

SOCIETY, POWER and CLIMATE CHANGE: *A Social Critique of Public Climate Change Receptivity in Ireland*

Executive Summary

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The fieldwork for this doctoral thesis was carried out between 2010 and 2013. The research into Irish society uses documentary and secondary analysis and is complemented by references to pre-existing quantitative data. The work into public receptivity is largely based on 11 focus groups and 19 life-history interviews used to record participants' sense of empowerment, climate change literacy, carbon-related practices, group-specific socialisation and interactions (pre-existing groups were used).

The small size samples for the different groups are not meant to quantitatively represent the broader population from which those groups hail. Instead they offer a more in-depth focus on the historical everyday reality of the participants and their climate receptivity than what would be obtained by a large survey. The findings also offer direction for theorizing on the wider receptivity of members of the public who hail from similar class-related contexts and hold similar resources and skills. The author favours future quantitative research to examine this generalizability.

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Project Background

Many social scientists, researching climate change perceptions and behaviours, ignore the social origins behind practices and values and therefore paint a picture of a public whose motivations and lifestyles appear largely unchangeable. The effect is to conceal possible policy alternatives that are based on reducing carbon-heavy living through transforming society and its institutions. This sociological study of public receptivity to climate change in Ireland breaks new ground by concentrating on this societal influence. It examines how this receptivity is connected to the structure of Irish society and to how representations of 'climate change' are shaped and defined by that society.

More specifically the research incorporated a comparative analysis across four societal fields: the education system, environmentalism, business, and agriculture. The participants recruited from within these fields included: teachers, academics, undergraduates, farmers, businessmen and lower economic groups, ex-Steiner pupils, organic growers, eco-villagers and Climate Camp activists. By juxtaposing mainstream (e.g. teacher, farmers) and non-mainstream groups (e.g. organic growers, eco-villagers), the study revealed how different social conditions and power relations contribute to diversified climate change perceptions and responses between certain groups.

Research Findings

How 'climate change' is broadly represented

Climate change issues have overwhelmingly come to be *owned* by experts ranging from climate scientists to economists and policy bureaucrats. This technocracy downplays local connections and moral arguments and tends to alienate the general public.

The research identifies the reformist view of 'climate change' as informing climate change science and dominating the international policy arena.

- Reformism accepts the existence of human-induced global warming and recognises the need for lowering emissions in a manner compatible with economic growth.
- Its recommendations include technological solutions as well as financial incentives and awareness campaigns that appeal to *individual* consumers.
- Ultimately, reformism signifies climate change as gradual and manageable within the current political and economic system.

How representations of 'climate change' are shaped by Irish society

The Irish state's position on climate change is predominantly reformist. The Irish political economy, emergent patterns of state nomination, various legitimacies sustained by state education and the media, conspire in favour of a societal hierarchy based on nationalistic economic growth and individualism. The type of 'climate change' that this societal hierarchy supports and projects throughout Irish society:

- is individualised, economised, and class-related aspects are ignored.
- is largely silent concerning the moral dimensions and is often submerged within the narrative of national competitiveness.
- reduces public involvement to the role of consumers who can save money from better energy efficiency.

The nature of participants' receptivity to 'climate change'

The opportunities and capacities for engaging with climate change were not shared equally by participants. Many had limited access to the ongoing debate and decarbonisation efforts and displayed an unease or lack of familiarity with the technical veneer of dominant depictions of climate change. The data collected suggested several forms of culturally patterned receptivity including how participants:

- with higher expert literacy (e.g. economic and technical literacy), attached to politicised communities and having a prominent social justice reading of the climate change issue, favoured collective engagement and made strenuous efforts to respond to climate change.
- with some concern, lower expert literacy and a depoliticised environment, were socially excluded from much of the issue. They also limited their role-related opportunities to individualised consumer-related practices of decarbonisation. Their own carbon-mitigating behaviours amounted to minor actions such as recycling, which they tenuously connected to the issue.

The four fields – environmentalism, agriculture, business, and education – had a strong effect on participants' climate change receptivity, leading to marked inter-group differences, for example:

- Organic growers were much more accommodating than the small conventional farmers to the concept of 'climate change' as a threat and saw themselves as part of the solution. It slips neatly into their political and social-justice take on agri-production.
- The farmers were mostly resistant to the concept and their role in responding to it. They largely viewed it through pre-existing inconveniences of government restrictions.
- A cost-benefit-rationale, regulatory and economic competitiveness discourses proved to be the defining features of the business focus group.

Some Recommendations

While recognizing that more quantitative work is required on receptivity, how Irish society broadly presents 'climate change' to the public and the participant findings, so far, supports calls for greater inclusivity and democratisation of climate change. This would include: expanding the role of the public, broadening public discussion to include local and moral discourses on climate change, recognising the influence of class, various fields and institutions on people's dispositions. These dispositions can be both enabling and incapacitating with regard to how the public engages with 'climate change'.

[*Click here to view an online pdf copy of the full doctoral thesis.*](#)