



Climate, class and culture: political issues as cultural signifiers in the US

Thomas Laidley

Abstract

Since the 1970s, social scientists have argued that general pro-environmental attitudes have diffused throughout American society, rendering socio-demographics largely irrelevant in predicting support for such issues. The public reaction to the issue of climate change, however, is an exception to this narrative. While media bias, ideological framing, and business influence are often invoked to explain public apathy, I argue that ignoring class and culture in determining why climate change is so divisive is a potentially significant oversight. Using the cultural theory of Bourdieu, I examine how the conception of and reaction to climate change varies with economic and cultural capital using data from 40 interviews of Boston-area respondents. The results suggest that climate change may indeed be a 'classed' issue – both in how the respondents conceive of it in the first place, and how they speak of social class in the context of it. The results suggest that social scientists should go beyond rational-choice and media framing explanations, to take two prolific examples, in exploring how disagreements on the importance of climate change persist in the US.

Keywords: climate change, social class, culture, sustainability, attitudes and behaviour

Research in the sociology of culture has often focused on social reproduction fostered by aesthetic consumption (DiMaggio, 1982), symbolic boundaries based on collective identities (see Pachucki *et al.*, 2007, for a review), and the purported 'omnivorousness' of postmodern material and cultural consumption (Holt, 1998; Tampubolon, 2010). Though some research has examined how material objects confer distinction in relation to political issues (eg Horton, 2003, who examined material consumption among environmentalists), comparatively little has been written on whether political attitudes and practices related to specific social issues are themselves cultural signifiers. Using Bourdieu's theory of culture (1984) to examine the case of the public perception of climate change in the US, I examine what role class cultures may play, paying particular attention to lifestyle practices, political attitudes, and what participants take them to signify. That is to say, do certain conceptualizations

of climate change signify a more refined cultural disposition or privileged economic status?

While general principles of environmentalism have become ubiquitous in the US, polling researchers have documented substantial declines in concern over climate change in the past decade, with an especially pronounced drop over the last four years (Jones, 2011; Newport, 2010). On a cross-national level, Americans are often found to be less concerned about climate change than the publics of almost all other industrialized countries (Brechin, 2010), and routinely rank it last (or near last) among social and even environmental problems (Saad, 2011). In explaining this apathy, many researchers either implicitly or explicitly invoke information-deficit/manipulation models, pointing to media narratives which portray the science as contested (Boykoff and Boykoff, 2004), or organized political and business forces who promote sceptical stances on the issue (Jacques *et al.*, 2008).

Others note a common perception of the problem as spatially and temporally abstract (eg Weber, 2006), potentially indicative of a 'postmaterialist' concern (Inglehart, 1995; Krosnick *et al.*, 2006). Ungar (2000) similarly notes that while ozone depletion was eventually met with substantive public concern and policy, climate change goes largely unnoticed due to the lack of immediacy characterizing the latter compared to the former. Going beyond a psychological or affective (eg Norgaard, 2006) analysis of how 'climate as abstraction' would affect the torpor regarding public opinion, one would also expect climate change in this sense to transcend the often utilitarian concerns of those with low levels of economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). While some empirical evidence supports the notion that class has rather modest positive associations with concern over climate and policy support (Dietz *et al.*, 2007; see McCright, 2009 for a review of other literature), these trends are often illustrated linearly. That is, if relationships between class and climate exist, they may well not fall along strictly linear patterns whereby increases in either income or education, for example, inexorably increase or reduce concern.

I examine this possible relationship further using data from in-depth interviews of a culturally and economically diverse sample of 40 Boston-area respondents. Though it may seem as if the liberal political character of the metropolitan Boston area would lead to obvious responses of concern and even political engagement, the class structure of the area presents a fertile ground for exploring the intersections between climate and class. With the broadly successful transition away from traditional manufacturing to a service-based economy with a particularly robust presence in biotechnology, finance, and higher education, the city and metro region are also characterized by increasing economic inequality and spatial segregation. Indeed, the Boston Metropolitan Area Planning Council recently found the region to be in the 85th percentile among US metropolitan areas in terms of inequality as measured by Gini coefficients, and worsening (MAPC, 2011). For all the economic success the Boston metropolitan area has experienced in adapting to

the post-industrial economy, the dividends have not paid off for most. The high costs of living and housing only exacerbate the pressures felt by those on the lower end of the income distribution, particularly those who are uneducated and constrained mobility-wise. Local Democratic political candidates are also often left to navigate a precarious road between their core constituencies – environmentalists who want robust regulation on one hand, and unions which emphasize growth on the other (Bierman, 2011).

Contested terrain: climate, science and society

It is important to situate this work as primarily descriptive as opposed to normative. That is, it is outside the bounds of this article to discuss what the specific implications of a warming planet may be, the upsides or downsides of various proposed mitigation strategies, or what beliefs may be more or less ‘correct’ according to the latest science (which does not preclude issuing value judgements regarding the problem or how people or institutions view it in other contexts). Climate change can be understood as a socially constructed concept which people (and, indeed, quite powerful institutions) invest meaning into, and is heavily bound with social, political and cultural differences. Nevertheless, I believe it is important to bracket out any inclination to suggest equivalency among all perceptions of the problem, and take a position consistent with McCright and Dunlap (2003) – science is often a messy enterprise, but overwhelming consensus unmistakably privileges certain realities over others.

Still, it is necessary to go beyond the natural sciences, rational choice theories, and psychology in revealing how climate change is not simply a ‘black box’, but an issue which reflects profound cultural, economic, political, religious and social divisions (Hulme, 2009). In bringing class cultures into the fold, this work aims to spur more work that goes beyond ‘Attitude, Behaviour, Choice’ models (see Shove, 2010 for a more in-depth critique), specifically focusing on class (defined in both material and symbolic terms) as a potentially powerful structural force which dynamically influences how people may perceive the problem and act upon it. This is important not only for the sake of analysing an under-theorized and under-studied facet of the ‘climate question’, but also to broaden the approach beyond ‘top-down’ theories that privilege the imposition of ideas derived via ‘framing’ effects (eg Fletcher, 2009) or psycho-social models which hold structural forces as constraints rather than generative conditions themselves (eg Stern, 2000), to take two examples. Applying Bourdieu’s theory specifically to the understanding and perception of climate change is also fruitful in evading either a primarily structural or agentic orientation. And even if psycho-social, knowledge-deficit, or rational choice approaches are generally correct, they may well operate differently for different groups, including various social classes.

Politically, the ramifications of class cultures playing a strong role in the public perception of climate change are also important, though of course outside the bounds of this paper to argue with any degree of certitude. Though systems of international governance and powerful national-level institutions craft the frameworks of broad-based carbon dioxide emissions strategies (eg the Kyoto accord, Copenhagen summit, etc), and powerful business interests have their own well-documented agendas, public engagement is arguably a vital component in prompting political action in the US – itself a powerful player in whether international treaties and frameworks succeed or fail. As Rome (2001) illustrates, a key factor in the popularity and success of America's post-World War II environmental movement was the effect of urban sprawl on middle-class suburbanites (eg contaminated drinking water, flooding, etc), which eventually hit such a critical mass that even conservative politicians and business interests began questioning the limits of untrammelled growth in the housing industry. Aside from the potential for broad-based political concern to enact change, there may also be substantial equity issues involved in purported mitigation strategies, particularly those calling for costlier fossil fuel energy and austerity measures. Social scientists and political interests will realistically have to consider these implications in studying the issue, engaging the public on it, and crafting policy measures to address it.

Economic capital and values: cultural capital and the aesthetics of asceticism

National-level affluence has often been invoked to explain the ascendance of the American environmentalism in postwar US (eg Inglehart, 1995). Empirical studies have often focused specifically on the rise of the 'postmaterial' left, embodied by the 'new class', characterized by a broadly liberal political ideology derived from its position in the realm of production – well-educated middle-class professionals, often with high levels of cultural capital and not directly dependent on capitalist modes of production (Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich, 1977). Numerous critics point to environmental movements in poorer countries and cross-national survey data which show broadly robust concern for these issues as evidence that Inglehart's theory is limited at best (see Dunlap and York, 2008, among others). Nevertheless, both Inglehart's theory and the critiques of it fail to delineate support *among* specific environmental issues, many of which may be conceived of as materialist – for example, water and air quality, which demonstrably affect immediate material well-being. Another issue with these studies is the distinction between general professed concern and more robust measures like policy support. Finally, the economic reductionism and linearity of the postmaterialist theory are conceptually limiting (see Haller, 2002, for a more in-depth critique).

I suggest Bourdieu's cultural theory (1984) as a preferable alternative in theorizing how class and culture may relate to issues like climate change.

While Bourdieu does emphasize the preoccupation with necessity which often characterizes the lower economic strata, similar to Inglehart, his theory goes beyond economic reductionism and positions symbolic capital as an equally powerful dimension of class disposition and reproduction. It also avoids the simple linearity of 'stage' theories of value change, and is arguably better suited to individual-scale analysis. For Bourdieu, the materialist preference for utility among those with lower economic and cultural capital contrasts with the 'asceticism of the privileged', whereby the affluent distance themselves from necessity (Bourdieu, 1984: 256). In this sense, general 'material paucity' (Holt, 1998: 11) is also theorized to be aesthetically desirable to those with high cultural capital, as they experience markedly different relationships with material necessity than those with lower overall levels of capital. Bourdieu's theory can also explain how those both materially rich and poor may hold more materialist dispositions due to the importance of the composition of their capital as opposed to the aggregate level of it.

The application of Bourdieu's theory to the US has not been without criticism. Some studies have found that those possessing high cultural capital are 'omnivores' who consume a range of objects and genres across the popular to high-brow spectrum (eg Erickson, 1996; Peterson and Kern, 1996). In contrast, Holt (1997) argues that Bourdieu's theory never posits cultural proclivities as operating monolithically across contexts, nor does it claim his metrics of class disposition (eg a taste for opera as opposed to jazz) operate in a nomothetic fashion. Perhaps even more importantly, 'styles' of consuming rather than status objects are more significant in gauging 'classed' dispositions in a postmodern historical context, where mass production affords many the ability to own goods or participate in behaviours which were once rarified (Berger and Ward, 2010; Holt, 1997). Moreover, those with high levels of cultural capital can co-opt working-class taste and aesthetics in an attempt at distinguishing themselves from the emulation of the middle classes, illustrating the non-linearity of Bourdieu's theory and again highlighting the importance of embodied practice over objectified taste (Bourdieu, 1984; Trigg, 2001).

While the possession or positive perception of 'green' products has often been found to correlate with social class metrics both in the US and abroad (eg Starr, 2009; Onyango *et al.*, 2007), there is reason to suspect general political attitudes toward the environment in general and climate change in particular may also be culturally patterned.¹ For instance, Strandbu and Krange (2003) found that working-class Swedish youth framed environmental issues in more immediate, materialist and practical terms than their middle-class counterparts. In the US, Leudicke *et al.* illustrated how automobiles are coupled with political ideology within a moral framework, consistent with the signalling of status distinctions and the consequent social antagonism – eg 'profane' Hummer drivers, or 'pious' Prius owners (2010: 1030). Investigating whether 'climate consciousness' is indeed culturally desirable to some and not to others is an extension of this work, and illustrates how social and environmental

problems themselves may align with cultural and class distinctions in complex and significant ways.

Methods

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted for this project with 40 Boston, Massachusetts-area respondents over a three-month period in the summer of 2010.² The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and the results analysed using the atlas.ti software package. Data on participant's age, sex, ethnicity, income, occupation, educational attainment, parents' educational attainment and occupations, political affiliation, and home and car ownership status were also collected. From the socio-economic (income, home ownership and car ownership) and cultural (education, parents' education) variables, subscales were generated to measure the levels of economic and cultural capital.³ The respondents were then placed in Low or High Cultural Capital (LCC/HCC) categories based on the scores determined by these economic and cultural variables.⁴ See the appendix for detailed descriptive figures for all categories.

The sample consists of 40 adults living in the Boston metro region, all of whom live within the I-95 belt surrounding the central city and inner-ring suburbs. Overall participants earned an average of \$35,881 annually, while the median reported income was \$22,500. The presence of a small number of students who reported little or no earnings, as well as those unemployed (in the midst of a then ongoing recession) reduced both the mean and median income figures. The median age was 42 years, compared to 36.8 nationally. There were 15 males and 27 females. Twenty-eight respondents self-identified as (non-Hispanic) white, 7 as black or African-American, 3 as Asian, and 4 as Hispanic. All of the respondents have at least a high school education, with 16 possessing a bachelor's degree, 9 a master's degree (including MBAs), and 2 with JDs in law. There were no participants with either medical or doctoral degrees (though some respondents did have parents who held these degrees). Eleven of the participants were registered as independent, 22 as Democrat, and 9 were unregistered. Massachusetts is characterized by high levels of Independent and low levels of Republican enrolment, so while the lack of Republicans is not unexpected, the sample does skew Democratic.⁵ Eight of the respondents owned homes outright, 4 had mortgages, and 30 were renters. All names used in this analysis are pseudonyms, while identifying details are suppressed to protect the anonymity of the respondents when appropriate. The convenience sampling of this research precludes any claim to generalizability. Nevertheless, the aim is less to generalize these results than to provide a glimpse into how class and culture can intersect with global environmental issues using qualitative methods, which are rarely brought to bear on these issues (see Kempton, 1991, for the last example of a qualitative study on climate change that I am aware of).

Data and analysis

Though the perception of the seriousness of climate change was not universally divergent across boundaries of economic and cultural capital, there were patterns related to how the issue itself was conceptualized along with support for certain mitigation strategies. The LEC/LCC respondents were more likely to view the issue as exaggerated, were more likely to view mitigation strategies as either expensive/difficult or subsumed to general material necessity, and when concerned were more likely to focus on individual-level efforts at combating it than structural or governmental approaches. In contrast, LEC/HCC respondents had higher levels of overall concern, were more critical of consumption-based strategies for mitigation – also at times citing cost feasibility commensurate with their levels of economic capital – and focused on structural and governmental implementations when discussing abatement. These respondents were also the only ones who explicitly critiqued the consumerist ethos of the US. None of the LEC/LCC, HEC/LCC, or HEC/HCC respondents proposed a ‘sufficiency’ oriented approach – that is, favouring reductions in aggregate consumption and critiquing the resource-intensity of American capitalism, as opposed to embracing increased efficiency, better technology, or unspecified governmental regulation or incentive strategies. Both HEC/LCC and HEC/HCC respondents were more likely to stress the utility of carbon emissions-abatement strategies (ie saving money), similar to LEC individuals, yet rarely predicated this on economic necessity and conspicuously demurred in regard to challenging neoliberal economics, commensurate with their position on the socio-economic spectrum.⁶

When LEC/LCC respondents discussed confronting climate change in terms of certain individual behaviours, these were often simpler actions they viewed as rooted in economic necessity. To Abby, a 30-year-old from East Los Angeles – a relatively poor and working-class section of LA – there is a preoccupation with the immediacy of poverty which in her view often drives ‘environmental’ behaviour. While she also described the woefully polluted air and its effect on the residents of LA, the grinding poverty of her old neighbourhood often took centre stage in her discussion of environmental issues and actions related to them:

It was this big thing in L.A., how this family had recycled – they had this whole – it was their full-time job. But that wasn’t out of . . . that was out of necessity, not because they’re concerned with the environment, I think. So if you see people doing a lot of recycling at home and whatnot that occupy the lower classes, it’s because they need the money.

Others also focused on relatively modest approaches to curbing environmental effects while coupling these behaviours with economic prudence. Samuel (LEC/LCC) is 59 years old, and like many others in the recession is

unemployed and recently lost a house. He affirms the importance of environmental problems (and indeed dismisses those who deny their existence with a noticeable measure of disdain), and does suggest the economy and environment are not at odds, yet subsumes environmental issues to economic ones in his suggestion that addressing the former may help with the latter:

Interviewer: Does it [climate change] compare with the economy?

Samuel: No. By all means, no. But it's part of it . . . if we can lower our electric bills, that'll give us more money to pay for, oh, let's say, the leap. Or when the gas price goes up at Labor day, which it will. Or the price of oil goes up this winter, which it will, because uh-oh we didn't get any oil stored, and were making gasoline nobody bought.

Interviewer: So you think it just makes good . . .

Samuel: Good sense. Good economic sense, yeah.

Other LEC/LCC respondents couple climate and environmental behaviours to economic necessity, but in a more negative fashion. While these contentions were at times exacerbated by their opinion that the concern over the issue is exaggerated, the disjunction between it and material necessity or utility was often highlighted regardless. Tim, 51 years old and out of work after spending years as a municipal employee in Boston (LEC/LCC), contends that the perceived affluence of those 'pushing' behavioural changes results in a backlash, especially in the midst of a prolonged economic downturn. During our conversation he especially took issue with such suggestions as shorter showers, viewing them as invasive and obnoxious critiques of personal behaviour, while adding:

I think people, like, don't agree with it because a lot of the people are – money and celebrities pushing it. I think it is an issue, definitely. You know, that people are struggling just to get by and you've got people, with a lot of money, pushing organics, food, and stuff. I think it's hypocritical.

Jessica (LEC/LCC), a 20-year-old part-time extension school student who works nights and weekends, goes so far as to suggest that buying power inculcates concern for the issue based on the ability to 'buy in' to the sometimes (economically) resource-intensive, individualized amelioration strategies. In Jessica's view, those who have the resources to do so consume what are deemed 'green' products, or consumer goods produced with sustainable principles in mind, which leads to a deeper engagement with climate change:

I think . . . it seems to be more of an upper-class thing. Who's really into it. Probably because they have more money to spend on the . . . the changes that you need to make in your life to buy those expensive products. And like buy different cars, [they] probably can afford it more. Maybe that's why they believe [in] it [climate change].

This preoccupation with material necessity and utility related to solving environmental issues like climate change is evidenced by the coupling of the amelioration of climate change with economic prudence and austerity, which may render certain mitigation strategies in a positive light. Still, the absence of any critique, however nominal, of the ‘work and spend’ cycle (Schor, 1998) characterizing American consumerism is conspicuous, and suggests that for these respondents solutions overwhelmingly lie in the nebulous field between substantial lifestyle modification and state intervention – individual solutions that are not rooted in fundamentally changing the American lifestyle, and are often simple practices like recycling or reusing water bottles. And while saving money and helping the environment are often associated with one another, in practice these are fraught negotiations for respondents. Consider Elias, a 44-year-old former clerk, now unemployed and living in a working-class neighbourhood of Boston, who sees climate change as a problem of crisis-level proportions. Yet unlike many LEC/HCC respondents who sometimes avoid automobile transportation and its environmental and financial costs, Elias only connects public transportation with inconvenience: ‘. . . I just got a car and everything’s more convenient and more accessible . . . it’s a whole different world with the car; before I was taking the T (Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority), so I wasn’t too happy about it.’

Coupling economic constraint with solving environmental problems in this way can threaten to backfire for LEC/LCC respondents. If viewed in the context of their relative material deprivation, hard-line calls for austerity – real or imagined – can breed resentment and resistance. This is evidenced by the LEC/LCC respondents who saw strategies for addressing climate change as either insulting in the face of material scarcity, or part of a process of angling for exclusivity, going beyond the material aspects of changing lifestyles in response to climate change, and focusing on the more intangible dimensions of what they see as distinction – the status and fashion they view as coupled with the issue. Though these distinctions are conceptualized in more symbolic rather than material terms (ie intangible distinction rather than the material accessibility explored previously), they are also frequently related to material objects and consumption patterns. Rhonda (LEC/LCC), a 45-year-old self-employed mother who believes fears over climate change are overstated (but not entirely illusory⁷), sees reactions and behaviours related to the issue as overtures for status recognition:

You know . . . I haven’t really come into contact with people that I feel are genuinely concerned. I think they’re following a fad. Say for example, the reusable bags. You know, it’s what everybody has . . . it’s like a trend, a cool thing to shop at Whole Foods, health foods.

Frank (LEC/LCC), a 33-year-old who works part-time as a research assistant and is surrounded by people who view climate change with particular urgency, sees those who embrace it as a problem as following ‘fashion’ borne out of biased information regarding the topic:

I get the impression it's part fashion. And I get the impression there's a little distortion in the way people go about getting the information they have. I think this is true for a lot of people. For a lot of issues.

Though the LEC/HCC group had similarly low levels of material security as the LEC/LCC respondents, they in contrast frequently conceptualized the issue and mitigation strategies surrounding it in more structural terms, and often questioned American consumerism. While many of the LEC/HCC respondents also saw buying 'sustainable' material goods as signifying status, this was less because they see concern for climate as a 'luxury' good (whether financially or symbolically) and more because of their general critique of consumer society. Britney (LEC/HCC), a 20-year-old student attending a prestigious university in the Boston area whose parents are highly educated and 'into renewable energy', is sanguine about the prospect of technological innovation helping ameliorate climate change, yet still believes curbing consumption is necessary in combating the problem:

I think people definitely can consume less but of course science . . . they've advanced this far, and I feel like science can definitely help us in the future in terms of renewable energy. You know they come with . . . I'm sure science will help, but people have to start now by consuming less, not letting the problem [get] worse.

Other respondents similarly see the problem driving climate change as material consumption itself, and dismiss the relevance of many 'green' products because of their place within larger patterns of American consumption. Charlene, a 21-year-old student who also attends a prestigious university in the Boston area (LEC/HCC) and 'hangs out' with environmental activists at her school while falling short of self-identifying as one, sees the root of combating climate change more abstractly bound with lessening material consumption:

Well, I ride my bike everywhere. And I try to buy organic food, but sometimes I just don't have the money. But . . . those products I'd say, like that label that sells with 'green' and 'eco-friendly,' I think it's sort of hypocritical – because I think, like one of the problems that's leading to global warming is also of consumerism, materialism. So like if you're, even if you're buying something that says it's eco-friendly, you might be better off not buying anything.

Charlene echoes Tim's charge of hypocrisy, but does so under a subtly different calculus. While Charlene sees 'green' goods as a marketing ploy which obscures the paradoxical character of keeping the same consumer habits but substituting 'green' products for conventional ones, Tim saw resentment and frustration borne out of affluent people 'pushing' others to consume expensive consumer goods. Both render charges of hypocrisy, but the latter

example is devoid of the presumption that we should all consume less, and the equity issues of who gets to consume what and how resources are provisioned is substituted for a generalized critique of consumer society.

Transportation was also a large part of how LEC/HCC respondents conceptualize their behaviour related to climate change, which contrasts with the LEC/LCC respondents, who did not connect it to the environment. That is, when LEC/HCC respondents mention individual-level behaviours in addition to more structural solutions, they are usually more substantive than recycling or reusing consumables. Brook (LEC/HCC), a 25-year-old former assistant at a private equity firm who left the job because of her contempt for the business culture, emphasizes how her relatively affluent, well-educated, and cosmopolitan neighbourhood embraces an environmentally conscious ethos with respect to food and transportation:

Brook: Like, we love going to the farmer's market, we love buying local produce, trying to – they have a compost thing at the farmer's market. We definitely ride our bikes . . . I just got a bike, so I'm excited to ride. And, um, yeah. I mean we take the train everywhere, so we're not doing, you know, jumping in our cars. Definitely the markets in our area are mostly organic. Trader Joe's is a huge deal. Honestly, like every single new market that's come in has organic. And all . . . a lot of the restaurants have local food. So it's a really big deal in ____.

Interviewer: So what are the impressions of those people in the neighborhood? Does anything jump out?

Brook: I mean people call us hipsters. I would not classify myself as a hipster, but they do. I don't know, I enjoy it. I like it. I like, you know, taking whatever I can do to help the planet, yeah.

While LEC/HCC respondents frame mitigation strategies in terms of structural solutions and often criticize the aggregate levels of consumption which lead to climate change, both HEC/LCC and HEC/HCC respondents – when pondering structural approaches as opposed to individual-level behaviours – see more technological, market-oriented solutions. At times they also subtly pushed back against the hypothetical draw-downs in consumption, explaining how accustomed to a materially rich lifestyle they have become. Yvette (HEC/LCC), a 55-year-old in the legal field who lives in an affluent, environmentally conscious suburb of Boston, reports that she is an avid recycler, uses canvas bags at the grocer, and owns a hybrid automobile, but stops short at conceding energy use in the end of curbing her effect on the environment:

So you know, we try to do things like that as much as possible, but am I going to turn off my air conditioning? No. I mean we keep the house pretty

cold in the winter, but it's . . . not as much about preserving the environment as it is to not pay the cost of heating oil. You know it's a combination of things . . . but if heating oil was really cheap, we'd probably turn the heat up a little more. So we try to do what we can, but we're accustomed to an American lifestyle.

Though commensurate with their relatively high levels of economic capital the HEC/LCC respondents express less financial constraint related to changing behaviours in the name of curbing carbon emissions, they share the LEC/LCC's orientation toward practicality, efficacy and financial prudence. HEC/LCC respondents also frame most of the strategies for dealing with climate change in individual or consumer terms, rather than proposing structural solutions like many HEC/HCC respondents did. Nonetheless, this is a subtle difference – although the HEC/HCC respondents often proffered structural solutions, these largely involved market-based incentives to induce changes in individual or consumer behaviour, making them similar to HEC/LCC respondents in many respects. Some respondents also took issue with regulation in a general sense, arguing that economic prosperity and employment were hindered by overzealous governance. Ruth (HEC/LCC), a 55-year-old who lives in a middle-class suburb and commutes to her job in the legal field in Boston, sees environmental regulations as a roadblock to job creation:

Well with the crisis that the country is in, with the expensive wars, and with the economy . . . the way industry is drying up in this country right now . . . I would consider it [climate change] lower on the scale. In fact I have a little anger toward the, quote, 'environmental Nazis' for stepping in – I think in large part because the manufacturing in the country has been outsourced, and we've had to stop making things because we're so afraid of EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] and the DEP [Department of Environmental Protection] in this state – regulations – and fines that for a country who could not . . . we could be heading for third world status because we don't make anything of our own.

At times, HEC/LCC respondents also noted that they engaged in what they saw as pro-environmental behaviour due to health or personal well-being, in keeping with a utilitarian orientation. For example, Richard, a middle-aged accountant who recently settled in a gentrified neighbourhood of Boston (HEC/LCC), frames his behaviour related to climate change and sustainability – organic food purchases, in this case – in terms of practical health:

I was there the other day near Mass General seeing a client, and Whole Foods is, you know, 100% organic, so just trying to you know . . . and the quality of the food is good. So I guess for food products, um . . . not saying cost is no issue, but I think it's easier from a food perspective, because you're eating the pesticides and things like that.

The HEC/HCC respondents did not express as critical of a view toward regulation, but did see market-based mechanisms like tax incentives as most effective in engendering change and transforming behaviours. Sarah (HEC/HCC), a 28-year-old research analyst living in a neighbourhood of Boston increasingly inhabited by young professionals, sees the issue as one of economics and rational choice, whereby people are aided in doing the 'right' thing by carrots and sticks:

If you give people tax credits if they buy a hybrid . . . and I think people care way more about money than about the environment. The same thing . . . the recession . . . so if you basically have to bribe people to treat the environment, well, then that's the way you get them to do it and that's what you gotta do.

Amelia, a 49-year-old in computer sales (HEC/HCC), similarly sees the issue as one of incentives and disincentives. Government does play a role, but a nominal one of issuing the kinds of policies which foster more sustainable or technologically efficient choices within the private market:

I think the government is intervening. I mean, honestly, with all the programs Obama has right now, I think he has a lot of programs to incent . . . I don't know if he's intervening or incenting. He's incenting people to buy the hybrids, to buy the energy savers, the energy star whatever it's called. He's giving rebates. And people are jumping on that and it's working.

The LEC/HCC group stands in contrast with the others – sometimes rather starkly – often focusing on consumerism and the market as the drivers of the problem, rather than its possible solution. Perhaps the most significant finding is that the respondents connected climate change with class both directly and indirectly, while none of them denied the reality of the phenomenon outright. That is, respondents both connected it to their own class position at times (ie certain practices or products are too expensive), and to that of others (ie following a 'fad'), while still affirming that climate change is a very real issue. When asked whether there are 'differences in how people view climate change based on their class position', only three of the 40 respondents stated that the subject prompted universal concern, with one answer too vague to categorically interpret. Most suggested that higher material security or education levels led to higher concern (and a good deal argued for the importance of both, in tandem).

While some suggested that higher income or wealth was negatively associated with concern, these respondents nevertheless offered an explanation consistent with the 'new class' theory – those with high levels of cultural capital and comparatively low levels of economic capital caring most. For instance, Sarah (HEC/HCC) claims that it is the 'hippie-ish, granola type of people that are usually . . . their jobs are usually working in the public sector and

non-profits . . . it's the type of work they go into that gives them the lower to middle-class salary which is where they are. Whereas people like the bankers, they couldn't care less.' When asked if they ever talked about the issue, results held across capital groups: rarely if ever did the respondents talk about the issue with other people (either within or outside of their own class group), with some even actively avoiding it for fear of speaking to somebody that disagreed about the severity or reality of it. On the rare occasion a respondent mentioned speaking about climate change with others, they exceedingly rarely spoke to anybody who thought differently than they did about the subject, with HCC respondents sometimes reporting that they don't 'hang out' with those who they see as uneducated and therefore in their eyes unconcerned about it, or actively avoid those who may be. For example, Donna (HEC/HCC), a 47-year-old engineer for a technology firm in the greater Boston area, claims: 'I personally think that [not affirming the reality of climate change] comes from being uneducated and I don't know if . . . alright, snobbish, but I pretty much hang out with people that are educated.'

Conclusion

In this work I sought to examine the role social class may have in conceptualizations of and reactions to the issue of climate change. While many respondents expressed concern for the issue across the economic and cultural capital groupings used here, subtler but still discernible patterns emerged. First, though many LEC/LCC respondents affirmed the import and severity of climate change, they were nevertheless more likely to view it as exaggerated, as subsumed to more immediate economic concerns, or as a 'luxury' good which primarily preoccupies those richer than themselves – particularly in terms of economic capital. The LEC/HCC respondents were the only respondents to explicitly question American consumption, prompting many to espouse a 'sufficiency' approach, while propounding structural rather than individual-level solutions to the problem. The HEC/LCC respondents were more likely to view behaviours related to climate change in more individual and utilitarian terms. HEC/HCC respondents did affirm structural solutions to the issue, yet this was often market-based or technological (ie efficiency gains) as opposed to calling for cutbacks in material consumption (see Figure 1).

Most of the respondents answered positively when asked whether class plays a role in how or if people react to the issue, suggesting that for this sample at least, climate is substantively connected to social class. Though affirmative answers in survey and interview-based research may sometimes be the result of acquiescence bias, respondents here did respond in the negative for other questions and went on to elaborate how they thought class was connected to the environment (ie no respondent answered in one-word answers to any of the questions). Virtually none of the respondents claimed they talked about the issue with others, even on rare occasions. Those with

<p>LEC/HCC Affirmed climate change as a substantial concern; only group to position American consumerism as key part of the problem; most likely to connect the issue to personal transportation; nevertheless, saw structural forces as most powerful in ameliorating it.</p>	<p>HEC/HCC Affirmed climate change as a problem; saw structural approaches grounded in market-based or technological change as mitigation strategies; stopped short of endorsing substantial changes in American lifestyle consistent with their consumption habits.</p>
<p>LEC/LCC Many affirmed climate change as a problem, yet this group was most likely to view it as exaggerated; individual-level behaviors like recycling most often offered as mitigation strategies; more likely to see these strategies/lifestyle changes as expensive or otherwise symbolizing higher status position.</p>	<p>HEC/LCC Affirmed climate change as a problem but sometimes viewed amelioration strategies as problematic; saw market-oriented strategies for abatement as most effective; at times called into question the efficacy of government regulation; often saw individual lifestyle changes as more closely related to personal health and well-being.</p>

Figure 1 *Climate change attitudes by economic and cultural capital categories*

lower levels of capital (but especially cultural) were more likely to view those who ‘care a lot’ about climate change as materially secure. Those with higher levels often viewed those who did not care about the issue as uneducated or ignorant. This provides an intriguing contrast to Lamont (1992), who found that moral distinctions are crucially significant in maintaining status boundaries. Here, even though the issue of climate change is heavily bound with narratives of morality and ethics (ie intergenerational justice, environmental stewardship, etc), my respondents drew boundaries firmly based in class and cultural distinctions. That is, when they drew boundaries, they were never predicated on a moral superiority, but one based on their class position.

These orientations are thus emblematic in some ways of ‘symbolic boundaries’ (Lamont, 2000) or ‘symbolic fences’ (Strandbu and Krange, 2003), whereby respondents draw differences between themselves and others regarding climate change commensurate with the levels and composition of their capital. To some relatively poor and uneducated, the issue can be indicative of a ‘rich person’s’ concern. These social distinctions, often involving cultural and economic differences, can affect respondents’ professed behaviours, their purported solutions (ie buying less versus tax incentives; recycling versus biking to work), and their perception of others in relation to the issue. While theorists often describe muted responses to climate change as psychological or cognitive, these findings suggest the possibility that they are also culturally fraught and contested, and that the issue possesses symbolic meanings which convey markedly different things to different groups.

It is often argued that in a context of anthropogenic global warming, lifestyles must change, overconsumption must cease, and behaviours must be modified. Whose lifestyles, what kinds of overconsumption, and which behaviours? Asking these questions is not simply about political efficacy and

coalition building, but involves a reorientation of the approach both academics and policymakers take in examining the issue, and a recognition that class and culture may play vital roles in how scientific knowledge is absorbed, processed and acted upon. Let me be clear that this is not to be taken as a suggestion that 'caring about the climate' must be marketed differently or more forcefully to certain social classes. The point is that the approach both academic and non-academic actors often take – one of crafting 'concrete, achievable and manageable' policy strategies which often involve this kind of marketing (Shove, 2010: 9) – fundamentally err in tacitly assuming these individual-level actions are both simple and desirable for all types of people if only the correct information and incentive structures were present. To implore those who have never had the luxury of automobile ownership (and perhaps desire it) to walk or bike is a strange policy 'solution'. And though here the LEC/LCC respondents often focused on individual-level actions like recycling or reusing water bottles, this certainly does not mean they are incapable of advocating for or understanding structural-level solutions. They may simply be offering these as substantive actions because they are the only ones they can reasonably undertake with the resources they have. I argue that one important implication of this is that equity (not just in an intergenerational sense) must be more substantively and meaningfully coupled with issues of sustainability, which again necessitates going beyond psychology or economics in exploring how we perceive and process global environmental problems.

While caring about a specific environmental problem is not necessarily constitutive of boundary-making processes, they may be yet another symptom of them, themselves often influenced by structural determinants like social class (though not in a rigidly deterministic manner). With this I am not arguing that caring about or supporting policy initiatives in reaction to climate change is necessarily a mechanism of social reproduction. Rather, these political affinities may simply reflect a culturally variegated disposition – overlapping but not synonymous with class culture – which is largely missing from our account of why the scientific and expert-level consensus to act diverges so greatly from the popular understanding of the issue. The potential for a class-contingent variation of how people understand and react to the issue and the social antagonism based on boundaries forged in class and culture suggest that we be fully aware of their influence in affirming climate change as one of the greatest social and environmental problems of our time.

Notes

- 1 Though the more affluent or educated may consume 'green' products with greater frequency than others, this does not necessarily make their lifestyles more sustainable when considering

- overall energy use and general patterns of material consumption (Gatersleben *et al.*, 2002). I am also not claiming that politics and consumption are mutually exclusive – in fact, as Shudson (2007) and others have argued, consumption is often bound with politics in complex and historically significant ways.
- 2 Respondents were solicited through advertisements on craigslist (www.craigslist.com), a popular web-based classifieds service – specifically the ‘volunteers’ section – and given \$10 in compensation for their time.
 - 3 For determining whether individuals were assigned to LEC/HEC or LCC/HCC categories, points were allocated based on the respondent’s income and home/car ownership status (for economic capital) along with total years of tertiary education between the participants and their parents (for cultural capital). If the respondent scored above an 18 in the economic calculation, they were assigned to the HEC category. If the respondents and their parents had 12 or more years of tertiary education between them – 8 for those from single-parent households – they were assigned to the HCC category. Economic capital categories (LEC/HEC) were determined using a point system, with those scoring above 18 being assigned to the HEC category, and those scoring lower assigned to the LEC category. Income intervals were given the following points (the points are not allocated in linear fashion, to further distinguish higher income earners): \$0 – 14999 = +2; 15000 – 29999 = +4; 30000 – 44999 = +6; 45000 – 59999 = +9; 60000 – 74999 = +12; 75000 – 89999 = +15; 90000 – 104999 = +19; 105 – 119999 = +24; 120000+ = +30. Homeowners were given +12 points, while those with mortgages were given +6. Car owners were given +2. Cultural capital was determined by years of tertiary education between respondents and their parents (with 12 or more being categorized as HCC). This was determined assuming BAs constituted 4 years, MA/MBAs 6, JDs 7, and PhDs/MDs 9. Students in their final year of undergraduate education were coded as possessing BAs. Though this operationalization of economic and cultural capital is only a rough proxy for the concepts they are attempting to measure, it was not feasible to build additional indicators into the calculation.
 - 4 Though the calculus behind the categorization is my own, I use LEC/LCC/etc groupings consistent with Holt (1998).
 - 5 See the Secretary of State of Massachusetts’ compilation of enrolment statistics: www.mass.gov/Ador/docs/dls/mdmstuf/socioeconomic/voterregistration.xls (accessed 20 April 2011).
 - 6 HEC/LCC respondents primarily cited individual-level behaviours in combating climate change, while the HEC/HCC group stressed structural or governmental changes. The relatively low numbers of respondents that constitute these groups, however, limit many other comparative claims.
 - 7 Though some respondents either thought that the concern over climate change was overstated or that it was more of a natural rather than anthropogenic phenomenon, nobody in the sample denied it was happening outright. Presumably this would be far different in other regional contexts.

References

- Berger, J. and Ward, M., (2010), ‘Subtle signals of inconspicuous consumption’, *Journal of Consumer Research*, 37 (4): 555–569.
- Bierman, N., (2011), ‘Brown, Warren on opposite sides of oil pipeline debate’, *The Boston Globe*, 16 December.
- Bourdieu, P., (1984), *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Boykoff, M.T. and Boykoff, J.M., (2004), ‘Balance as bias: global warming and the US prestige press’, *Global Environmental Change*, 14: 125–136.
- Brechin, S.R., (2010), ‘Public opinion: a cross-national view’, in Lever-Tracy, C. (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Climate Change and Society*, London: Routledge.
- Dietz, T., Dan, A. and Shwom, R., (2007), ‘Support for climate change policy: social psychological and social structural variables’, *Rural Sociology*, 72 (2): 185–221.

- DiMaggio, P., (1982), 'Cultural capital and school success: the impact of status culture participation on the grades of U.S. high school students', *American Sociological Review*, 47 (2): 189–201.
- Dunlap, R.E. and York, R., (2008), 'The globalization of environmental concern and the limits of the postmaterialist values explanation: evidence from four multinational surveys', *The Sociological Quarterly*, 49: 529–563.
- Ehrenreich, B. and Ehrenreich, J., (1977), 'The professional-managerial class', *Radical America*, 11: 3–6.
- Erickson, B.H., (1996), 'Culture, class, and connections', *American Journal of Sociology*, 102 (1): 217–251.
- Fletcher, A.L., (2009), 'Clearing the air: the contribution of frame analysis to understanding of climate policy in the United States', *Environmental Politics*, 18 (5): 800–816.
- Gatersleben, B., Steg, L. and Vlek, C., (2002), 'Measurement and determinants of environmentally significant consumer behavior', *Environment and Behavior*, 34: 335–362.
- Haller, M., (2002), 'Theory and method in the comparative study of values: critique and alternative to Inglehart', *European Sociological Review*, 18 (2): 139–158.
- Holt, D.B., (1997), 'Distinction in America? Recovering Bourdieu's theory of tastes from its critics', *Poetics*, 25 (2): 93–120.
- Holt, D.B., (1998), 'Does cultural capital structure American consumption?', *Journal of Consumer Research*, 25: 1–25.
- Horton, D., (2003), 'Green distinctions: the performance of identity among environmental activists', *The Sociological Review*, 51(s2): 63–77.
- Hulme, M., (2009), *Why We Disagree about Climate Change: Understanding Controversy, Inaction, and Opportunity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Inglehart, R., (1995), 'Public support for environmental protection: objective problems and subjective values in 43 societies', *Political Science and Politics*, 28 (1): 57–72.
- Jacques, P.J., Dunlap, R.E. and Freeman, M., (2008), 'The organisation of denial: conservative think tanks and environmental skepticism', *Environmental Politics*, 17 (3): 349–385.
- Jones, J., (2011), 'Americans increasingly prioritize economy over environment', *Gallup Polling*, 17 March. Available at: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/146681/Americans-increasingly-prioritize-economy-environment.aspx> (accessed 21 April 2011).
- Kempton, W., (1991), 'Lay perspectives on global climate change', *Global Environmental Change*, 1 (3): 183–208.
- Krosnick, J.A., Holbrook, A.L., Lowe, L. and Visser, P.S., (2006), 'The origins and consequences of democratic citizens' policy agendas: a study of popular concern about global warming', *Climatic Change*, 77: 7–43.
- Lamont, M., (1992), *Money, Morals, and Manners: The Culture of the French and the American Upper-Middle Class*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago.
- Lamont, M., (2000), *The Dignity of Working Men: Morality and the Boundaries of Race, Class, and Immigration*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Leudicke, M., Thompson, C.J. and Giesler, M., (2010), 'Consumer identity work as moral protagonism: how myth and ideology animate a brand-mediated moral conflict', *Journal of Consumer Research*, 36: 1016–1032.
- MAPC (Metropolitan Area Planning Council), (2011), 'The state of equity in Metro Boston', 12 December. Available at: http://www.regionalindicators.org/equity/media/pdf/FINAL_Equity_Executive_Summary_11_29_11.pdf (accessed 28 March 2012).
- McCright, A.M., (2009), 'The social bases of climate change knowledge, concern, and policy support in the U.S. general public', *Hofstra Law Review*, 37: 1017.
- McCright, A.M. and Dunlap, R.E., (2003), 'Defeating Kyoto: the conservative movement's impact on U.S. climate change policy', *Social Problems*, 50 (3): 348–373.
- Newport, F., (2010), 'American's global warming concerns continue to drop', *Gallup Polling*, 11 March. Available at: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/126560/Americans-Global-Warming-Concerns-Continue-Drop.aspx> (accessed 20 April 2011).

- Norgaard, K.M., (2006), ‘“People want to protect themselves a little bit”: emotions, denial, and social movement nonparticipation’, *Sociological Inquiry*, 76 (3): 372–396.
- Onyango, B.M., Hallman, W.K. and Bellows, A.C., (2007), ‘Purchasing organic food in U.S. food systems: a study of attitudes and practice’, *British Food Journal*, 109 (5): 399–411.
- Pachucki, M.A., Pendergrass, S. and Lamont, M., (2007), ‘Boundary processes: recent theoretical developments and new contributions’, *Poetics*, 35 (6): 331–351.
- Peterson, R.A. and Kern, R.M., (1996), ‘Changing highbrow taste: from snob to omnivore’, *American Sociological Review*, 61 (5): 900–907.
- Rome, A., (2001), *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Saad, L., (2011), ‘Water issues worry Americans most, global warming least’, *Gallup Polling*, 29 March. Available at: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/146810/Water-Issues-Worry-Americans-Global-Warming-Least.aspx> (accessed 20 April 2011).
- Schor, J.B., (1998), *The Overspent American: Upscaling, Downshifting and the New Consumer*, New York: Basic Books.
- Shove, E., (2010), ‘Beyond the ABC: climate change policy and theories of social change’, *Environment and Planning A*, 42 (6): 1273–1285.
- Shudson, M., (2007), ‘The troubling equivalence of citizen and consumer’, *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 608 (1): 193–204.
- Starr, M., (2009), ‘The social economics of ethical consumption: theoretical considerations and empirical evidence’, *Journal of Socio-Economics*, 38: 916–935.
- Stern, P.C., (2000), ‘New environmental theories: toward a coherent theory of environmentally significant behavior’, *Journal of Social Issues*, 56 (3): 407–424.
- Strandbu, A. and Krange, O., (2003), ‘Youth and the environmental movement: symbolic inclusions and exclusions’, *The Sociological Review*, 51 (2): 177–198.
- Tampubolon, G., (2010), ‘Social stratification and cultures hierarchy among the omnivores: evidence from the Arts Council England Surveys’, *The Sociological Review*, 58 (2): 1–25.
- Trigg, A.B., (2001), ‘Veblen, Bourdieu, and conspicuous consumption’, *Journal of Economic Issues*, 35 (1): 99–115.
- Ungar, S., (2000), ‘Knowledge, ignorance and the popular culture: climate change versus the ozone hole’, *Public Understanding of Science*, 9 (3): 297–312.
- Weber, E.U., (2006), ‘Experience-based and description-based perceptions of long-term risk: why global warming does not scare us (yet)’, *Climatic Change*, 77: 103–120.

Appendix

Descriptive statistics for EC/CC categories

	LCC (N = 25)	HCC (N = 15)
Average no. of years of tertiary education between participants and parents	4.05	15.20
	LEC (N = 31)	HEC (N = 9)
Average self-reported income (2010, US\$)	\$18,045	\$87,000
Median self-reported income (2010, US\$)	\$15,000	\$90,000
Homeowners and mortgage holders	2 (6.5%)	8 (89%)
Car owners	10 (32.3%)	8 (89%)