

Beyond Politics and Business as Usual?

Climate Code Red: The Case for Emergency Action by David Spratt and Philip Sutton. Melbourne: Scribe, 2008, pp. 304, ISBN: 978-1-921372-20-9, £25.00 (pbk.).

By Javier Sethness

It could justifiably be said that David Spratt and Philip Sutton's *Climate Code Red: The Case for Emergency Action* is a challenging read. The work's authors, principally concerned with systematically exploring the present predicament of anthropogenic global warming, or climate change, conclude that the greenhouse gases emitted since the onset of the Industrial Revolution have already caused the Earth's climate to warm to dangerous levels, and that hence the future warming expected to accompany the carbon-reduction trajectories to which governments of the world are in principle committed to realizing would induce catastrophic destruction. Extant climate-change policy is fundamentally irrational and deeply inhumane, in this calculus, for 'the fate of most people, and most plants and animal species' that exist on Earth is essentially being jeopardized by the status quo and its defenders. Going far beyond the warming targets being considered in hegemonic discourse and policy, Spratt and Sutton find that the highest average-global temperature increase that can reasonably be allowed is one of 0.5°C beyond the temperatures that prevailed in 1750 CE, before industrialization—that is, 0.3° below the warming that has taken place to date. Any warming beyond this level would be unacceptably destructive to life on Earth, claim Spratt and Sutton.

The perspectives advanced by Spratt and Sutton in *Climate Code Red* are "desperate," for they reflect "the desperate straits our planet is now in," given the profundity of the threat presented by "business- and politics-as-usual" regarding climate change (p. 132). The specter of climate catastrophe amounts in Spratt and Sutton's conclusion to "the greatest threat in human history"; the likely futures being provoked by present approaches to the problem call into question the very future "viability" of Earth as "a life support system" (pp. 178 & 251). The authors' reviews of climate-related incidents experienced in recent years make the basis for their argument clear. For one, Spratt and Sutton see the alarmingly violent recent recessions of Arctic sea-ice cover, and especially that experienced during 2007 – to say nothing of this year's reports, which show even more extreme reductions of the Arctic sea-ice minimum – as demanding a radical reconsideration of approaches to climate change, since, among other things, the

sustained loss of Arctic ice would prompt a reduction in albedo that would in turn bring about further warming. That the unprecedented 2007 and 2010 Arctic sea-ice minimums occurred within the context of the 'achievement' of a 0.7-0.8°C increase in average global temperatures beyond those of pre-industrial history shows the present level of warming to be unacceptably high, say the book's authors, while consideration of the dire threats that current atmospheric carbon concentrations and their attendant warming-capacity pose to the Greenland ice sheet as well as the life that today resides in the Earth's coastal areas should further support this claim (pp. 20-27, 33-44). Spratt and Sutton also claim already-extant climate change to be responsible for famine in Darfur (p. 89); in addition, one could indict this culprit for presently emerging famine conditions in Niger, Chad, and Mali (Foy, 2010), as well as murderous heatwaves experienced this summer in South Asia (Burke, 2010).

Spratt and Sutton's findings, decidedly radical in implication, revolt against the 2°C 'safe-warming limit' advocated by many dominant global institutions. Were global warming to be limited to a 2°C increase in average global temperatures, such an achievement would amount to "a death sentence for billions of people and millions of species" (p. 99), claim Spratt and Sutton, for a world experiencing such warming would see dramatic disruptions of agricultural production in northern India's grain-belt, the complete disappearance of glacial ice in the Andes – which provides water for millions in Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Chile – and mass starvation in Mali, among other effects (Lynas, 2008). It should not be controversial to state that such outcomes, in addition to those that are to be expected to take place under conditions of warming beyond 2°C, should be avoided.

In light of the profound threats posed by climate catastrophe, Spratt and Sutton insist that the present state of the world's climate necessitates the realization of an emergency response within the little time which remains for the possibility of such. This state of emergency would be directed toward achieving a 'safe climate': a drop to the aforementioned 0.5°C average-global temperature increase, or a reduction from the present carbon-dioxide concentration of 390 parts per million (ppm) to 315 ppm. Warming at such a level would restore the summer Arctic sea-ice and avoid the various other life-negating consequences expected to accompany further warming. Policy directed at achieving such would, in Spratt and Sutton's estimation, entail three important movements: cutting greenhouse-gas emissions to zero, removing excess atmospheric carbon, and engaging in the direct cooling of the Earth. World society must become 'post-carbon' in the first place to avoid significant future temperature-increases and also embark on massive re-forestation campaigns to draw down current carbon-concentrations – but these two moves, crucial to preventing catastrophic climate change, would paradoxically itself provoke warming, as the artificial cooling effect of industrially produced aerosols would disappear with the abolition of carbon emissions. Since Spratt

and Sutton assume that the transformations needed to realize a post-carbon global society would, if seriously pursued, require at least two decades to be achieved, they naturally expect greenhouse-gas emissions to continue for some time, thus also inducing warming. In the authors' view, the warming that is to be expected to result from the emissions expected to occur during the envisioned transition system – an increase in average global temperatures of 1 or 2°C beyond that experienced to date, for a total increase of 1.8-2.8°C – would be too dangerous, and so they advocate geo-engineering schemes to cancel out the potential for such warming. Their treatment of this last proposal is brief, referred to quickly as constituting a “least-worst option” for preventing climate catastrophe (p. 132). They do not consider reports that warn that geo-engineering may result in disruptions to the Asian monsoon season and exacerbate drought in Africa, thus imperiling the lives of two million humans, as claim estimates reported by Silvia Ribeiro in *La Jornada* (2010). They do however insist that any large-scale geo-engineering project, once implemented, would necessarily have to exist continuously during the entirety of the hypothetical transition period; for it to be suspended at any point during this time would result in unacceptably dangerously levels of warming.

As should be clear, the thoroughgoing changes called for by Spratt and Sutton would be possible only through a ‘great transformation’ of existing society. The market, which the authors of *Climate Code Red* find to be incapable of “respond[ing] by itself at the depth and speed required” (p. 192), would need to be heavily regulated as a first step, though Spratt and Sutton seem to endorse planned economics and a concurrent reduction of the market’s role in society altogether (p. 224). Consumption patterns deemed “non-essential” are to be “curtailed or rationed” in this vision (p. 224); “mass air travel” by planes would preferably not exist (p. 196). Strangely enough, the authors at no point directly consider the importance that the general adoption of vegetarian diets, let alone vegan ones, could have for the avoidance of climate catastrophe, considering the dramatic greenhouse-gas emissions implicated in the mass-raising of livestock for exploitation and slaughter (Monbiot, 2002; Carus, 2010; Vidal, 2010).

Spratt and Sutton do make clear that their favored approach to the specter of catastrophic climate change is not to be an initiative imposed by technocratic elites but rather one to be advanced by the active democratic participation of “the broad community” by means of deliberative decision-making processes (pp. 234-6). The authors’ call here for building participatory democracy comprised of a ‘fully engaged’ citizenry aligns with Noam Chomsky’s (2010, p. 170) assertion that present trends of popular disenfranchisement constitute a “critical challenge for the future” that must be overcome, if reason is to be given a chance to prevail and humanity afforded a chance to avoid the numerous threats to its survival.

Less clear than Spratt and Sutton’s commitment to achieving a safe climate is

their take on capitalism, a present reality that has clear implications – principally highly negative ones – for the project set forth in *Climate Code Red*. Given the exegesis of Spratt and Sutton's arguments as presented above, their profound opposition to the existent should not be in doubt; they themselves argue for the general establishment of “local and global ‘Commons’”, or spaces held “‘in common’ for the benefit of all,” in place of markets serving “the corporate agenda” (p. 216), and assert in the book's closing pages that concern for “shareholder value” is to be subordinated to concern for “a viable future for our planet” and the lives of those who currently exist together with those who are expected to be born in the future (pp. 253-4). Here the authors express radically anti-capitalist perspectives, though they fail to identify their opposition to capitalism explicitly in the book's text. This lack of clarity is reflected in two important questions: for one, the authors fail to consider the seemingly sensible possibility of employing space-based solar power as a means of moving toward a post-carbon global society, as explored briefly by Kolbert (2006, 144-6). Moreover, they do not come to advocate the expropriation of capital to finance the thoroughgoing changes that will be needed for the transition period, as Marxists and anarchists might, nor do they, as e.g. Clarke (2010) does, call for the resources currently dedicated to military spending to be re-directed toward addressing the climate emergency.

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Encountering Strangeness

Strange Spaces: Explorations in Mediated Obscurity, edited by Andre Jansson and Amanda Lagerkvist. Farnham: Ashgate, 2009, pp. 356, ISBN: 978-0-7546-7461-0, £65.00.

By Chris Rumford

Understanding change, and more particularly understanding our experience of change as it is happening is a seriously under-researched dimension of social and political life. Transformations are usually reflected upon long after the dust has settled, when life has returned to stability or normality, and when trusted categories of interpretation can be brought to bear on events. This book aims to understand how we experience change, and to this end explores the feelings of estrangement, uncertainty and displacement associated with an encounter with 'strangeness'. It aims to throw light on a variety of bewildering or bizarre spaces which we may encounter in our societies resulting from moments of transformation and interruption which make us somehow feel out of place. Places where the familiar is revealed as a site of exile, discomfort or awe. Places which leave us speechless or bemused. Places which disrupt the smooth running of everyday existence. What is strange about strange spaces then, the editors of this book inform us, is that they evade the explanatory fixity of perceptive and theoretical categorizations (p. 7). Such places are more often than not opaque and not easily knowable and/or open to many interpretations. The obscurity of such places is increasingly mediated, in the sense that they are revealed to us via media technology, and it is possible that the obscurity is actually a product of this mediation. In other words, strange spaces disrupt our