

(In)Visibility of Climate Change & Low Carbon Transition in Urban Mobility Electric Mobility Innovation in China as Political Process

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The scientific evidence regarding the risks, dangers and uncertainties of anthropogenic global heating and associated climate change grows ever more compelling and nuanced. Yet evidence of concerted political and/or commercial will to tackle these issues remains sorely lacking. It seems therefore that the continuing invisibility of climate change in policy discourses is a singular barrier to doing something about it. This includes political momentum for low-carbon innovation; a key site of the socio-technical changes needed to respond to climate change. Part of this must be explained in terms of the (non-coincidental) simultaneous emergence of several other apparently existential social crises, regarding *inter alia*: financialized capital accumulation; a US-centred world order; legitimacy crises of nation-state governments (both ‘authoritarian’ and ‘democratic’); energy and other resource constraints; and a political economy of knowledge production. But in each case, in fact, a similar phenomenon is observable, namely increasingly clear aetiologies of the problem (e.g. systemic over-indebtedness, over-propertyised IP regimes etc...) but utterly inadequate action in response.

It is clear, therefore, that the approach of demanding first recognition of the problem (‘truth’) before proceeding to appropriate action is not working. This paper will explore a different tack, based on analysis in terms of power relations and their parallel mediation of both strategic action and power-knowledge technologies. From this perspective, the in/visibility of climate change can be seen as a *product* or *co-produced signal* of successful low-carbon innovation rather than its *precondition*. The issue of ‘tackling’ climate change, therefore, must be explored in terms of emergent and potentially self-sustaining positive feedback loops amongst low-carbon innovations, public discourses and changing power relations. Yet this turns the orthodox framing of the ‘problem’ regarding inaction on climate change on its head. For where evidence of these dynamics is forthcoming, the problem is not ‘why is nothing being done?’ but rather ‘what society is being created by emergent system innovations that is attempting to do something about it?’ In other words, *which* ‘climate change’ is emerging as of concern to policy and business, and who are the winners and losers, internationally and intra-nationally?

This latter question is explored using the crucial global case study of low-carbon urban mobility innovation in China: the world’s largest car market, an urbanization experiment without historical precedent in size and speed and already the world’s largest absolute emitter of greenhouse gases; but also the home and source of the world’s largest fleet of electric two-wheelers, facing serious and socially-destabilizing challenges of car-based pollution and congestion and with one of the world’s most ambitious national industrial policies regarding the electric car. Can China lead the way to ‘sustainable mobility’? And for whom?