Book Review: Rapid Climate Change: Causes, Consequences, and Solutions and Waste and Consumption: Capitalism, the Environment, and the Life of Things

Cliff Brown

*Teaching Sociology* 2013 41: 221

DOI: 10.1177/0092055X13483704

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://tso.sagepub.com/content/41/2/221

Published by:

http://www.sagepublications.com

On behalf of:

American Sociological Association

Additional services and information for *Teaching Sociology* can be found at:

**Email Alerts:** http://tso.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

**Subscriptions:** http://tso.sagepub.com/subscriptions

**Reprints:** http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

**Permissions:** http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

>> Version of Record - Mar 20, 2013

What is This?
taken classical or contemporary sociological theory should have no problems following along, particularly if the instructor takes enough time with the text to work through the key concepts with them. Students will easily find current events upon which they can bring the “problem of emotions” to bear. There is a glossary and provocative questions for discussion. And, they will be delighted at the affordability of this option, whether it is purchased as a separate text or as part of a course reader assembled by the custom publishing company.

This brings me back to the topic of what a wise idea the series editors at Routledge had when they conceived this series. As instructors, we want to introduce our students to a broad range of scholarship, and many of us are veering away from more costly, often hardbound, multiple edition textbooks in favor of shorter texts (including research monographs in some cases) supplemented by journal articles from the databases to which our students have increasing access. The former can be hard to find, and the excerpted material offered by many of the custom publishers loses a bit in translation.

Texts like Turner’s, offered through this medium, keep the level of scholarship high while being both accessible and flexible. An instructor could use the text as one of a series of readings in a graduate-level course or as a supplement to other texts (in courses on the sociology of emotions, social problems, stratification, and social movements). Another alternative would be to use the text in an introductory-level course and make use of the excerpted readings the publisher (or other publishers) offers to extend the topics of social psychology, sociobiology, and collective action that Turner, of necessity, covers in brief. There are quite a few possibilities here, and if the other texts in the series are of comparable quality, I foresee making good use of this new kind of option.

REFERENCES

Scott G. McNall

Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi

Reviewed by: Cliff Brown, University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH USA
DOI: 10.1177/0092055X13483704

Routledge has created its Framing 21st Century Social Issues series as a way to teach students about prominent contemporary social problems. The series emphasizes the paradigms, models, and frames that social scientists use; highlights the relevant evidence and scholarly debates; and considers policy approaches and individual-level strategies. Chapters conclude with several discussion questions that invite readers to reflect on key themes, and books in the series also feature a useful glossary/index. The examples evaluated here, Rapid Climate Change and Waste and Consumption, are appropriate for undergraduate courses, particularly those in social problems or environmental sociology. Both offer accessible introductions to their respective topics, and both do so in a condensed and engaging manner.

Of the works considered in this review, McNall’s Rapid Climate Change is the more topical and more clearly focused, and as such, it may more readily complement instructors’ existing sociology courses by adding needed depth on climate issues. The book starts with a succinct review of the essentials of climate science and discusses the evidence associated with global warming. Many of McNall’s examples—melting glaciers, shifting seasonal patterns, increasing frequency of extreme weather, thawing permafrost, diminishing Arctic ice—will be familiar to readers, but the author’s situation of recent trends in terms of the long-term context of climate variability opens the book in a compelling way. Next, Rapid Climate Change evaluates the main critiques offered by skeptics of the scientific consensus, the proliferation of which has blunted the impact of empirical
research by creating the appearance of a legitimate debate. McNall considers how this “debate” shapes public opinion, giving attention to the manner in which the news media cover climate issues and the promotion of competing perspectives by conservative think tanks. He also includes more nuanced discussions involving the complexities of risk assessment and the ways that global poverty and political instability undercut international efforts to promote meaningful climate policy. Taken together, these factors convincingly illuminate why extensive research and overwhelming evidence have not been sufficient to compel a decisive and unified response from the international community.

Throughout the book, the author is attentive to the integrated complexities of the climate system and its vulnerability to tipping points that could render calamitous transformations on relatively short time scales. McNall’s treatment underscores why climate change is a “wicked” problem, one defined by multiple, overlapping interdependencies that may imply contradictory or constantly evolving solutions. In this context, readers can readily appreciate the shortcomings of the Kyoto and Copenhagen climate talks and the near paralysis that has characterized the U.S. response to climate change. After presenting the scientific evidence and considering many of the political, economic, moral, emotional, and conceptual reasons underlying policy inertia, the book concludes with a discussion of green technologies and reflects on how strategic policy choices (e.g., a carbon tax or a cap-and-trade system) can potentially internalize the environmental costs of various energy scenarios while realigning the forces of innovation with environmental sustainability. McNall’s brief overview of several prominent green technologies could serve as a useful starting point for a class debate, a variety of research paper topics, or a series of in-class presentations.

Rapid Climate Change nicely touches on numerous topics and concepts that will resonate in environmental sociology classes. These include the tragedy of the commons, the concept of sustainability, soft versus hard energy paths, the problem of peak oil, global inequality, and population pressures. Similarly, the book connects with the ideas of Thomas Malthus, Paul and Anne Erlich, Donella Meadows, Lester Brown, Jared Diamond, and Al Gore, and the author’s up-to-date treatment of Hurricane Katrina and the 2010 oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico makes this short work feel fresh and relevant. McNall presents readers with a comprehensive, accessible, and well-organized overview of climate science and the associated policy and technological debates that have developed in the wake of that science. The author’s condensed but detailed and lucid presentation makes Rapid Climate Change a worthwhile supplement for introductory and advanced courses that deal with contemporary social problems or environmental themes. The author provides no easy answers, but he does help readers cultivate a more sophisticated and nuanced perspective.

Falasca-Zamponi’s Waste and Consumption also devotes significant attention to climate change, which the author uses to frame her core thesis: The choices we make about consumption directly affect the waste we produce and thus influence the health of the environment that sustains us. This may seem like an obvious insight, but Falasca-Zamponi makes the case that modern dialogue about consumption has become disconnected from a corresponding and necessary focus on waste. For the author, the campaign to discredit the legitimacy of climate science and the associated debate over the implications of global warming epitomize the extent to which our pursuit of consumption has been uncoupled—logically, emotionally, and intellectually—from its relationship to waste and environmental decline. A primary goal is to make readers more conscious of the ways that consumption and waste are inextricably linked and to explore why societies embrace the former without thoughtfully considering its implications for the latter. As Falasca-Zamponi writes, “when we defend our right to consume we are also upholding our privilege to create waste” (p. 3).

The book offers a thoughtful analysis of the economic, political, and cultural factors that underpin our defense of consumption despite the environmental costs and, by implication, compromise our long-term interests. That said, the author’s scope is broad and the causal links in her analysis are sometimes incomplete, which results in an uneven argument that may present some challenges for instructors and their students. Waste and Consumption opens with an overview of the
climate change debate and a concise presentation of the main argument. Falasca-Zamponi devotes separate chapters to industrialization and the rise of global capitalism (with attention to Marx and the intellectual tensions between the Enlightenment and Romantic periods), the scale and scope of waste production (introducing the concept of waste and some of its manifestations), the problem of waste disposal (including a discussion of e-waste and global waste flows), and the rise of a modern-era consumption paradigm (drawing, in part, on Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*). The author suggests that cumulatively these technological, economic, and ideological forces have obscured the links between consumption, waste, and environmental decline. A final chapter assesses potential solutions and challenges and concludes by encouraging readers to become more knowledgeable and thoughtful in evaluating their own roles in the waste production.

Among the strengths of *Waste and Consumption* are the author’s attention to international processes and connections as well as her inclusion of non-U.S. examples. Falasca-Zamponi deals with significant issues and themes, but the book could be more precise about pinpointing the underlying forces that make waste and consumption particularly weighty social problems in the contemporary era. In various places, the analysis directs readers to consider capitalism, mass production, globalization, morality, the culture industry, individualism, and our notions about freedom; certainly, all of these are relevant. However, the book often treats these forces in their respective historical or intellectual contexts without considering how exactly these causal threads come together in contemporary societies to maintain or exacerbate processes that were set in motion during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In short, the values, social forces, and political arrangements that sustain high levels of waste and consumption in present-day society do not receive the sort of sustained, integrated attention that a book devoted to contemporary social problems might be expected to offer. Curiously, there is no discussion of Veblen and conspicuous consumption, and attention to planned obsolescence, the power of advertising, rising inequality, or Alan Schnaiberg’s notion of production treadmills might offer points of connection that would resonate with readers. Although it is critical to explore the historical antecedents to contemporary social problems, ultimately readers may find that the author’s argument does not effectively coalesce as it applies to the present. In sum, students are likely to find the book’s broad scope, analytical ambiguity, and lack of clear solutions somewhat unfulfilling. The book deals with an important issue and carefully outlines some relevant processes and concepts, but its failure to offer a compelling, overarching framework constitutes a prominent limitation.

**Tammy L. Anderson**


**ISBN:** 978-0-415-89205-6

**Reviewed by:** Anthony A. Peguero, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg USA

As a sociologist who instructs courses centered on youth violence and social problems, I often look for succinct and accessible readings that I can introduce to undergraduate students. Thus, I was excited about the opportunity to review Dr. Tammy Anderson’s book *Sex, Drugs, and Death: Addressing Youth Problems in American Society,* which is part of the *Framing 21st Century Social Issues* series, which provides originally short written texts that provide “overview” to important social issues as well as teachable excerpts from research for an undergraduate audience. This book explores how youth behavior, identity, activities, and lifestyles are associated with a broad spectrum of social problems in the United States. Depiction of the intersections between three predominant social issues for today’s youth is presented in this book: sexuality, substance use, and suicide. Anderson focuses particularly on the interactions that youth have across many contexts such as social networking Internet sites, schools, and clubs. Moreover, discussions about how gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status are significant in relation to sexuality, substance use, and suicide for U.S. youth are central to this book.