

Book Reviews

Dryzek, John S., and Jonathan Pickering. 2019. *The Politics of the Anthropocene*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Reviewed by Conrad George
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Scientific evidence indicates that we have entered a new geological epoch, termed the Anthropocene, in which human activities have become a significant geological force. How do we confront this new reality where our relationship with our biophysical environment has changed so significantly? On what basis do we determine how to respond? In *The Politics of the Anthropocene*, Dryzek and Pickering argue that rather than engaging with these critical questions, the core institutions of our society (like markets and states) instead severely constrain our ability to identify and then answer them.

The authors argue that a “pathological path dependency” in our institutions systematically represses information on the Earth system to prioritize a narrow set of economic objectives. They attribute these behaviors to the critical importance of economic growth to these institutions and their origination in a time when our impact on the Earth system was significantly smaller. To address this problem, the authors propose the notion of “ecological reflexivity.” This concept builds off the established idea of reflexivity and involves confronting the core commitments of our society and changing the response where necessary (Beck et al. 1994). Dryzek and Pickering extend this idea to include the Earth system, so the reflexivity would be of social-ecological systems (the human and nonhuman world), rather than just social systems. Ecological reflexivity, as they outline it, involves a cyclical process of recognizing changes in social-ecological systems; reflecting on the changes occurring and rethinking core values; and then responding to these changes by rearticulating core aims, discourses, and values and reconfiguring practices.

Dryzek and Pickering demonstrate how ecological reflexivity could be applied. They first illustrate how it can shape the way that we understand values in society. For example, “sustainability” can reflect the dynamic nature of the Earth system in the Anthropocene and our role in these changes, rather than serving as a static view of conserving ecological conditions when those conditions may no longer be attainable. In examining how ecological reflexivity could then be implemented, Dryzek and Pickering focus on what they term the “formative sphere,” rather than on institutions. This “formative sphere” is a theoretical domain in which ideas, principles, and values are generated and developed. It operates across, separate from, and potentially within existing institutional configurations, but

while it may ultimately inform the collective decision-making of institutions, it is always outside of and preceding these processes. Dryzek and Pickering argue that “formative agents,” which include a broad collection of individuals, groups, and other entities (including norm/discourse entrepreneurs, scientists, and other experts), operate within this sphere, with the potential to create and shape values. Deliberation is essential as formative agents interact with each other and also with citizens, who play a central role in creating and establishing new meanings and values. In outlining ecological reflexivity, while not directly addressing the source of path dependency in institutions, Dryzek and Pickering nonetheless lead us back to the possibility that such reflexivity can indirectly inform the decision-making of our institutions and societies.

The Politics of the Anthropocene is built on strong theoretical foundations, leveraging a range of insights from the authors’ earlier studies (including Dryzek 2000, 2015). It effectively connects these works to provide a comprehensive framework for exploring how deliberative processes can contribute to an understanding of and response to the challenges of the Anthropocene. In this way they identify the role of deliberation as part of a broader process aimed at rethinking core meanings, principles, and values in the Anthropocene, rather than as being limited to seeking views on already well understood issues.

The decision to explore ecological reflexivity outside of institutions, and without focusing on the sources and impacts of path dependency, creates an open theoretical frame. However, it misses an opportunity to understand the form, extent, and impact of the path dependency in institutions that the authors argue systematically represses information on the changing Earth system and a response to it. While analysis of this type may require detailed empirical work, it could examine whether the ecological reflexivity of the formative sphere can be embedded as a core priority in institutions, as the authors argue, or if path dependency would ultimately preclude it. More fundamentally, empirical analysis may indicate whether ecological reflexivity is practically possible or the extent to which the ideas and structures that create path dependency in institutions extend to society as a whole and thus similarly restrict the formative sphere. For example, to what degree are the discourses, knowledge, norms, and/or science the authors describe in the formative sphere also inherently constrained by the path dependency of institutions? It may be that the formative agents that are expected to provide a source of reflexivity actually constitute a continuing source of constraint, whether in the formative sphere or not.

Dryzek and Pickering conceptualize the Anthropocene as not simply a multiplication of environmental challenges, but rather as a more fundamental issue of political economy in a world where human activity is altering the Earth system. Ecological reflexivity provides an important mechanism to call attention to this reality and identify a path by which society can engage with it and determine on an informed basis how to respond. Whether we can or will grasp this opportunity, and then how we might decide to respond, is another issue.

References

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Harris, Paul G., editor. 2019. *Climate Change and Ocean Governance: Politics and Policy for Threatened Seas*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

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The goal of this ambitious edited volume is to “explore and understand possibilities for *ocean governance amidst climate change*” (3, emphasis original). Given the vital function that the oceans play in mitigating and reducing the impact of climate change, along with the relative lack of attention given to this role in mainstream discussions of climate change, this volume is both timely and of great interest. The structure and organization of the book are such that there is something valuable to all scholars who work in the areas of either climate change or ocean governance, while still being approachable for those relatively new to the field.

The introductory section consists of two chapters: Paul Harris’ overall approach to assembling the volume and Elizabeth Mendenhall’s discussion of overarching issues that underlie all chapters, namely, a history of ocean governance and various international maritime treaties such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Many of the chapters that follow refer to these ideas, and Mendenhall’s chapter skillfully weaves everything together for those new to the topic.

Following this introductory material are six case studies on islands and coasts and the particular problems faced in these areas by climate change. The value of these case studies is undeniable, given that the very breadth of cases (from the Caribbean to the Middle East to the coasts of Asia) is certain to contain new information for any scholar seeking to understand global impacts of sea level rise and coastal development. They also work as a cohesive note to begin the volume, as the case studies are generally independent from each other in a way that works naturally. However, the case study choices do not feel deliberate in any meaningful way. This is not to say that regions of focus were chosen poorly, just that there is a lack of justification for why these six cases were deemed the most relevant.

This is important to note because later in the volume are three chapters on the polar seas (and a fourth on the Arctic Ocean in a different section). These would seem to logically fit in well with the previous case studies, providing a more in-depth examination of one particular region. (There are drawbacks to considering

the Arctic and the Antarctic as a single region, but given the goals of this particular book, grouping them together is a logical choice.) Instead of transitioning from the case studies to the section on the polar seas, however, the book instead transitions to a section on fishing that consequently feels out of place. Overall, this is more of a missed opportunity than an organizational flaw, but it is one that could have helped to strengthen the case studies, both polar and otherwise, as a narrative.

The case studies are only half of the volume, however. In the latter half of the book, Harris brings together various chapters on nearly every element of ocean governance investigated by modern scholars. There are considerations of international law focusing on whether the current maritime treaties are sufficient to the challenge of ocean governance in a world with climate change and examining to what extent they align with the separate climate change regime in international law. Ori Sharon's contribution on the rights of low-lying small island states given the existential threat of sea level rise is of particular note here, as international law remains unclear what happens to state rights once the state is underwater and thus lacks statehood.

The second half of the book also includes discussion of a number of issue areas predicted to become highly important in the near future. These include marine shipping, ocean energy, and coral reef degradation, among others. The problem of marine plastic pollution, for example, is well known, but Peter Stoett and Joanna Vince take an approach to the issue focused on climate change. They point out that marine plastic pollution is not only a problem for the marine environment but also may interfere with the oceans' ability to absorb CO₂, and that both plastics and climate change problems ultimately stem from the use of fossil fuels. This climate change-centric approach provides a good overview of both the nature of the problem and the difficulties in finding solutions.

Overall, this book provides a good overview of the current state of research into the intersection of ocean governance and climate change and makes an important contribution to the literature on the topic. The case studies are relevant, providing examples that showcase various problems. Likewise, the combined approaches of law and policy make for an excellent interdisciplinary read, and the particular issues explored are all highly relevant and of current interest.

van der Ven, Hamish. 2019. *Beyond Greenwash? Explaining Credibility in Transnational Eco-Labeling*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

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Eco-labels have flourished over the past few years and today seem to be ubiquitous. We encounter them not only in groceries, supermarkets, and warehouses but also in catalogs of shipping cruises and advertisements for offsetting carbon emissions from flights or other environmentally harmful practices. Such labels promise

that the offered bananas, coffee, or other goods and services meet a certain environmental standard or are in line with a given code of conduct. In *Beyond Greenwash? Explaining Credibility in Transnational Eco-Labeling*, Hamish van der Ven begins from his curiosity (which is nicely described in the acknowledgments) about whether the various existing labels really mean anything—a highly relevant concern in times of pressing sustainability challenges and raising awareness among consumers about the environmental impacts of their purchasing decisions.

The landscape of eco-labels is certainly full of greenwashing exercises, and van der Ven's book takes these practices into account. Numerous companies have recently been confronted with accusations of greenwashing, which basically connotes that corporate claims to build on eco-friendly modes of production or service delivery are misleading or simply false. Yet, other companies obviously put considerable efforts into enhancing their sustainable behavior and also set standards for managing the environmental impact of supplier firms, potentially leading to a change of global value chains down to local producers. There is thus a large variation between the credibility of prevailing eco-labels, or, as van der Ven puts it, "credible efforts to address environmental problems often exist alongside superficial greenwash, and the two are frequently indistinguishable to casual observers" (3).

Assessing the credibility of different eco-labels across policy domains is an important endeavor, and van der Ven's book takes up this challenge. To this end, he does not—as could perhaps be expected—look at the compliance of companies with particular eco-label standards but evaluates the adherence of eco-labeling organizations to so-called best practice guidelines. Such best practice guidelines are formulated by international organizations, nongovernmental organizations, and associations of eco-labeling organizations and entail various principles of good conduct related, *inter alia*, to accountability, inclusiveness, and transparency. Van der Ven argues that some eco-labeling organizations comply with best practice guidelines, while others fail to do so, which is why he treats these guidelines as "a reasonable proxy for the overall sincerity of an [eco-labeling organization's] governance efforts" (17).

Based on these considerations, the key research question raised in the book is, "[W]hy do some transnational [eco-labeling organizations] follow established best practices more closely than others?" (3, italics original). Van der Ven situates his study in the literature on transnational governance. He understands eco-labeling as a prime example of transnational new governance since it involves quasi-authoritative rules, which are applied and spread by mostly private actors beyond national borders and jurisdictions. Owing to the absence of a centralized authority and oversight within this governance sphere, free-riding is a common and frequent practice. This framing underlines the relevance of van der Ven's two research goals, that is, first to distinguish between credible and noncredible eco-labels and second to explain why some eco-labeling organizations are more reliable, others less so.

Building on an original database of 123 transnational eco-labeling organizations and a comprehensive theoretical framework to assess the credibility of different labels in two case studies, van der Ven draws one central conclusion. He contends that eco-labeling organizations with a larger transnational presence

are generally more likely to adhere to best practice guidelines and hence possess more procedural credibility than those with a smaller coverage and narrower ambitions. In other words, those eco-labeling organizations “that aim big by attempting to certify a large proportion of a relevant global market are driven to closely follow best practices out of concern for both material consequences and demonstrating appropriate behavior” (155).

With this argument, van der Ven aims to provide a novel explanation for the variance in the credibility of eco-labels. While most existing studies point to agency and hold that it is most important *who governs* and sets standards in what context (e.g., governments, industry associations, certification entities, or nongovernmental organizations), his book highlights that *who is being governed* by private norms and rules also matters. Based on his empirical findings, van der Ven draws the wider conclusion that scholars concerned with transnational relations should devote more attention to “the *targets* of governance and not simply the *owners* or *sponsors* of governance” (161, italics original). This novel perspective is a major strength of the book.

While van der Ven’s conclusions are generally convincing, he does not elaborate in enough detail about how his findings speak to existing scholarship beyond his own theoretical and conceptual approach. Relatedly, the book remains relatively vague on the question of what exactly the empirical results add to the wider literature on transnational governance. The findings presented in the book do not challenge or question central assumptions of established accounts but rather refine and complement previous knowledge. The claim made on the book’s cover that the analysis upends conventional wisdom seems to be slightly exaggerated.

Nonetheless, *Beyond Greenwash?* gives some nuance to a vibrant field and offers a great read for students and practitioners interested in the potential and limits of transnational governance. All in all, the book constitutes a rigorous and painstaking investigation of the credibility behind eco-labels with several illustrative examples that bring more clarity to an unwieldy and rapidly changing research landscape.