

The Problem of Climate Change and the Analogy of Development: Green Technology Transitions in the BRICS

Online Lecture by Benjamin H. Bradlow, Princeton University, New Jersey, USA

Moderator: Sohini Sengupta, Tata Institute of Social Sciences (Mumbai Campus), India

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Abstract

Why do some BRICS countries succeed in coordinating low-carbon industrial transformation while others stall? Examining Brazil and South Africa's automotive transitions through field-based research in both countries including 95 interviews with industry, government, and labour, I demonstrate that inherited energy infrastructures shape climate development pathways. Brazil's renewable grid enables flexible industrial policies and Chinese investment for electric vehicle manufacturing, while South Africa's coal dependence fragments coalitions and channels the country toward conditional Western donor finance. Energy histories—not just state capacity—determine which developing countries can pursue sovereign climate industrialisation.

Benjamin H. Bradlow

Benjamin H. Bradlow is an Assistant Professor of Sociology and International Affairs at Princeton University, jointly appointed in the School of Public and International Affairs and the Department of Sociology. He is also a Visiting Researcher at the Southern Center for Inequality Studies at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa, and a CIFAR Azrieli Global Scholar in the research program on “Humanity's Urban Future.”

Bradlow's research makes connections between climate change, urbanization, technological change, and the political challenges for democracy that confront societies across the globe. His award-winning first book, [*Urban Power: Democracy and Inequality in São Paulo and Johannesburg*](#), was published in October 2024 by Princeton University Press, included in the series Princeton Studies in Global and Comparative Sociology. *Urban Power* compares the divergent politics of distributing urban public goods — housing, sanitation, and transportation — in two global mega-cities after transitions to democracy: São Paulo, Brazil, and Johannesburg, South Africa. In doing so, Bradlow develops a new theoretical account for why some cities are more effective than others in reducing inequality.

He is currently writing a new comparative book that investigates how climate change is reshaping economic and political life, with global perspective. Entitled *The Climate Hinge: Green Industrial Transitions in the Global South*, this work explores how Brazil and South Africa, middle-income countries with export-oriented, internal combustion engine automobile manufacturing sectors, are navigating a rich world transition to electric vehicles.

His award-winning research articles have been published in leading journals in sociology, economics, environmental studies, urban studies, and public health. This work has been funded by grants from the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research, the National Science Foundation, the American Council of Learned Societies, the Fulbright Program, the Climate Social Science Network, and the Brazilian Studies Association.

Bradlow is a public scholar and he regularly writes essays for public-facing outlets including the *Financial Times*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Boston Review*, *Bloomberg's CityLab*, *Phenomenal*

World, the *Washington Post*'s *Monkey Cage*, and *Africa Is A Country*. His research has gained the interest of international news media such as the *Financial Times*, *The Guardian*, and *Heatmap News*.

Prior to arriving at Princeton University, Bradlow was a postdoctoral fellow and lecturer at Harvard University. Prior to his academic life, he worked as a South Africa-based researcher and organizer with Shack/Slum Dwellers International, a network of housing movements across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and as a journalist in Johannesburg, South Africa, and Philadelphia, USA.