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Climate discourse and economic downturns: The case of the United States, 2008–2013

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ABSTRACT

Global progress on climate change has been stalled since the 2008 financial collapse. I consider the case of the United States and how the crash and subsequent stagnation have reduced prospects for climate solutions at the national level. I focus on discourse and the economic and cultural framing of climate protection and the environment as a luxury good, unaffordable in recessionary times. As a solution to this paralyzing framework, I consider the emergence of “new economics,” which employs an alternative framing at the local and regional level. New economics is fostering the creation of new forms of ownership in a range of enterprise structures that also contribute to sustainability and greenhouse gas reductions.

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1. Introduction

It is now seven years since the September 2007 run on the British bank Northern Rock. It is six years from the panic that gripped the markets and triggered a worldwide economic collapse and four years from the trough of that recession. While it is too early for a thorough accounting of the ways in which the financial crisis and subsequent downturn have affected the transition to sustainability in the global North, a number of effects are already apparent.

At the time the global financial panic hit, in the fall of 2008, the world’s scientists and environmental policymakers were preparing for the climate summit in Copenhagen. In the months leading up to the

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summit, scientists produced a series of reports on the state of the planet. They spoke with a single voice: things are worse than we anticipated at the time of the last IPCC report in 2007. The international community went to Copenhagen with unprecedented optimism and determination that rationality, compassion and perhaps even the survival instinct would prevail. The watchword of the week was Hope—who can forget the renaming of the city to “Hopenhagen?” Today, it feels naïve to have believed in the possibility of a global climate solution at the very moment the world economy was collapsing around us.

After February, the global economy got worse and so too did the situation with climate. The global emissions trajectory has been relentless. Emissions are nearly 60% higher than they were in 1990, the benchmark year enshrined in the Kyoto Protocol, and rising emissions mean that the 2° target is unlikely to be met ([Global Carbon Project, 2012](#)). In 2012 emissions grew 2.5%, and in 2013 the atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide reached 400 parts per million, considerably above the 350 ppm that many scientists say is a safe limit ([Earth System Research Laboratory, 2013](#); [Hansen et al., 2008](#)). Modest emissions declines in wealthy countries have been insufficient to counter-balance the large increases in the global South, especially from China and India. And some of what is easing emissions in the United States, such as the shift from coal to hydraulic fracturing for natural gas, is accompanied by gas flaring and methane release that may turn out to be worse than the practices they are replacing ([Howarth et al., 2011](#)).

Meanwhile, the effects of climate disruption have become increasingly visible. In 2012, Arctic ice hit a new low, putting the predicted date for an ice-free Arctic within a decade, rather than the 100-year timeline originally expected by scientists ([Gillis, 2012](#)). In March of 2012, 15,000 temperature records were broken in the United States, as the average temperature was 8.6 °F above the 20th Century March average ([US Department of Commerce, 2012](#)) and the continental U.S. suffered its worst drought in 50 years ([Masters, 2012](#); see also [NOAA National Climatic Data Center 2012](#)). In October, Hurricane Sandy, possibly the worst storm ever to hit the Northeast United States, devastated the region ([Wikipedia, 2013a](#)). The year 2012 now ranks as the hottest in US history, by an astonishing full degree Fahrenheit ([Gillis, 2013](#)).

During this period, the US and global economies have struggled, and failed to regain their earlier growth trajectories. In the US, the original reduction in national output was severe, in comparison to other OECD countries. GDP fell by 12% in the six months after the financial panic ([Council of Economic Advisers, 2013](#)) and while growth in GDP resumed by 2010, annual growth rates have been below 3% ([Council of Economic Advisers, 2014](#), Table B-1, p. 367). While GDP has grown, the fraction of the civilian population that is employed plummeted from 63.0% in 2007 to 58.5% in 2010, and has barely risen since then. ([Council of Economic Advisers, 2014](#) Table B-11, p. 379) Unemployment and under-employment, which rose to almost 27 million at the height of the downturn, remained at nearly 22 million in 2013 ([Economic Policy Institute, 2013](#)). Continuing economic weakness has contributed to rising poverty: the number of Americans relying on government assistance to meet their basic food needs continues to increase, rising to 46.6 Million in 2012, up from only about 16 million in 2000 ([Wikipedia, 2013b](#)).

Using the case of the United States, I will argue that the downturn has severely crippled attempts to move toward sustainability, particularly in the area of climate. One reason is the framing of environmental protection as a luxury, affordable only in good times. “Environment as luxury” is a longstanding discourse that has been difficult to dislodge; it exerts an especially paralytic effect during periods of economic distress. In this paper I focus mostly on issues of framing, or discourse, rather than the flows of investment into renewable energy or other green initiatives. An extensive literature in sociology finds that framing is central to the success of social movements and their attempts to make social change ([Gamson et al., 1982](#); [Snow et al., 1986](#); [Snow and Benford, 1988](#); see [Benford and Snow, 2000](#) for a review. See also [Nisbet \(2009\)](#), who has used frame analysis to discuss climate change.) I will argue that climate change has been “framed” poorly and in a way that makes it vulnerable to counter-framings, such as the need for jobs or economic growth.

My argument is consistent with papers from the special issue of this journal on the impacts of the financial crisis, and in particular with the detailed analysis of [Geels \(2013\)](#). Discussing Europe and to a lesser extent the United States, Geels argues that after the early stimulus funds, which included large funding streams for renewable energy, the “window” of opportunity began to close in 2010–11, and

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