

Book Review Essay

Power and Authority in Global Climate Governance

Hamish van der Ven

Bulkeley, Harriet. 2016. *Accomplishing Climate Governance*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Ciplet, David, J. Timmons Roberts, and Mizan R. Khan. 2015. *Power in a Warming World: The New Global Politics of Climate Change and the Remaking of Environmental Inequality*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Hickmann, Thomas. 2016. *Rethinking Authority in Global Climate Governance: How Transnational Climate Initiatives Relate to the International Climate Regime*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

The 2015 UNEP Emissions Gap Report summarizes the challenge posed by climate change in a single, colorful infographic (UNEP 2015). A gray line on the graph shows projected greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions rising toward a four-degree global temperature increase by 2100 under a baseline scenario. Farther below this, a decidedly cheerier blue line charts a pathway toward the globally agreed-upon two-degree temperature increase. Between the two lines lies the titular emissions gap. When portrayed visually in this way, the dilemma posed by climate change appears both apolitical and technical in nature. One may be forgiven for thinking that wedging the emissions gap is simply a matter of adding up enough win-win technological solutions to hit the specified number of GHG reductions.

Yet the benign imagery of the emissions gap belies the inherently political nature of climate change. Finding the reductions necessary to wedge the gap will create both winners and losers at multiple scales. Developing countries face constraints on their pathways to economic development as wealthier countries increasingly ask them to leave fossil fuels and forests in the ground. Developed countries are being asked to pay billions of dollars in transfer payments for mitigation and adaptation efforts in the developing world. The fossil fuel industry's very survival is threatened, and the fate of the burgeoning clean technology industry remains far from secure. Western environmental NGOs campaign for

the preservation of diminishing tropical forests, while indigenous groups increasingly assert their land rights. All parties in this colossal struggle exert power to pursue their interests, yet the fundamental nature of “power” remains a hotly contested subject in the climate governance literature.

Three recent books wade into this broader debate about power and authority in global climate governance. Each wrestles with questions that are at once broadly relevant to global governance and particularly salient to climate change. What is power? Through what mechanisms does it operate? Who has it? Is the nexus of power shifting? How can a focus on power and authority in global climate governance explain the current state of the regime complex for climate change (Keohane and Victor 2011)? Finally, what implications do the answers to these questions hold for the study and practice of global climate governance? The books largely concur that power is more dynamic and multifaceted than it has previously been conceptualized in the international relations literature, but they disagree on the proper boundaries for the study of climate governance and how best to chart a pathway forward.

In *Accomplishing Climate Governance*, Harriet Bulkeley takes umbrage with how climate change has been conceptualized by practitioners and social scientists as an objective problem that requires solving. This conception, she notes, leads to a field of study where “issues of power and inequality are subsumed by more practical considerations of how to design appropriate institutional, market or behavioral responses” (p. 2). As with the emissions gap infographic mentioned above, Bulkeley is deeply suspicious of attempts to mask power and politics in climate governance. She astutely notes that governing is not a matter of implementing solutions to predefined problems, but also encompasses the “constitution and configuration of what should be governed and what it means to govern in tandem” (11). Hence, the central research question that guides her book is: how does climate change come to be constituted as requiring intervention?

Bulkeley addresses this question by investigating climate governance by means of six loosely connected climate interventions in the UK, ranging from the actions of multinational corporations to community-based initiatives. Her analysis is rooted in poststructural theories, and draws particularly on the work of Michel Foucault and the conceptual repertoire of governmentality to ask how climate governance is accomplished. Bulkeley establishes early in the book that power and governance are intertwined. Governing is “the orchestration of distinct modes of power” (3), and Bulkeley seeks to explore the workings, politics, and geographies of its operation. While power comes in multiple guises, including violence, control, and domination, she observes that such forms play a marginal role in climate governance. By contrast, forms of governing—authorized practices of rule and conduct—are everywhere. Power is generated through the process of governing climate change and by establishing sets of relationships between things. The generation of power and authority, in turn, reconfigures the climate problem in relation to those entities that are party to its assemblage. In this way, multinational corporations define and address the problem of climate

change in different ways than community organizations. The power relations generated through the act of governance have far-reaching impacts for how scholars, policy-makers, and individuals think and act about climate change.

Bulkeley's work is provocative in the sense that it prompts readers to adopt a different starting point in thinking about climate change. She convincingly argues that we must first consider how climate change is conceptualized as a problem before we can fully understand why some solutions come to dominate others. The book suggests that power, and consequently politics, can be found in the most mundane activities, and not just in international climate negotiations. Her work therefore implies a radical rethinking of the research agenda for climate governance. Social scientists, she argues, must look well beyond the conventional sources of power and authority in the international system if they hope to reach a full understanding of climate governance. Skeptics may justifiably wonder whether this sets too broad a task, but Bulkeley deserves credit for critically interrogating the disproportionate focus on international negotiations in the existing climate governance literature.

International negotiations are in the foreground of David Cipler, J. Timmons Roberts, and Mizan R. Khan's *Power in a Warming World*. The book starts with the observation that the multilateral response to climate change is both inadequate and inequitable. Existing multilateral agreements leave us well short of the globally agreed-upon two-degree target and do little to avert the fate of the world's poorest countries, which stand to suffer disproportionately from the negative impacts of climate change. Given this bleak condition, the authors ask: how did we get to this point, and is there any way out?

Power is at the center of their explanation for why global climate governance is presently inadequate, and it informs their prescription for moving toward a brighter future. They challenge narrow conceptualizations of power in either material or coercive terms. Instead, they adopt a political economic view of power relations, drawing particularly on the works of Antonio Gramsci and the concept of hegemony to argue that power is frequently exercised through noncoercive and legitimate means. For example, both state and non-state actors act strategically to construct, solidify, and leverage shared ideas of what is socially acceptable, thereby advancing some solutions to climate change (e.g., market mechanisms) and precluding others. Importantly, power (as conceived in the book) is rooted in a specific historical and institutional context. Thus, which actors hold power at any point in time is conditioned by the current economic order, geopolitics, ecological conditions, and capabilities of transnational civil society, among other factors.

Adopting a broader conceptualization of power corrects what the authors see as a tendency to view climate governance as impeded by a simple North-South divide, wherein the North holds all the power and the South holds none. This portrayal, they suggest, is at odds with the current complexity of multilateral climate negotiations, in which both hemispheres are presently divided into multiple negotiating blocks. They convincingly argue that the old North-South

power divide has undergone fundamental transformations since the Copenhagen round of climate talks in 2009. The apparent failings of the neoliberal economic order revealed by the 2008 financial crisis, the rise of China coupled with the waning power of the United States, the increasing visibility of ecological disasters in the West, and the transnationalization of civil society have altered power relations in global climate negotiations. While the resulting world order has not yet produced the coalitions necessary to create an adequate and equitable solution to climate change, the realization that power structures are not fixed and immutable offers some cause for optimism.

Power, therefore, does not preclude the possibility of a positive end to the climate crisis. It does, however, suggest that major structural shifts will have to occur to create the broader conditions necessary for the powerful to take action. Climate change-related disasters can certainly help shift the balance of power (as the authors illustrate with reference to Superstorm Sandy). More importantly, structural shifts are contingent on the presence of “strong, strategic and unco-optable social movements” (230). Three processes need to occur to facilitate these kinds of social movements. First, mainstream advocacy-focused NGOs need to link grassroots social activism to their legislative efforts. Second, civil society groups must successfully construct counterhegemonic “Baptist-bootlegger” coalitions across historically divided constituencies. And third, these same groups must link social movement actions spatially across the globe.

The authors’ stated objective is to create “a useful framework to understand the roots of this political crisis as a tool to help identify pathways forward” (xiii). The book succeeds in describing the crisis, but it leaves some further work to be done in charting a path forward. As with other works in the Neo-Gramscian tradition (e.g., Klein 2014), the authors argue that social movements are the solution for reconfiguring power relations. However, the book offers few new insights into how such movements are fomented. Of the three processes the authors outline for creating robust social movements, the second (creating coalitions across historically divided constituencies) appears the most challenging. Convincing workers in the fossil fuel industry to unite under the same banner as environmental groups is no small feat. Apart from the oft-invoked examples of the World Social Forum and People’s Climate March, the authors present few examples of what these types of diverse, counterhegemonic movements look like in practice. Some further insight into how Baptist-bootlegger coalitions can be deliberately formed would have strengthened the book’s practical relevance.

In *Rethinking Authority in Global Climate Governance*, Thomas Hickmann asks how emergent forms of transnational climate governance, particularly those initiated by sub- and nonstate actors, relate to the international climate regime. Hickmann offers three hypotheses regarding this question, which he somewhat confusingly terms “conceptual assumptions,” even though they are explicitly framed as “conjectured relationships.” He hypothesizes that transnational climate governance will either conflict with, complement, or depend

on the international climate regime for authority. He investigates these hypotheses through comparative case studies of the ICLEI Local Governments for Sustainability Network, the gold standard for carbon offsets, and the greenhouse gas protocol.

Hickmann's conceptualization of authority closely resembles the conceptualization of power offered in Ciplet, Roberts, and Khan's book. He defines authority as "the legitimate problem-solving and decision-making capacity of an actor that is voluntarily accepted and recognized by others" (39). The distinction between power and authority is that the former relies on coercion while the latter does not. In this sense, Hickmann is equally interested in the question of who has power in global climate governance, even if the language of power is largely absent from his text.

The book's central finding is that all three cases of transnational climate governance are highly dependent on the multilateral regime for funding, structure, or governing authority. Hickmann finds no evidence of competition for authority between nonstate or subnational initiatives and state-centric ones. A central conclusion is therefore that "changing patterns of authority in world politics cannot be conceptualized as a zero-sum game, in which the emergence of authoritative structures beyond central governments and international institutions equals a loss of authority at the expense of state-based forms of governance" (12). Instead, Hickmann suggests that the proliferation of transnational climate governance is better conceived as a "reconfiguration of authority" (190) across various actors and multiple levels of decision-making.

Hickmann's book provides fresh empirical evidence of the increasing dispersion of power and authority outside the interstate realm, yet readers may justifiably wonder whether the book breaks new ground. All but the most ardent neorealists have long since acknowledged that multiple sources of political authority operate outside the state. Moreover, Jessica Green's (2013) book previously established that private authority can arise independent of the relative waxing or waning of the state. While Hickmann's book certainly bolsters these claims, it does not quite deliver the "rethinking" of authority promised in the book's title.

Apart from its individual contribution, Hickmann's book is notable for how it further develops themes addressed in the other two books. Specifically, all three suggest a growing consensus on the nature of power and authority in climate governance. The authors agree that climate governance is inherently political. Climate change is not a technological problem that can be addressed exclusively through win-win solutions. Rather, climate governance involves politics, and therefore the application of power in pursuit of specific agendas and interests. Power in all three books is conceptualized as both dynamic and multifaceted. It extends well beyond the use of coercive force, and is often rooted in legitimate authority, however such authority is constructed. Power can be observed operating at multiple scales and is equally present in state-centric and nonstate contexts. In both domains, the distribution of power is in a constant state of flux and is conditioned by endogenous and exogenous variables. The

authors agree that no single actor or group of actors is “powerful” in an innate and timeless manner.

Notwithstanding their consensus on power, the three books chart vastly different courses forward in the study and practice of climate governance. Whereas Bulkeley sees the research agenda on climate governance as properly extending to multiple sites and domains—“from the corridors of power to the power of vacuum cleaners” (155)—the remaining authors maintain that a focus on international negotiations remains appropriate, even as the international negotiations affect and are affected by social movements and transnational climate initiatives. The authors are also split on the centrality of multilateral processes to efforts to address climate change. Bulkeley argues that “rather than investing so much of our climate resolve in the international domain, we can instead further its circulation through the geographically dispersed and yet connected sites and arenas through which climate governance is already taking place” (168). By contrast, Ciptet et al. argue that “no other level of solution is able to do what global interstate negotiations can, which is to assemble in a mutually agreed-on process the legal representatives of the people of the world to agree on binding commitments to a problem facing all of humanity” (16). Hickmann would likely critique the idea that resolve and energy must be invested in one domain or the other as a false dichotomy, and counter that the efforts at different scales are interwoven and mutually reinforcing. Little can be gained by arguing that one of the authors is more correct than the others. All support their positions convincingly. Rather, the broader contribution of these three books is in providing a comprehensive conceptualization of power in global climate governance and drawing clear lines of debate about how climate governance should be studied and practiced by future scholars and practitioners.

References

- Green, Jessica. 2013. *Rethinking Private Authority: Agents and Entrepreneurs in Global Environmental Governance*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Keohane, Robert O., and David G. Victor. 2011. The Regime Complex for Climate Change. *Perspectives on Politics* 9 (1): 7–23.
- Klein, Naomi. 2014. *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- UNEP. 2015. Emissions Gap Report 2015—Executive Summary. Available at <http://bit.ly/1kzcjSk>, accessed January 12, 2016.