

Review - What's Wrong with Climate Politics and How to Fix It

Written by Nick Chan

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NICK CHAN, JUL 15 2014

What's Wrong with Climate Politics and How to Fix It

By: Paul G. Harris

Cambridge: Polity, 2013

Despite its title, Paul Harris' new book is not really about what's wrong with climate politics. It is, perhaps, instead about what is wrong with the human condition. "What ails climate politics", Harris writes in its opening pages, "is self-interestedness – selfishness of governments, selfishness of politicians, selfishness of business, selfishness of other special interests, and ultimately selfishness of individuals" (p.2). The climate crisis, he argues, is "a by-product of actors behaving quite normally to promote their perceived interests" (p.5). The failure of climate politics is therefore a consequence of the "selfishness that is built into the economic and social structures that influence people's lives" (p.19).

The book is divided into two sections, of three chapters apiece. The first section sets out the diagnosis of selfishness and the second offers possible treatments. While written for the general public rather than the scholarly reader, it is relevant to both. The author's focus on selfishness helps to link two themes that have often been treated separately, both within academia and without: *state-centric* politics and *individual* consumption. Selfishness is judged to be the underlying cause of both the moral blinders that national boundaries often place on our obligations to assist other humans, and the logic of modern capitalism that encourages individual material overconsumption. Bringing these together in a single volume is the deceptively simple, but innovative contribution of *What's Wrong with Climate Politics*. Harris's analysis will also serve as a good introduction to the politics of climate change.

The 'cancer of Westphalia'

For students of international relations (IR), this discussion will be striking insofar as the selfishness that is at the core of Harris' critique is also the standard starting point of realist IR analysis. Selfishness is typically *assumed* in international political life in a world of nation-states. This is suggested by scholarly debates around cooperation and 'mitigating anarchy', and the relative novelty of global 'governance without government'. By contrast, it is the very system of *states* that is implicated in Harris' diagnosis, as his label of the 'cancer of Westphalia' indicates—a reference to the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia commonly interpreted as the 'founding moment' of modern state sovereignty [i]. In his argument, the norm of Westphalian state sovereignty privileges territorially bound 'national' interests over international ones, to the detriment of efforts to address climate change. Harris judges this state-centrism to be the underlying reason why international negotiations have failed:

solutions are officially conceived in terms of nations... They [nations] routinely do things that they (or more specifically their officials) believe will promote their national interests. They only rarely act to promote wider common interests when doing so might conceivably incur significant costs to themselves, especially in the short term, which is what acting on climate change might do (p.62).

Deadlock, especially between the US and China (this deadlock is examined in a chapter of its own, titled 'The

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Malignancy of the Great Polluters'), is therefore an unsurprising consequence of such self-interested statism. In response, Harris urges a focus on a different unit of analysis: the individual, rather than the state. "People should be *at the center* of climate change discourse and politics, and they ought to be viewed as the primary *ends* of climate diplomacy and policy" (p.141, emphasis original). This is an unambiguously cosmopolitan normative vision, and this call for 'people-centred diplomacy' is couched in the language of human rights, of which increasing linkages have been made within climate change policy [ii]. This view is also not that far from the perspectives of the climate-vulnerable countries, e.g. SIDS (Small Island Developing States). In a 2013 UN Security Council debate on climate change, a minister from the Marshall Islands centred on the Westphalian notion of national sovereignty: "Treating the atmosphere like a Westphalian cake where we can haggle over the size of each country's slice is wrong. Negotiating to get the best deal for our country over the interests of others is downright irresponsible" [iii]. Still, realists may respond that the fading away of the nation-state is a more pious hope than an empirical reality. Indeed, the irrelevance of national boundaries has often been proclaimed before [iv]. Another critique of this section of the book is the scant attention that has been paid to the communitarian strand of political philosophy that accords moral importance to national allegiances and responsibilities. Harris does make a forceful argument as to the inadequacy of the self-interested nation-state argument in the face of the global challenge of climate change, however, the resilience of the nation-state is also in part an indication of its continuing normative value in organising political life, of which more could have been usefully said.

Nonetheless, Harris's occasional use of the term 'human security' may provide some instructive parallels for discussion and debate in the future. The advent of the 'human security' paradigm in the 1990s saw the referent unit of security debates ('what is to be secured') deepen from the state to the individual, broaden in the face of 'new' threats such as civil wars and HIV/AIDS, and move away from a narrow notion of 'security' as purely and simply 'national security'. The ambiguous way in which the human security agenda has been operationalised should still provide caution about any desired reorienting of climate action via 'human security' [v]. Similar debates in the 1990s did in fact illustrate some further possibilities of individual-centred international politics, such as the 'responsibility to protect' (R2P) doctrine. In its emphasis on the responsibility of both states and the international community to citizens, the R2P doctrine has reshaped the normative context for humanitarian intervention over the past decade. Could such a shift from 'rights' to 'responsibilities' also happen for climate change?

States don't emit, people do

Harris's urged shift in political emphasis from states to people is especially relevant to climate change; the agents directly responsible for emissions are people, not states—the aggregation of individual emissions. Hence there is a subtle, but important, point in the observation that "It is not the US and China, but Americans and Chinese" who matter in the emitters of today and tomorrow. Harris produces an arresting image of how this may influence standard thinking about who is responsible for climate change:

Imagine one billion tiny red dots – one for each of the one billion most affluent people on the planet – spread across this borderless map. Hundreds of millions of those tiny dots would be clustered in North America, Europe, Japan, and Australia. Large splotches of red, comprising millions of dots, would overlay New York, London, Tokyo and Sydney... These splotches and waves of red would correspond to something in the order of one-quarter to one-third of current global greenhouse gas emissions. In contrast, much of the developing world would have relatively few red dots... however, many locations in the developing world would contain large and expanding spots and splotches of red. This would be especially true in areas that correspond to major cities in the world's newly industrialised nations (pp.155-156).

Harris highlights the correspondence between affluence and emissions, placing 'material overconsumption' in the spotlight—an issue intergovernmental discussions often fail to address. The reason that the more affluent emit more is a reflection of the "hedonistic" selfishness inherent in modern capitalism, which encourages the consumption of more material goods than are necessary to meet material needs—an addition sometimes labelled as 'affluenza'. Harris argues that "addictions" to resource-intensive consumption are spreading to the newly affluent in developing countries where "consumption has come to define modern society and... has become the aspiration of people almost everywhere" (p.107). Thus responsibilities for climate change have to be distributed among *individuals* as well as

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states, to prevent the high-consuming affluent—wherever they live—from ‘hiding’ behind their poorer (and therefore low-consuming) compatriots. “[C]limate politics should be much less about the per capita emissions of *nations* and much more about per capita emissions per se – that is, *individual* emissions” (p.153, emphasis original). In this way the flattening of national boundaries, that is the result of Harris’ analysis, dramatically recasts the political problem of “differentiation” that so beguiles international negotiations.

Political change in our response to climate change, Harris argues, needs to begin with renewed attention to the affluence-consumption nexus at the individual level—a map of individuals rather than a map of states. But rather than being a purely utopian exercise, Harris points to a number of initiatives where the consumption of ‘happiness’ rather than material goods may be gathering steam. Efforts to revise ‘Gross Domestic Product (GDP)’ as the ultimate objective of economic policies are noted [vi], however, for individuals it is a social and cultural shift that is needed, namely changing attitudes about self-interest to include the pursuit of happiness rather than the acquisition of goods. This argument effectively recasts what it is that individuals should be selfish about: “To act in one’s best interest is to reduce material consumption toward the level of one’s needs, while increasing consumption of those things that all the evidence shows make people happy: time with friends and family, leisure activities, rewarding avocations, and the like” (p.195).

Curiously, however, Harris argues that states are still the main vehicle for this change (“governments can utterly transform people’s thinking” (p.190)). Some of his specific prescriptions are also a little underwhelming, such as his suggestion revision of advertising standards and the reshaping of environmental education). Nonetheless, it is clear that the kind of transformation in selfishness envisioned by Harris is that which reimagines material consumption “as something that is dirty and harmful” (p.189) and a dead-end towards improving human welfare.

What’s wrong with climate politics?

Much of the ongoing debate surrounding international climate politics addresses questions of ‘architecture’, including legal form and bindingness, forum shopping, or institution-building. Even as trans-national and sub-national climate activity deepens and intensifies, a world of states remains the default framework with which to approach this problem. Against this backdrop, Harris sets out a different vision for what climate politics *could* look like. While others have noted the limited headway that a global norm of environmental protection has made against the embedded character of state sovereignty and capitalist consumption [vii], *What’s Wrong with Climate Politics* unapologetically overturns the existing *international* order. It replaces a world of states with one of people and proposes a reshaping of material consumption as the basis of economic activity. The type of selfishness that our twenty-first century politics—not just climate politics—has grown accustomed to needs to be dramatically shaken up and replaced by a different sort of self-interest that is at the same time more global and ‘happier’. Are our collective political imaginations ready for this and what benefits will this shake-up bring?

Notes

[i] Buzan, B. & Lawson, G. (2012), ‘Rethinking benchmark dates in International Relations’, *European Journal of International Relations*, <http://ejt.sagepub.com/content/early/2012/10/23/1354066112454553>.

[ii] Cameron, E. & Limon, M. (2012), ‘Restoring the Climate by Realizing Rights: The Role of the International Human Rights System’. *Review of European Community and International Environmental Law*, 21(3): 204-219.

[iii] De Brum, T. (2013), “Minister Tony de Brum: Arria-Format Security Council Meeting – 15 February 2013”, accessed at <http://www.independentdiplomat.org/debrumspeech>.

[iv] Weiss, L. (1999), ‘Globalization and national governance: antinomy or independence?’ *Review of International Studies*, 25 (5): 59-88.

[v] Therien, J-P. (2012), ‘Human Security: The Making of a UN Ideology’. *Global Society*, 26(2): 191-213.

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[vi] Harris notes the new economics foundation's Happy Planet Index, but another initiative in the same vein may be the 2009 report of the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress.

[vii] Falkner, R. (2012), 'Global environmentalism and the greening of international society'. *International Affairs*, 88(3): 503-522.

About the author:

Nicholas Chan recently completed his D.Phil in International Relations at St. Antony's College, Oxford University, on developing country coalitions in the UN climate change negotiations. He holds an M.Phil in International Relations from University College, Oxford University, and a B.Sc in International Politics from Aberystwyth University. He has been a delegate at UNFCCC since 2011, and his research interests are on global environmental politics, constructivist IR, and the global South in world politics. He tweets at @nickdotchan.