# Asset Revaluation and Beyond: Theorizing Climate Politics

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On the back of a revived account of climate change as properly political – understood as deeply conflictual and embedded in broad patterns of social power relations – Jeff Colgan, Jessica Green and Tom Hale, in a recent article in *International Organization* (2020), seek to formalize this into a model. This short intervention seeks to respond to that article in a spirit of critical engagement. I find their argument, and the underlying 'repoliticization' of climate change within work on climate change it draws, inspiring but also limited in important ways I want to draw out. I focus on their article partly because of the way they couch it specifically in relation to IR theory (much of the other work in this vein is more within comparative traditions focused on national-level political dynamics) but also because it synthesizes for me some of the limits of this particular way of thinking about climate change as political. I draw out a number of arguments I spell out here, although not with the focus on their article, in a forthcoming book, *In Search of Climate Politics* (2021).

Colgan et al's starting point is to refuse the idea of climate change as a collective action problem. They rightly state that this has been an underpinning of much IR work on climate change, although it would be worth noting that beyond Aklin and Mildenberger (2020), who they cite, there might perhaps be worth in excavating how people have resisted the idea of climate change as collective action problem to see how people have done this (in recent work, Bernstein and Hoffmann, 2019 also make this argument, but for example I made at least a proto version of the argument in Paterson 2001). This is however an excellent starting point for thinking more generatively about climate change as a problem in global politics – the collective action problem framing has got us nowhere in really understanding key dynamics in climate politics and arguably actively shapes how scholars approach climate change to seek the reasons why states do not act on climate change, rather than understand the conditions under which many do. There is an additional point to be made to this – in what ways does the collective action problem framing really understand climate change as political at all – it can only really do so with an extremely narrow account of politics as the site of authoritative decision-making, abstracting from questions of power, inequality and conflict. Some will be comfortable with this understanding of politics of course, but a richer conceptualization will enable us to think more broadly about climate change.

This then reflects a recent shift in what might be called attempts to "repoliticize" climate change, by arguing it entails challenging the power of incumbent fossil fuel interests and can't be reduced to technical, depoliticizing fixes like carbon pricing (this is now a substantial literature but see notably Mann & Wainwright 2018; Stokes 2020; Mildenberger 2020; Neville 2021; Hochstetler 2021; Malm 2015; and of course in the popular literature, Klein 2014). Colgan et al then draw on much of this literature to emphasize that an alternative theorization of climate change needs to understand it as a distributional conflict. Their particular twist is then to conceptualize this conflict as one between holders of different specific assets. They then reduce this to a binary, a conflict between holders of 'climate forcing assets' (CFAs) and 'climate vulnerable assets' (CVAs). There are a number of issues here.

First, what is the implication of using the term 'assets' here? Why not simply 'forces' for example? Assets implies something material that represents the wealth of the agents associated with it, out of which income (as rent or profit) is or can be generated. It starts thus with the question of who has something to lose out of climate change. Hence the formulation of climate-forcing vs climate vulnerable. But, even while the overall argument in the piece is about the

dynamic relations of asset *revaluation* – a process where some assets are devalued over time and others increasingly valued – the image of assets here is somewhat static. Coal mine owners have the asset of the rights to mine the coal under the ground in a particular place, homeowners in Miami have the rights to sell their ocean-front house. But many assets are not static, but constantly being assembled and constructed (e.g Birch and Muniesa 2020). Even the coal mine as an asset had a series of institutional and political fixes to make it so.

In the climate context then there is an additional possibility, that is to think about what I will call here following their terms, 'Climate Saving Assets' (CSAs – I recognize in other contexts this means Community Supported Agriculture – apologies!). That is, the sorts of assets that are entailed in constructing a low (zero, net zero, net negative …) carbon economy. In a static view of assets of course, these may be missed, since many of them do not currently exist, or at least only in too small numbers. But a dynamic view sees them at least potentially as key to the politics of climate change. I will return to these later.

Second, there is good reason to be very sceptical that CVAs can ever be politically that important in climate politics. There is certainly precious little evidence they have to date. They haven't determined national positions – if so, we might expect say the Netherlands to be a pioneering global leader rather than the relatively tepid actor on climate change beset by various contradictions that it is (surprising also because it has been such a strong leader on other environmental issues). Even the most climate vulnerable countries like the Maldives, while they have engaged in very effective rhetorical mobilisation within the UNFCCC (although with little effect on high emitting countries in practice), they have largely failed to demonstrate that leadership with domestic action – the UNFCCC period has been characterised by a dramatic rise in Maldives emissions (from 0.77tCO2 to 3.04tCO2 between 1990 and 2016 according to World Bank data) as it has aggressively promoted its tourist economy. And within countries, the climate vulnerable have not yet mobilised in any great numbers. Even insurance companies, who to an extent represent, or at least intermediate, the interests of climate vulnerable asset holders, have been less consistently (and certainly not effectively) promoters of aggressive climate action than one might think, or certainly that many environmentalists hoped in the 1990s and early 2000s (Paterson 2001).

But there is a stronger theoretical reason for questioning the choice of CVAs in Colgan et al's model. This concerns the temporality of climate change. As we know, this dimension is one of the things that makes climate change a 'superwicked' problem (Levin et al 2012). The simple version of the issue is that greenhouse gas emissions take at least a decade and perhaps longer (Ricke and Caldeira 2014) to generate their full effects (the estimates of this used to be considerably longer timeframes of 30–40 years). And of course beyond that the socio-technical qualities of energy systems also entail very significant lags to effects on emissions: a country could decide to say eliminate all gas-fired household heating and cooking – for the UK that is roughly 25 million homes, for example – but implementing that even on a crash course would take at least a decade. As a result, by the time existential threats to CVAs generate political action by them it's too late. This means that in Colgan et al's figure 2 (p10), their general model of theory, it is not at all clear that the feedback loop they envisage from the change in actors interests back to policy responses really works for the CVAs, at least not in the sense that it may have any chance of saving them from the existential threat they face. In other words, at the point in time that we can act to save (say) south-east US coastal properties (i.e. now at the latest), it won't (or doesn't) feel existential to them, just distributional – and a way in which those asset holders will experience as forcing them to lose assets they have in ways they don't want to, through either higher insurance costs, reduced value of their homes or businesses, or even being forced to move away from the coasts and incur significant losses.

This feedback loop is much stronger however if the competing force with CFAs is CSAs. As investment in renewables, efficiency, public transport or cycling infrastructure, 'green jobs', and so on, rises, and as regulatory shifts guarantee future income streams to such investments, those things that currently appear fragile will increasingly 'assetize' (in the sense suggested above) and become investments that CSAs will seek to protect. And as time proceeds, the shift in balance of power away from CFAs should become a self-reinforcing dynamic as implied in their figure 2.

This argument becomes stronger if we make a third move and embed the account of these specific accounts of assets in the broader structure of capitalism. If we do this, then the question about CVAs becomes how do they

generate capital accumulation? These assets are of course quite heterogeneous (they give examples of coastal property, fisheries, and farms in arid locations), but it seems their logic is understood as largely defensive – protecting existing assets either as homes or as sources of income. They are unlikely to be significant sources of future capital accumulation except perhaps in the sense of potential housing bubbles for homeowners. By contrast, CSAs are precisely investments in novel economic activity that generate accumulation for specific capitalists (the RE companies, the construction companies, etc., as well as the financiers who invest in these initiatives) and thus future assets to be protected. This is another reason to think that the model they present in figure 2 works better with CSAs instead of CVAs – it has a dynamic quality of "asset revaluation", and could for example include thinking about how fossil fuel incumbents periodically (including at the moment) attempt to rebrand themselves as shifting towards renewables – whether we believe them or think it is all greenwashing, it reflects this sense of a shift in the value of the assets from CFAs to CSAs better than from CFAs to CVAs.

This is further helped by understanding some underlying systemic requirements that shape political action, and not just the behavioral power of specific actors. As a system, capitalism needs to grow as a whole so if parts of it are being shut down, then you need novel sources of growth to compensate. Whatever massive disagreements in political economy there are from Marx to Schumpeter to Polanyi to Friedman, they largely agree about this growth-generating and dependent character of capitalism. If you shut down CFAs successfully and 'save' CVAs in the process, then either some of those CVAs do become sources of accumulation (which is hard to see for many), or we need the idea of CSAs to understand which new assets are in the process of being created that generate new sources of capital accumulation.

Reformulating Colgan et al's model this way, replacing their CVAs with CSAs, I think would make their general intention to model in a fairly abstract way the politics of climate change around key political-economic conflicts a good deal more powerful. It also synthesizes I think more effectively the recent growth in literature on climate politics focused on corporate lobbying, regulatory capture, social movement contestation of corporate power, and so on, referred to above, since those struggles over electricity regulation, pipelines, national-level climate legislation, etc., can be characterized very largely by attempts (for the most part so far successful) by fossil fuel incumbents to prevent market access and otherwise limit the ability of renewable energy actors and their political allies from promoting more aggressive low carbon transitions – i.e. a CFA-CSA struggle and not a CFA-CVA one.

But I want to throw one last spanner in the works, by shifting attention to the question of culture. Colgan et al do mention this, in three contexts. One is in thinking about the existential politics of CFAs. They mention coal mining communities in Poland as an example (p11) but many similar cases could be introduced – climate denial in the US has much of this sort of dynamic associated with it. Another is in brief discussions of the Climate Strikes and generational conflicts where the concept of assets doesn't really capture the dynamic (although perhaps an expanded account of assets beyond the physical or financial might) The other is a question for future research, to focus on emotions and identities as means of mobilizing. This latter point reads somewhat disingenuous as a call for future research, since there is already a large amount of such research on exactly these questions of the "cultural politics" of climate change (e.g. Norgaard 2011; Shove & Spurling 2013; Bulkeley et al 2016).

These all do speak to the limit of their formal model, as they recognize. In one of the instances there is perhaps an opportunity to revisit this question. The Polish model is instructive: coal mining communities might have deeply embedded attachments to coal, but they also have deep contradictions within that – over miners' health, local air quality, and so on. This is perhaps analogous to how Colgan et al discuss the contradictions among the holders of some CFA assets, where they discuss how oil platform vulnerabilities to sea level rise or extreme weather increases (p8). Compare this however with the UK where coal mining still has very similar affective power, but where ambivalence about coal is considerable (see e.g. Rohse et al 2020) and now when new mines are proposed, it is often those associated with the mining tradition who oppose returning to mining for those reasons even if they remain nostalgic in many ways). This is perhaps a question about temporal lags in the loss of CFAs – resisted as they are lost but quickly not mourned or a return sought, at least by workers in those industries and their communities.

But there is a deeper question I think arising out of questions of culture and politics, which is fundamental to how we conceptualize climate politics. Climate politics needs to be understood both as a struggle between competing forces

with material interests/assets at stake, and whose interaction also entails important power relations, and it is a struggle over the meaning of the various activities that are embedded in transforming away from high carbon worlds. That is to say we need to think of climate politics not only as a political economy, but as a cultural political economy. The transformations entailed in pursuing a zero carbon economy entail more than simply challenging the power of fossil fuel corporations but also will generate very significant forms of changes in daily life – from how we move around (and how much we move around), to what we eat, to how comfortable we might feel at different temperatures.

Sharp conflicts can be also expected, indeed already seen, over a range of aspects of daily lives and the cultural meanings embedded in them. The most acute can be expected over meat and dairy, flying, driving, perhaps air conditioning, as well as a range of powerful worker-based identities as in their Polish mining example. In each of these we can connect struggles over daily life to struggles to undermine the corporations holding 'Climate Forcing Assets', but it is not possible to reduce the former to the latter. Theories of social change towards zero carbon that target individual consumption as a causal factor of change are useless (or worse), but such consumption will nevertheless be transformed in the process of such change, and the sets of often deep meanings (like those of being a coal miner) can be expected to generate various sorts of politics of backlash against decarbonization, and thus necessitate a sort of reflexive politics across societies about the meanings we attach to meat, cars, flights, and so on.

This last point of course complicates considerably the possibility of 'parsimonious models' that Colgan et al take as a premise for their activity. It introduces all sorts of contingencies that can't be reduced to their assets model. But it also thereby revives the sense of inextricable political contingency associated with climate politics. There is no guaranteed pathway to a 'soft climate landing', and such models imply, even if inadvertently, such a possibility – if we can just tweak the CVAs (or CSAs I have suggested works better conceptually) enough to start to wind down the fossil fuel assets, we can tip the balance to make the decarbonization process unstoppable. We are certainly however in a world without guarantees – radical uncertainty about whether the world will manage to decarbonize fast enough, and what political strategies can make such an outcome possible, remains an issue (Paterson 2020). Colgan et al have made a valuable contribution to thinking about such questions, and hopefully this intervention has created additional ideas to think about them.

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