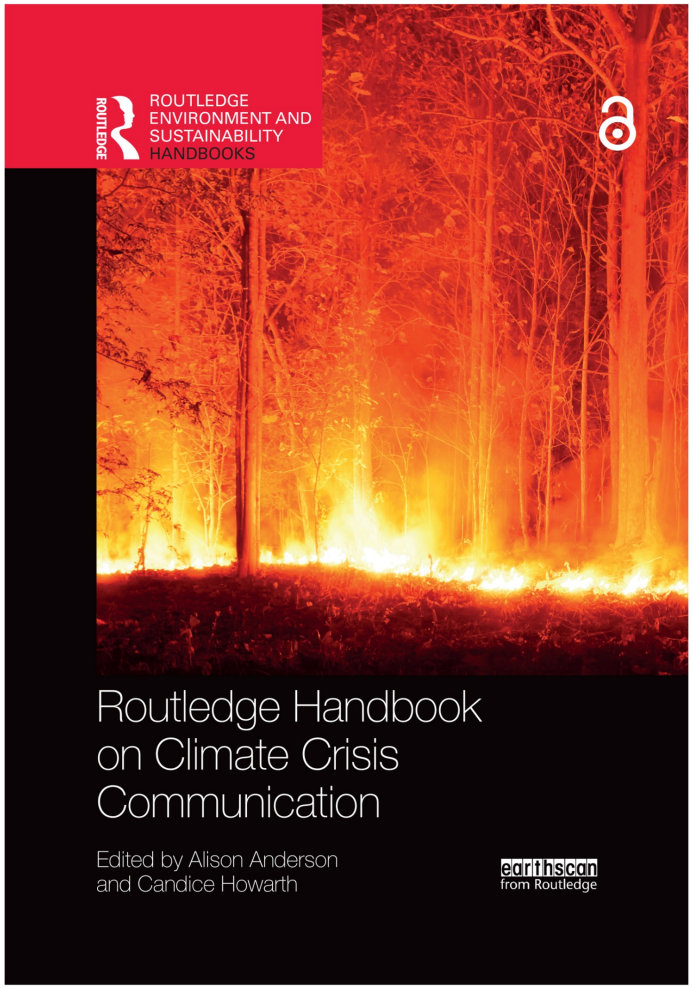
The role of communication in social and political change around climate

Declan Fahy, DCU
with Paul Cunningham, RTÉ
DCU Institute for Climate and Society and
Coimisiún na Meán



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SENSE-MAKING
How interpretive journalism shapes media coverage of climate change

Declan Fahy

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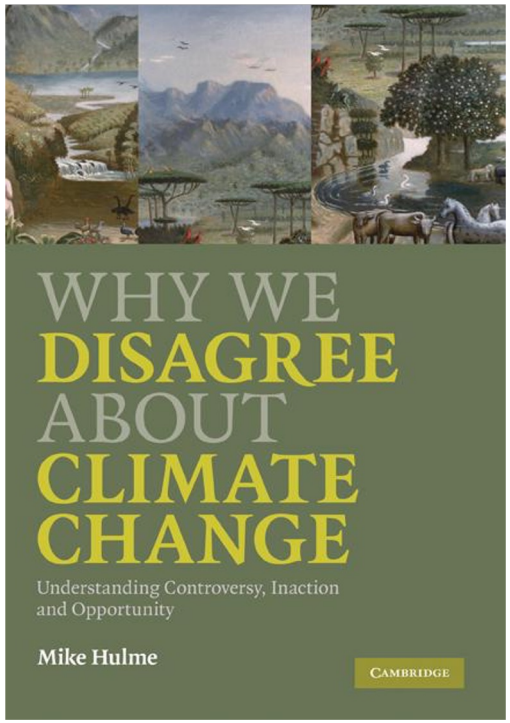
Interpretive journalism as sense-making

In his book *Why Democracies Need an Unlovable Press* (2008), the journalism scholar Michael Schudson outlined six core roles that journalism undertook to sustain and enhance liberal democracies. Journalism, he argued, provided fair and fact-based *information* for citizens to make political decisions, undertook *investigation* to scrutinise elite sources of power, created *social empathy* by showing people's diverse social experiences, provided a *public forum* for dialogue among diverse citizens, and enabled *mobilisation* among citizens around political causes or perspectives. Journalism, he argued, also undertook *analysis*. Journalists in this role went beyond presenting facts to provide what Schudson described (2008: 12) as "coherent frameworks of interpretation to help citizens comprehend a complex world." Journalists, he wrote, have sometimes undertaken these roles in different combinations and with varying emphases. Interpretive journalism can be understood, broadly, as a journalistic genre in which reporters combine the roles of *information* and *analysis*. It is a genre in which journalists go beyond providing facts to offer an interpretation of what those facts mean (Patterson, 1993). It is a type of journalism as sense-making about society (Hartley, 1996).

I will cover

a. Different large-scale ways of making sense of social change around climate, to help us all recognise and make sense of the different accounts of climate change that su

b. Different communication-based approaches – or theories of change – for influencing social change around the environment



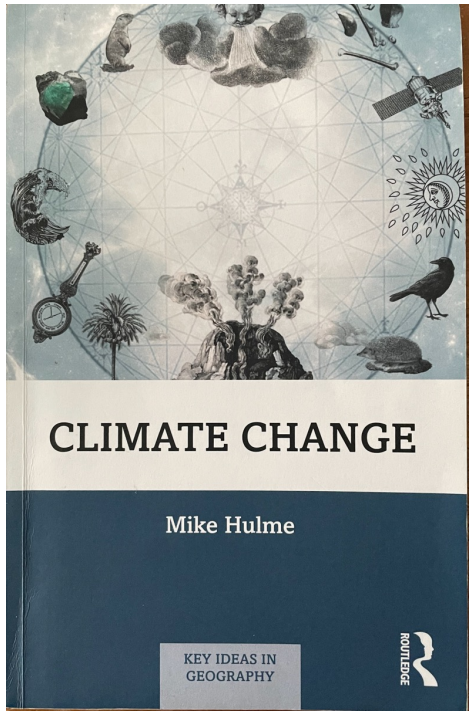
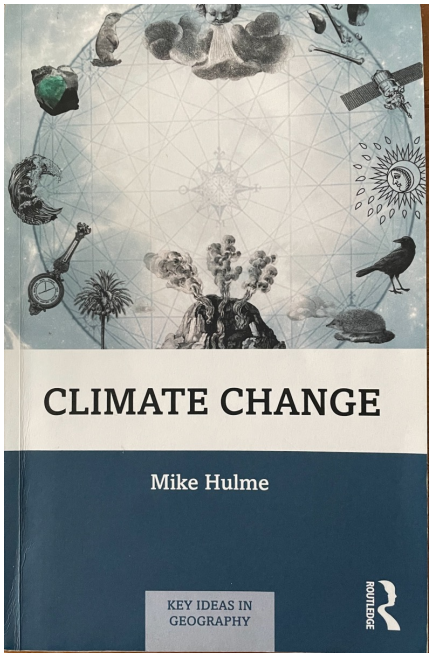


Photo credit: Tom Oliver Lucas at *deVolkskrant*

Climate Change as a “Wicked Problem”



As a wicked problem, climate change :

- is difficult to define
- has no clear solution
- is seemingly intractable
- is plagued by chronic policy failures
- features intense disagreement
- requires constant risk reduction and political negotiation
- is not likely to be solved or ended – only a condition that society will do better or worse at managing

As examples of the difficulty of defining climate change, the following problem-solution arguments are taken from Hulme (2022, pp.xxix – xxx).

The problem of climate change is that the Earth's radiation balance is dangerously disturbed

In which case the solution might be to spray particles into the stratosphere to create a sun-screen.

The problem of climate change is that there is too much carbon dioxide accumulating in the Earth's atmosphere.

> *In which case the solution* might be to scrub carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere and sequester it in durable products or geological strata.

The problem of climate change is the entrenched self-interest of the fossil fuel and other extractive industries that wield too much influence over the levers of power.

In which case the solution might be to divest and dismantle such industries in favour of less centralised and more enlightened ones.

The problem of climate change is that the environmental externalities* of goods and services are not properly reflected in market prices.

In which case the solution might be to establish a global price for carbon.

* Externalities happen when the production or consumption of a good impacts on people not directly related to the production or consumption of the good.

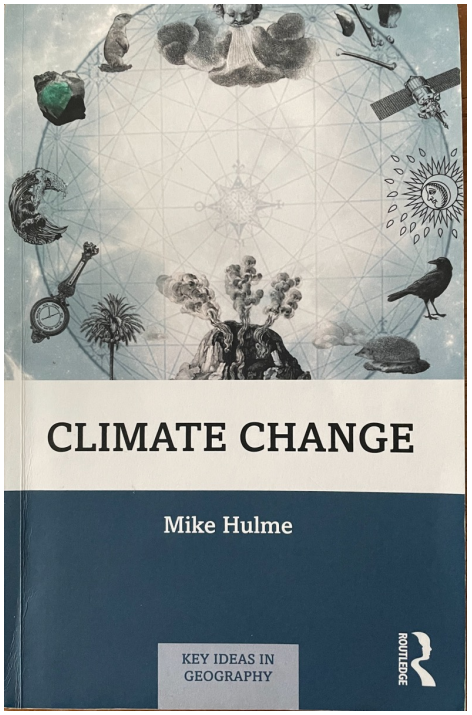
The problem of climate change is that the prevailing models of economic growth and social well-being remain too closely wedded to indicators of material consumption?

> *In which case the solution* might be to reimagine what is meant by a desirable and worthwhile human life and to inscribe such convictions into new policy metrics.

The problem of climate change is rooted in the colonial past and its legacies, which continue to subject peoples, species, and environments to coercive and extractive powers.

> *In which case the solution* might be reparations for the resulting ecological and cultural loss and damage caused by these colonising behaviours.

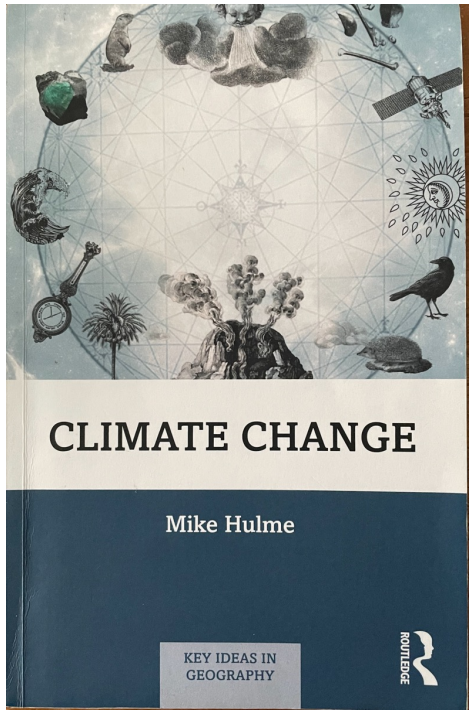
Hulme argued there were three large-scale “interpretive positions” through which we can make sense of social responses to climate change.



1. Reformed Modernism

2. Sceptical Contrarianism

3. Transformative Radicalism



Modernism

This position, argued Hulme (2022, p.55), “rests on twin commitments. A commitment first to the reliability and adequacy of scientific knowledge about climate change and, second, a commitment to the belief that the political institutions of modernity – if reformed – can be used to deliver the changes to the social and economic organisation of the world that will arrest climate change”.

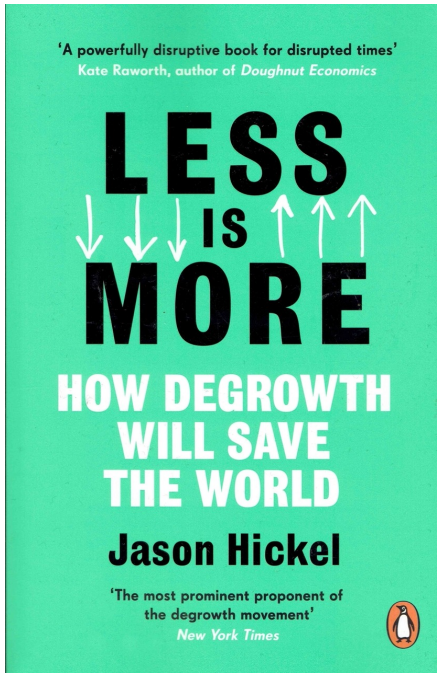
Contrarianism

This position, argued Hulme (2022, p. 55-56), "questions, if not directly challenges, the reliability of the current science of climate change, whilst holding firm to the conviction that the existing economic world order should continue more or less intact. The dangers of climate change are dealt with around the margins of public life."

Radicalism

This position, argued Hulme (2022, p.56), "rests on the empowering urgency that scientific claims about future climate change are deemed to demand. This is broadly consistent with reformed modernity . . . even if climate radicals are critical of some climate scientists for their undue reticence when speaking in public. In contrast to the previous positions, however, transformative radicalism demands a profound restructuring of the world's political economy* and a thorough-going transformation of social and cultural norms if climate change is to be arrested."

**Political economy,* broadly, is the term used to explain the link between political and economic systems in a society. For example, a capitalist political economy or a socialist political economy.


'A powerfully disruptive book for disrupted times'
Kate Raworth, author of Doughnut Economics
LESS
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MORE
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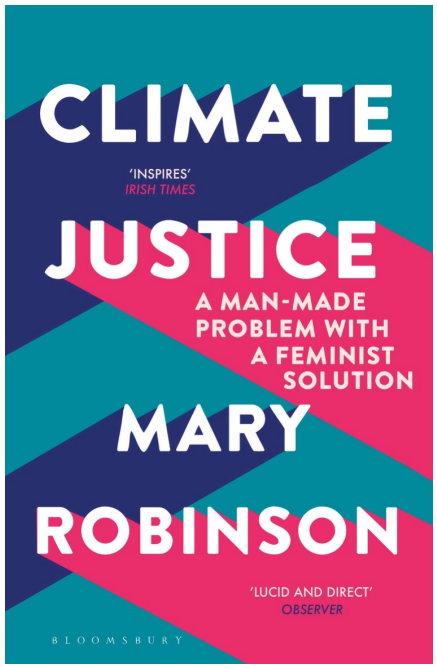
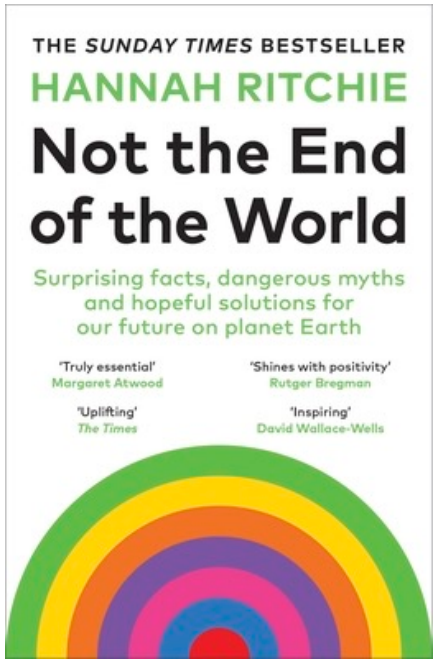
Jason Hickel
'The most prominent proponent of the degrowth movement'
New York Times


CLIMATE
'INSPIRES'
IRISH TIMES
JUSTICE
A MAN-MADE PROBLEM WITH A FEMINIST SOLUTION
MARY
ROBINSON
'LUCID AND DIRECT'
OBSERVER
BLOOMSBURY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The Times
'Inspiring'
David Wallace-Wells

Part 2:

Different communication-based approaches for influencing social change around the environment.

These approaches can also be termed *theories of change*, which describe how communication can foster social change around climate or other issues

1. Public and Personal Persuasion

Social change results from effecive persuasion, leading over time to the formation of a critical mass of public opinion that leads to policy change and behaviour change.

2. Social Mobilisation

Social change results from the mobilisation of social movements and increased citizen participation in politics that puts pressure on government and industry to force social change.

3. Dialogue and Deliberation

Social change results from effective dialogue and deliberation between different sectors of society to create shared understandings and paths forward.

4. Cultural Representations

Social change happens because cultural producers – including writers, filmmakers, documentarians – show people what life is and could be like in climate-challenged societies.

Interpretive Position on Climate and Society

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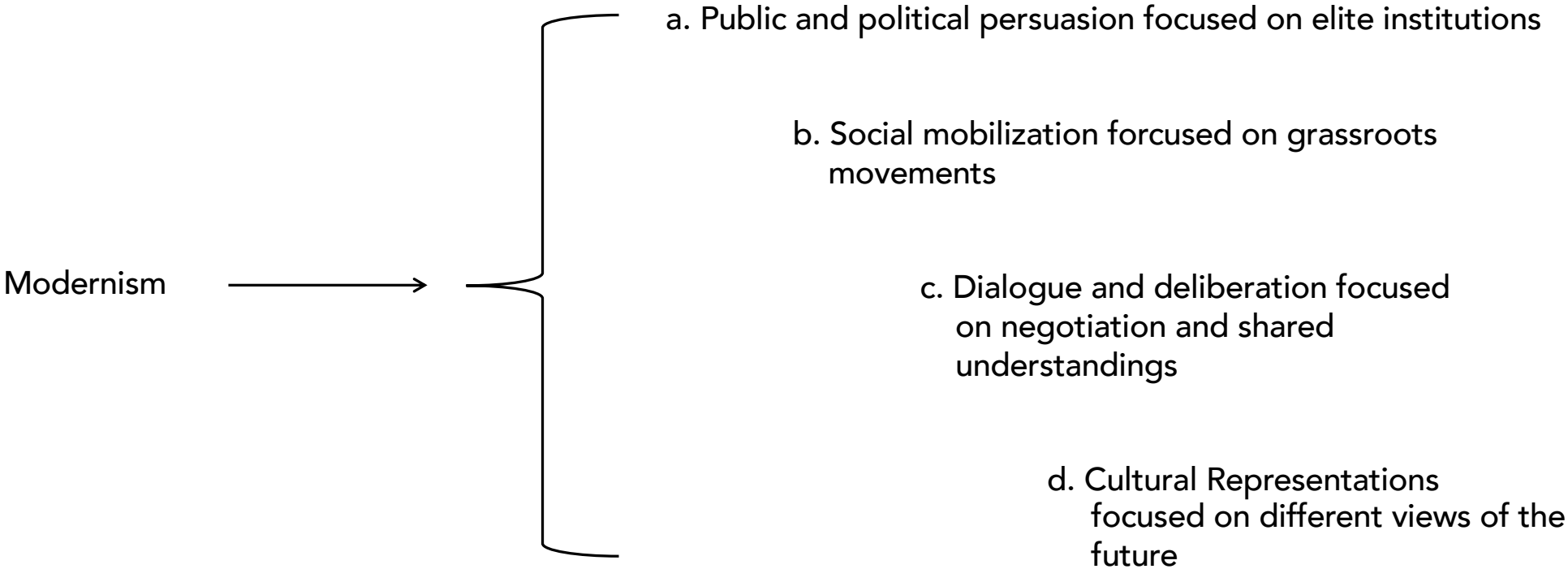
Theory of Change


Modernism
a. Public and political persuasion focused on elite institutions
b. Social mobilization forcused on grassroots movements
c. Dialogue and deliberation focused on negotiation and shared understandings
d. Cultural Representations focused on different views of the future