

The Winds of Change: Climate, Weather, and the Destruction of Civilizations

By Eugene Linden
New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006. 320 pages.

Security and Climate Change: International Relations and the Limits of Realism

By Mark Lacy
London: Routledge, 2005. 164 pages.

Reviewed by JOSHUA BUSBY

Eugene Linden's *The Winds of Change* provides a nuanced rendering of the complexities of climate science for non-experts. Linden, an experienced environmental writer who contributed to *Time* for many years, deftly synthesizes and summarizes the findings of the scientific community to build a convincing case that abrupt changes in climate have historically been one of the major causes of the decline of civilizations. In so doing, Linden shows a flair for popular science writing on par with Malcolm Gladwell and the late Stephen Jay Gould.

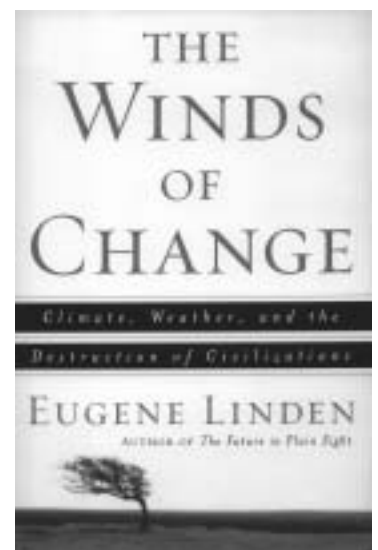
Readers familiar with Jared Diamond's work may find more than a passing similarity between this book and *Collapse* (2005). Linden's chapters on Greenland and the Mayans pursue similar substantive terrain, though Diamond's culprit is environmental degradation rather than variations in temperature and rainfall. It was thus surprising that Linden barely mentions Diamond's work. Given that both books deal with some of the same subjects, yet derive fairly different interpretations of why, for example, the Norse disappeared from Greenland in the 14th century, Linden could have addressed Diamond's thesis more directly.

Drawing on foundational research from numerous disciplines, Linden's book describes the tortuous process by which new scientific ideas overturn conventional wisdom. He portrays the scientists who recognized that natural variations in weather patterns had caused civi-

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lizations to collapse as fighting an uphill battle against an entrenched multidisciplinary antipathy to environmental determinism. It is thus somewhat ironic that Gladwell (2005), in his *New Yorker* review of *Collapse*, writes that "the disappearance of the Norse settlements is usually blamed on the Little Ice Age...what one archeologist called the 'It got too cold, and they died' argument." Linden's thesis, while significantly more nuanced, ultimately attributes the Norse disappearance to the Little Ice Age. Will the true conventional wisdom please stand up?

Given the complexity of weather systems, Linden makes a powerful case that we toy with them at our peril. However, the historical cases he describes turn local populations into largely passive victims of natural phenomena. He wants to demonstrate that these forces can be so large and sudden that they swamp human ability to adapt. At the same time, he wants us to





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believe we possess sufficient agency to stave off climatic changes wrought by greenhouse gas emissions. While we may be capable of unintentionally altering natural climate patterns, Linden's book left me less sanguine about our ability to deal with the climatic changes we have unwittingly brought upon ourselves—although the history of human ingenuity gives me some cause for optimism.

Linden's book also raises other questions. Suppose climate scientists could say with conviction that the Little Ice Age would return as a result of natural cycles. Would Linden encourage us to inject more greenhouse gases into the atmosphere to stave off this existential threat? Should we care only about warding off human-induced climate change or also natural climate variation?

In the book's later chapters on climate policy and politics, Linden begins to shed the even-handed approach that characterizes the more persuasive earlier arguments. He launches a sweeping broadside against industry and government and suggests that dealing with climate change is not as hard as climate skeptics make it out to be. In one of his less inspired passages, Linden writes:

While there is resistance to taking action to reduce greenhouse emissions, both industry and government are both more open to programs to either extract carbon from the atmosphere or adapt to climate change once it comes. On the surface, this makes no sense; it is the same as arguing that the best way to deal with someone ingesting arsenic would be to continue to give them arsenic but try to provide them with an antidote as well. From the logic of greed, however, the approach makes perfect sense. (p. 264)

Both carbon capture and adaptation make sense when you look at the projections for energy demand, greenhouse gas emissions, and the growth of renewable energy sources. Given China's construction boom in new coal-fired power plants, carbon capture will be necessary to mitigate climate change. Moreover, with the

amount of CO₂ in the atmosphere, some warming is going to happen, and adaptation will be needed to avert human and economic costs. While much of industry probably deserves the caricature Linden draws, I was disappointed that he abandoned the subtlety of his earlier chapters. Fortunately, this is but one chapter of an otherwise very good book.

I had some other minor quibbles. The book labors a bit in the middle where Linden retreads earlier material on Greenland and Syria to discuss the difficulty of finding reliable proxies in mud and ice for tracking historical temperature and precipitation trends. While the charts and graphs that open each chapter are helpful, I wanted more illustrations, particularly in later sections that describe yet another complex clockwork mechanism of underwater currents and wind patterns. I was particularly intrigued by one illustration: Linden's chapter on the "Tide of Public Opinion" opens with a chart tracking the rising scientific certainty about climate change amid more indifferent public opinion from the 1980s to 2005 (p. 219). This chart may have some foundation in reality, but as a social scientist, I worry that he generated it out of thin air. Finally, the chronology that appends the book gives the false impression that all of the major weather events of the past 20 years are linked to the same phenomenon—namely, anthropogenic climate change.

Security and Climate Change

If Linden's book is a well-written, largely thoughtful treatment of the complexities of climate science, Mark Lacy's book *Security and Climate Change* is its antithesis. It poses as post-modern critical theory, attempting to insert the author as a revolutionary in a grand narrative of scholar-activists arrayed against the forces of darkness. In this world, the "Realist" school of international relations theory is the enemy.

Realists (and I am not one) are pessimistic about the possibilities for progress on the world stage. Contemporary realists believe that the absence of an overarching world government creates powerful incentives for states to be

preoccupied with their own security. Lacy sees this narrow-minded view as a major limitation on our ability to imagine a more humane and just world. He not only thinks realists are wrong, but also that they dangerously legitimize the exercise of state power in ways that support war. I find this perspective to be a tired recycling of 1960s radical chic, the text adorned with numerous references to Zygmunt Bauman, Paul Virilio, and other theorists.

Lacy's discussion of climate change is almost an afterthought. At times, the topic is a prop in his larger project to dethrone realism and attack John Mearsheimer, whom Lacy takes to be the apotheosis of realism. Lacy links realists, and Mearsheimer in particular, to "a broader network of free-market think tanks, industry 'front groups' and conservative commentators" (p. 26). He suggests he is not creating a conspiracy theory but showing how these groups are mutually reinforcing. This Chomskyesque oversimplification is the most egregious demonstration of intellectual sloppiness in Lacy's book—and similar to the problem that plagued Mearsheimer himself in a co-authored piece on "The Israel Lobby" (2006).

Lacy suggests that Mearsheimer's brand of realism, which views the Iraq war as contrary to the national interest, is part and parcel of the military-industrial-complex, war-machine mentality that keeps people in a state of fear and issues like climate change off the table. He then concludes that Mearsheimer's opposition to the Iraq War is not a "significant disagreement" with the George W. Bush administration (p. 26). In this, Lacy is utterly wrong and has manufactured a seamless intellectual thread where there is actually discontinuity and difference.

Lacy chastises realists like Mearsheimer for failing to cite important critical theorists in what he calls the "underworld" of international relations. While I agree that realists are close-minded in their conceptions of security, the main reason critical theorists are slighted, in my opinion, is that their work is simply not very good.

Lacy groups all opponents of action of climate change into part of a broader "network of

Realism" that doubts climate science (pp. 35, 36). Thus, Mearsheimer gets unceremoniously lumped in with ExxonMobil and other climate naysayers. I am not sure if realists like Mearsheimer or Walt would deny that climate change is real. Knowing a number of them, I suspect that they would not argue with the science; they would argue that it is not an existential threat to great powers (and they may be right) and therefore not a security problem, at least for the great powers. Still, they might agree that it is a very important problem, as Robert Art (2003) does in his book on grand strategy.

To be fair, *Security and Climate Change*—though dressed up in rhetorical hyperbole and critical-theory speak—does make a couple of legitimate points. Lacy identifies (rather inelegantly) a contradiction in realist thought. Realism pretends to be a "descriptive" theory of how the world works but many realists also use it prescriptively to guide policymakers' behavior. Realists have also typically underplayed the importance of new security threats, in part because they are wedded to the notion that security problems come only from external armed attacks by states against other states. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 have already made this thesis more difficult to defend, as have other problems like pandemic flu. However, the task is to identify (1) what security means; and (2) the ways in which these new problems constitute security problems. A book on this topic would be worth reading, but *Security and Climate Change* is not that book.

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