Environmental Politics

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fenp20

Climate change ethics, rights, and policies: an introduction

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Published online: 10 May 2013.

To cite this article: John Barry, Arthur P.J. Mol & Anthony R. Zito (2013) Climate change ethics, rights, and policies: an introduction, Environmental Politics, 22:3, 361-376, DOI: 10.1080/09644016.2013.788861

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2013.788861

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Climate change continues to dominate academic work within green/environmental politics. Indeed, there appears to be almost an inverse relationship between the lack of political leadership on tackling climate change and the growth in ever more sophisticated academic analyses of this complex and multifaceted problem. There is an increasing disjunction between the growth in our knowledge and understanding of the ethical, political, economic, sociological, cultural, and psychological aspects of climate change and the lack of political achievement in putting in place clear and binding targets, an agreed decarbonisation roadmap, and associated regulatory and policy instruments with enforcement. This gap might be taken as evidence that we do not need more reports on climate change. To quote that most unlikely of green politicians, Arnold Schwarzenegger, former Governor of California: ‘The debate is over. We know the science. We see the threat. And we know that the time for action is now’ (California Energy Commission 2007, p. 1). This special issue focuses on a variety of ways in which climate change is conceptualised in normative political and ethical theory, and addressed in policy and regulations.

Climate change and the need for normative approaches
There are dangers in framing climate change as the most pressing socioecological problem humanity faces to the exclusion of all others. Presenting climate change as the most urgent of problems seems, sometimes unwittingly, to move us in the direction of technological solutions (Crist 2007). If decarbonisation of the energy system is the name of the game then it is little wonder that nuclear power, fracking for shale gas, as well as wind energy have become the ‘low-carbon energy trinity’ for many industrial societies to enable business as usual to continue. Such ‘supply side’ solutions to climate change dominate both national and international climate change politics and policy, invariably associated with technologically optimistic or technologically focused solutions,
and a neglect of demand side, citizen-consumption, and normative framings of climate change solutions.

A useful context for discussing climate change is the highly cited ‘Planetary Boundaries’ article by Rockström et al. (2009) who place climate change alongside other pressing socio-ecological and ecological problems such as biodiversity loss, acidification of the oceans, and nitrogenisation. However, apart from offering this holistic account of the various limits and thresholds humanity faces to avoid critical ‘tipping points’, it is also important to note in this landmark article an overwhelmingly natural science team’s explicit recognition of the centrality of normative political and ethical judgements: ‘although current scientific understanding underpins the analysis of the existence, location and nature of the thresholds, normative judgements influence the definition and the position of the planetary boundaries. The selection of planetary boundaries emerges from the definition of what constitutes unacceptable human-induced environmental change’ (Rockstrom et al. 2009, p. 4; emphasis added).

Thus, because we cannot objectively and scientifically determine what a sustainable society is or what constitutes a sustainable human-nature metabolism, normative theory is an essential element of dealing with climate change and other dimensions of unsustainability. This underlines two essential issues. The first is that questions of environmental risk or harm and human-induced environmental change are irreducibly normative and therefore matters of judgement and debate. The second is that the normative element of (un)sustainability becomes even more obvious when one considers the ‘non-ecological’ features of conceptualisations of sustainability. On the one hand, these features of sustainability relate to the specifically moral aspects of human-nature metabolism as opposed to material human-nature relations, such as our treatment of animals. On the other, this normative dimension of sustainability relates to questions of what type of (democratic) polity or governance system ‘fits’ best with a sustainable metabolism with the non-human world. That is, there are specifically intra-human normative and institutional aspects of sustainability (Barry 2012).

The normative analysis of climate change can be understood as falling into a number of related but distinct areas: moral/ethical, economic/technological, and political/policy/legal.

Moral/ethical/philosophical. Anthropogenic climate change is analysed in terms of the specifically moral implications of both causes and effects. Issues include the moral responsibility for causing climate change; the appropriate subject of moral concern (individuals or collectives, states); questions of reparations and compensation; questions of injustice and inequality in the distribution of climate change harms (and benefits); intergenerational and global justice considerations; and the codification of harms caused by climate change as forms of human rights violations (which seems to offer the most practical way of translating some of the moral and ethical aspects of climate change into legal and therefore enforceable obligations). More philosophical dimensions include the framing of climate change as heralding
the ‘anthropocene’ and the ways in which the latter calls into question human-nature relations in general, and the independence and separateness of ‘nature’ as non-human in particular. Going back to Bill McKibben’s (1989) book, *The End of Nature*, anthropogenic climate change calls into question the ontological and ethical status of the non-human world as independent from humanity. This erosion of nature’s independence has profound philosophical and moral implications in terms of the status of the non-human world and our species’ relationship to it.

**Economic/technological.** Climate change is understood more structurally and systemically in relation to, *inter alia*, the unsustainability of carbon-fuelled capitalism; the limits or necessity of ‘greening capitalism’ and a ‘low-carbon economy’; the role of markets in climate change mitigation (Spaargaren and Mol 2013); and the contested role of science and technology within climate change politics and economics, including climate change science as a form of ‘post-normal science’ (Hulme 2009).

**Political/policy/legal.** Climate change is viewed through the lens of the politics and policy of climate change, both in terms of causes/definition/effects and in terms of mitigations/adaptation. Issues here include the shifting and widening political actors and structures in defining and addressing climate change; the regulatory systems required for this (including international climate agreements); the ideological battle for hearts and minds around climate change, including the politics and political economy of climate change scepticism and denial (Jacques *et al.* 2008); the erosion of sovereignty under climate change conditions; international relations of climate change negotiations; and the international legal status of ‘climate refugees’. This area of focus intersects substantially with the other areas. For instance, questions of how best to govern and design function institutions and processes raise a host of moral and ethical issues, including the balance between democratic legitimacy and the role of expertise and knowledge.

**Social science theorising about climate change**

That we live in conditions of climate injustice and unsustainability, as opposed to justice and sustainability, would be accepted by most as self-evident. Yet for the most part, the ethical analysis of climate change is dominated by liberal political theory, meaning that distributive justice becomes the default analytical framing. Methodologically, this often means that an individual-focused and ‘resource’ approach to the issue is advanced, in which global climate is viewed as a resource, and the main normative question is how rights to the use and sharing of that resource, or the distribution or benefits and burdens arising from its use (i.e. the emitting of greenhouse gases (GHG) into the atmosphere) can be fairly distributed to individuals.

From the point of view of normative political theory, Marco Grasso offers a welcome non-liberal approach to climate change. He begins by stating that the
key issue to any feasible or attractive account of climate change ethics is harm and the avoidance or removal/lessening of human harm. However, for him, dominant liberal approaches to climate change ethics do not consider harm as the central moral tenet. Largely, according to Grasso, liberal approaches prefer to apply a resource-sharing perspective centred on the allocation of costs and benefits of actions related to climate change, independently from any consideration of harm. Thus Grasso re-establishes the centrality of harm in framing how we ought to think ethically about climate change.

Grasso advances effectively a theory of ‘climate injustice’, demonstrating that injustice is prior to justice in general (here based on an important and much under-used area of modern political theories of injustice – the work of Mary Wolgast, Judith Shklar, and Thomas Simon (cf. Barry 2012) and more recently Vittorio Bufacchi (2012). Grasso’s view is that we focus first on reducing injustice and harm, then we focus on doing climate justice – equal and fair sharing of costs of benefits of adaptation and mitigation within the broader and dominant ‘resource-sharing’ framing of the issue. The deontological character of the latter, with its central and animating focus on ‘justice’ and ‘fairness’, is a problem for Grasso who advances a consequentialist approach to complement the former. Grasso offers some suggestive lines of development for non-deontological approaches to climate change more centrally concerned with avoiding and minimising harm. Grasso’s argument chimes with a recent World Bank review of climate change and human rights, which stated that ‘Consensus-driven welfare-based approaches stand in uneasy relief, in the eyes of many, against the very tangible climate change harms already evident in many countries’ (McInerney-Lankford et al. 2011, p. 8). This underscores the moral and practical importance of making harm central to our understanding of climate change and designing effective institutional responses to it.

Another interesting theme is that of motivating action on climate change. Here, Grasso, following Schuppert (2011), is surely correct in viewing the impersonal and diffuse character of climate change, its cause and effect, as important considerations explaining the gap between the scientific establishing of climate change as real and a problem, and the lack of action by most individuals and groups who are aware of climate change. It is perhaps for this reason that Eric Brandsted and Anna-Karin Bergman discuss the human rights aspects of climate change harm in terms of ‘climate rights’, in that appealing to climate/human rights is to speak of the impacts of climate change in the strongest ethical language we have. For Grasso, unlike Brandsted and Bergman, the resolution of this ‘value-action’ gap, due to the impersonal character of the harm associated with climate change, requires going beyond political theory (liberal or otherwise) to include in his case moral neuropsychology. As he puts it, ‘a moral approach to climate change focused on impersonal harm, which, as made clear by moral cognitive neuroscience, is consistent with human morality, can be more widely acceptable’. That is, unlike abstract deontological approaches common in liberal political theorising around climate change, with
appeals to fairness and justice, Grasso’s argument is that appealing directly to the impersonal harm of climate change may be more likely to galvanise actual behavioural change to reduce harm (climate adaptation) or eradicate the cause(s) of that harm (climate mitigation). Grasso addresses both normative-conceptual as well as practical dimensions, in this case developing an account of the ethical dimension of climate change that he claims is more likely to go with the grain of ordinary, everyday human moral thinking. For him, the dominant ‘resource-sharing’ model is less likely to gain widespread public/political support, since (in removing the focus on impersonal harm) it also removes valuable ‘springs of motivation’ based on emotional and non-justice/fairness-based ethical responses. Grasso argues that:

Impersonal harm-related moral dilemmas are based on reflective, cognitive moral processes that prompt consequentialist moral thinking, whereas moral dilemmas associated with personal harm activate automatic emotional processes that lead to deontological reasoning … human morality does not envision climate change as a deontological moral issue. (Grasso 2013, p. 388, emphasis added)

Grasso thus provides us with motivating reasons why people might be moved to make changes to their lives, or demand political or economic changes on the basis of internalising the moral dimensions in a manner that is easily understood and translatable.

However, Grasso’s admirable concern for the articulation of approaches to understanding climate change which can have real-world, practical impact is not limited to his interesting hybrid account of consequentialist, harm-based theory integrated with moral neuropsychological insights. Brandsted and Bergman and Carl Knight are also concerned with this practical, real-world impact and ethics, also exemplifying non-ideal normative approaches to climate change, though, unlike Grasso, working at levels beyond how the human being morally reasons in practice.

Brandsted and Bergman focus on ‘climate rights’ as a way of thinking about the human rights dimensions of climate change impacts – thus underscoring the normative as well as potential legal and enforceable character of climate rights. Their clear legal-political approach is a welcome addition to the climate discourse that has largely been dominated by physical scientists and orthodox neoclassical economics.

The human rights impacts of climate change have been documented. For example, the UN’s Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in its January 2008 report on climate change and human rights, states, on the basis of the 2007 IPCC Fourth Assessment Report:

A number of observed and projected effects of climate change will pose direct and indirect threats to human lives. IPCC … projects with high confidence an increase in people suffering from death, disease and injury from heat waves, floods, storms, fires and droughts. Equally, climate change will affect the right to life through an increase in hunger and malnutrition and related disorders impacting on child growth
Brandsted and Bergman effectively seek to provide legal human rights-based responses to this by attempting to integrate both normative and practical (essentially legal and enforceable, perhaps including constitutional provision) and compensatory aspects of dealing with climate change. They explicitly view ‘climate rights’ sensibly as a form of ‘non-ideal’ theory, able to offer practical and tangible guidance to real-world climate change policy and political discussions. While Grasso offers an analysis based on the centrality of avoiding human harm, Brandsted and Bergman use a different language – that of the protection of ‘serious human interests’ threatened by climate change – effectively to communicate the same issue. Their concern is whether climate rights are just moral or are human rights deserving of legal enforcement. Their argument is that if the threats of climate change to human interests are so great as to violate human rights and therefore constitute climate rights violations, then they must/ought to be enforced as other human rights violations are.

Knight’s paper is practical in another way. For him, the issue of ‘emissions grandfathering’ – namely that prior emissions increase future emission entitlements and that agents are entitled to emit the same percentage of total emissions as they previously emitted – is central to real-world negotiations and regimes to reduce GHG emissions (such as the Kyoto Protocol and the European Union’s Emissions Trading System). However, grandfathering is either routinely dismissed by (liberal) political and ethical theoretical discussions of climate change as unjust, or criticised for being indifferent to the moral status of prior emissions. Knight defends a version of moderate grandfathering, suggesting that, ‘Moderate grandfathering can be combined with basic needs and ability to pay considerations to provide an attractive approach to allocating emission entitlements’. Grandfathering considerations are always relevant to distribution but are not the only ones, and Knight sees that moderate grandfathering can and ought to be included in discussions about reducing overall emissions globally and as part of a fair distribution of the benefits and burdens of emissions reduction. Thus, Knight could be said to suggest, at the practical level of climate change negotiations between states, a similar ‘realist’ position to the one offered by Grasso at the level of individual moral psychology and motivating pro-climate behavioural change.

Knight is less concerned about issues of justice and equity in analysing and thinking about climate change than about welfare gains and the practicality of generating and sustaining workable international agreements on emissions reductions. That is, both Grasso and Knight work from the centrality of harm and welfare in relation to climate change and responses to dealing with it, rather than...
concerns of equity and justice. Or rather, they suggest that the latter concerns ought not exhaust our moral imagination when thinking about climate change. So, for Knight, emissions grandfathering takes no moral view of whether prior emissions were those associated with ‘basic needs’ or ‘luxuries’.

Knight’s critical focus is the ethical significance of the transition costs to a low-carbon society or the costs of climate change adaptation or mitigation. For example, the logic of Knight’s position is that, while it would have been better for us in the (over)developed, high-carbon-emitting minority world not to have these high-carbon ways of life in the first place (in the sense that it would not have harmed us in morally significant ways not to have them), the reality is that to effect major changes in these ways of life now may result in harming us. This is not uncontroversial. Given the much greater levels of wealth available in high-emitting countries, they could be said to have greater capacity to make any transition to a low-carbon economy without the welfare-reducing effects Knight indicates.

Central here is whether high-emitting countries choose to integrate clear redistributive measures within their climate change/low-carbon transition plans, so that overall welfare is not reduced. Given the high levels of inequality within high-emitting countries, it is, ceteris paribus, possible to argue that the transition costs can be prevented from lowering welfare if and only if these societies also redistribute wealth and resources to ‘shore up’ welfare levels. This would open up the possibility of much more radical forms of climate politics than the dominant ‘reformist, business as usual’ approaches one finds in both actual climate change policy debates and the (liberal) political theory literature. Pursuing this line of thinking may also lead to considerations of ‘system change not climate change’ that one finds within the more self-professedly radical social movements.

Knight is also clear that while it is undoubtedly the case that high GHG-emitting countries have simply assumed emissions grandfathering for self-interested reasons (to minimise their obligations to cut emissions, and thereby protect their high-carbon economies and associated ways of life, as part of any climate change negotiations), this should not discount possible moral justifications for grandfathering. A key dimension of the moral justification of grandfathering is that high-emitting countries are effectively ‘locked into’ high GHG-emitting infrastructure and associated ways of life. Therefore, they face costs to reduce their emissions, and these costs are morally significant.

Here, however, one might make an analogy with slavery and the benefits to slave owners and non-slave owners who benefit from a slave-owning socioeconomic system. Slave owners historically were also dependent for their ways of life on being ‘locked into’ slave ownership and use. Would we say that the ‘transition costs’ of abolishing a slave-owning mode of production and associated forms of life are morally significant? This is not to suggest that GHG emissions are morally equivalent to owning human beings, but there are some suggestive lines of thought to be considered, and our moral imaginations may be provoked by such an analogy (Nuttall 2009). As Lord Puttnam (2007) put it in speaking in favour of the Climate Change Bill in 2007:
it [the Climate Change Bill] bears a quite uncanny resemblance to another piece of legislation which also addressed what was primarily a moral issue, but one which at the time appeared to have immense economic repercussions. It was a Bill, the 200th anniversary of which we unanimously celebrated earlier this year, which led to the abolition of the slave trade. So, 200 years apart, we find ourselves facing the same timeless question of whether we have a duty of care towards our fellow human beings: ‘Are we our brother’s keeper?’ In both cases the same economic question arises: what is the true cost of the energy we use to drive our economy? (emphasis added)

This provocative suggestion may offer ways of reacting to arguments such as Knight’s or, to be fair, interpretations of his argument about the moral significance of the high transition costs of a low-carbon economy, lending weight to moral (as opposed to realpolitik/realist) augments for emissions grandfathering. Such a line of thought could also form the basis for integrating the ‘harm’ and cognitive moral psychological reaction to that harm that Grasso suggests, at the same time emphasising the importance of viewing the negative effects of climate change as human rights violations that Brandsted and Bergman are keen to stress. Ultimately, the moral justification for grandfathering emissions rights for high-carbon ways of life is a difficult one to make, since the transition costs do not, ceteris paribus, equal the continuing costs to non-high-carbon-emitting countries, and the costs of not achieving significant global carbon reductions. At the same time, redistributive measures within high-carbon countries can offset any negative impact on welfare, given that high-carbon countries generally have more wealth and resources. Finally, there are realpolitik and economic strategic reasons for decarbonisation based not on moral arguments around combating climate change directly, but around ‘energy security’ and investment in a new low-carbon ‘industrial revolution’.

Whatever the specific moral basis or combination of philosophical bases for construing climate rights, the key issue is that there are moral dimensions to climate change that have to be recognised. More than that, this complex moral evaluation of climate change has real-world political impact. To return to the point regarding harm, one might suggest that the starting point for any explicit recognition of the normative dimension of climate change is more accurately captured by framing it in terms of climate injustice – the systematic violation of climate rights and the existence of actually existing climate harm, rather than notions of ‘climate justice’ and a just global order, which often animates liberal approaches to climate change. That is, our moral focus should be on relieving actual human harm – harm should be the focus and not abstract notions of justice – since relieving harm may not involve achieving justice (Barry 2012). If a legal approach to enforceability is so problematic, can there be non-legal forms of enforceability: use of direct political mechanisms (agreed by all concerned but without being codified in law?); use of climate rights and their feasibility as limits/side constraints on actual political and economic practices and institutions; or preventing climate rights violations in the first place?
Manuel Arias-Maldonado offers a confident acceptance of humanity taking responsibility for changing nature and being clear-eyed in declaring that we need to view green politics and the concern with sustainability within the context of the ‘end of nature’ as an independent set of processes and entities. This serves as an alternative positive alternative to the sotto voce apocalyptic undertones of much climate change analysis. As he puts it,

climate change imposes a pragmatic turn in our approach to sustainability, which results in a more pluralistic debate about both the desirable sustainable society and the means by which it is to be achieved (Arias-Maldonado 2013, p. 444).

He questions the ‘traditional green approach, founded on a moral view of the socio-natural relationship and inclined to a utopian transformation of the current social system’, and argues that environmentalism ‘must develop a post-natural view of sustainability’ if it is to influence political debates about the future green society.

Arias-Maldonado makes a distinction between two types of green thinking and action. On the one hand, we have reformist, pragmatic, techno-optimistic environmentalism; this may be termed ‘anthropocene environmentalism’, that is, those who accept that humanity has now ‘humanised’ the planet, breeched the ‘human–nature’ divide, and who advocate an ‘open’ as opposed to ‘closed’ understanding of sustainability. On the other hand, we have utopian, idealistic greens, whom he terms ‘classic environmentalists’, who hold the independence and intrinsic value of nature as central and are animated by a ‘closed’ sense of sustainability. While some might question this as a rather simplistic (and outdated) distinction, there is a great deal to be learnt from his argument, not least the positivity which characterises ‘anthropocene environmentalism’. This positive characterisation is important and interesting, not least in light of a discernable ‘apocalyptic’ strain within both green and climate change politics, particularly where both overlap as with the ‘peak oil’ storyline (Korowicz 2009, Hine and Kingsnorth 2010, Barry 2012).

However, while climate change heralds the arrival of our species as a geological force on the planet – the transition from the Holocene to the Anthropocene (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000) – this has not been planned. Many view it as marking the arrival of the high point of human liquidation of non-human life on the planet. We can think of E.O. Wilson’s (2006) description of this evolution of our species to a geological force as marking the ‘era of emptiness’ or the ‘Eremozoic Era’ (p. 91). Indeed, as Arias-Maldonado points out, part of the ethical and pragmatic considerations facing humanity in the Anthropocene is choosing which elements of the non-human world (or natural capital) are conserved, transformed, or simply liquidated. At one and the same time, the ‘anthropocene green’ analysis is positive, ambitious, and indicates a hopeful storyline in relation to climate change, but it offers a troubling arrogant humanism or anthropocentrism in which the solution to climate change is not the reduction of human interference and manipulation of the natural world, but its
accelerated and more conscious manipulation to effectively see all of the non-human world as actual or potential ‘cultivated capital’ or a form of ‘technona-ture’. For Arias-Maldonado,

cultivated capital is probably the category that should be underlined as that which best captures the current state of socio-natural relations …. In fact, climate change represents the epitome of this, insofar as human activities on Earth seem to have changed a natural system as complex as the climate – a system which cannot be considered ‘natural’ anymore (Arias-Maldonado 2013, p. 435).

Thus, climate change can be seen as viewing global atmosphere best thought of now as ‘badly cultivated’ capital – a hybrid creation of human and natural, but ‘post-natural’ and humanised. However, here it is perhaps more accurate and important for apportioning moral responsibility for climate change, as well as politically more useful, to describe climate change as ‘capitalised’ or ‘industrialised’ nature rather than ‘humanised’ ‘malcultivated capital’. This is because climate change as ‘cultivated capital’ has not been cultivated by all of humanity, but rather by a minority of the human population and largely by those who inhabit the ‘developed world’. In this way, viewing climate change as a ‘capitalised-industrialised’ form of ‘malcultivated capital’ is a much more radical political way of describing and therefore prescribing climate change politics.

While Wilson’s Eremozoic offers a lamenting but scientifically accurate sense of what is being lost in terms of non-human species, habitats, and ecosystems, anthropocene green thinking does, in part, convey an almost heroic obligation unwittingly thrust upon our species to now control and manipulate the world (which is but an extension of itself metaphysically speaking). This anthropocene imperative echoes Teilhard de Chardin’s (1975) view that ‘The dream upon which human research obscurely feeds is fundamentally that of mastering, beyond all atomic or molecular affinities, the ultimate energy of which all other energies are merely servants; and thus, by grasping the very mainspring of evolution, seizing the tiller of the world’ (p. 250; emphasis added). Climate change was certainly not planned, but solving it does require humanity to accept its historical/evolutionary responsibility to consciously take control of socio-ecological relations and thus the planet, so that our species can and indeed must ‘seize the tiller of the world’. Not to do so would be to fall prey to the erroneous and naive view of an almost pitifully nostalgic sense of wishing to maintain the moral and practical significance of a now defunct ‘human–nature’ divide.

Is declaring the end of the Holocene and the arrival of the Anthropocene itself evidence of ‘closed’ sustainability? For anthropocene greens, sustainability is now about viewing the planet as a garden, forms and processes of cultivated capital, with the value and usefulness (and thus the very existence) of the non-human world, to be bestowed by our species and our needs. In rendering the non-human world to the status of a ‘standing reserve’ (in Heidegger’s evocative
term), and suggesting, to put it bluntly, that ‘classic environmentalism’ needs to ‘get with the programme’ and embrace this new hybrid human–nature reality, this acceptance of a ‘post-natural’ nature ultimately calls for a ‘post-natural’ green politics of sustainability. A good example of where this thinking can lead is Crutzen’s (2006) statement that:

Hopefully in the future the ‘anthropocene’ will not only be characterized by continued human plundering of Earth’s resources and dumping of excessive amounts of waste products in the environment, but also by vastly improved technology and management, wise use of Earth’s resources, control of human and domestic animal population, and overall careful manipulation and restoration of the natural environment. There are enormous technological opportunities. (p. 17; emphasis added)

The technological optimism that underpins this approach to climate change effectively means the erosion of its quintessentially political and ethical dimensions, leaving climate change as a technical or management issue. At the very least, what is excluded in such lines of thinking is that living in a society which addresses climate change is a choice to live in a different type of society, as opposed to a low-carbon, resource-efficient version of the current one. The depoliticisation of green thinking is also evident in aspects of anthropocene green readings of climate change. As Crist (2007) points out:

The declaration that we live in the Anthropocene has the ideological effect of discouraging deep questioning and dismissing even discussion of revolutionary action. Rather, we are indirectly advised, our fate is to live our days in the ‘Age of Modern Man’, within which we must manage ourselves and the world as best we can. Further, the narrow and technical conception of climate change as ‘the problem’ is beholden to the same fatalistic mind-set. The real problem – the industrial-consumer complex that is overhauling the world in an orgy of exploitation, overproduction, and waste – is treated with kid gloves, taken as given, and regarded as beyond the reaches of effective challenge. (p. 55)

Thus, and bringing us back to some of the issues raised by Knight and Grasso, we are left asking what are the explicitly non-ecological/resource/pollution aspects of anthropocene green politics. That is, even if it is possible to ‘solve’ the climate ‘problem’ within liberal capitalism, this does not give sufficient space to the non-ecological dimensions of green politics in terms of social and environmental justice, democratisation of the state and the economic sphere, lowering socio-economic inequality, challenging gender discrimination, promoting localisation, and social solidarity and community. In not giving space to these considerations, ‘system change’ is dropped as a feasible or desirable political objective for green politics as a response to climate change.

Post-natural sustainability, and associated versions of green politics, are a techno-optimistic politics in which humanity can cultivate the types and levels/sorts of natural and critical hybrid forms of nature, ecological processes, and
natural entities we ‘require’ (for ecological functioning and survival) and ‘desire’ (based on ethical/aesthetic judgements). Sustainability now becomes, in this post-natural context, how much nature do we have to protect for our own survival and interests in well-being, and how much nature do we wish to protect for various human interests, including the intrinsic value of nature or specific elements of it. Thus, the anthropocene green view can be considered as echoing the myth of Achilles’ lance, a magic weapon that could heal the wounds it inflicted. In our case, technology is that lance, and as Stewart Brand has put it, ‘Our management of future technology acceleration has to reverse the effects of past technology acceleration’ (Brand 2009, pp. 19–20).

Political and policy theorising on climate change

From normative, moral, and ethical dimensions of and action on climate change, our focus shifts to political and policy institutions and action. However, political and policy strategies and action repertoires also have strong normative and ethical undertones. Who is included in and excluded from consultations and (non)decision-making on climate change? Who is held accountable by whom for lack or insufficiency of action? How do strategies and possibilities to adapt to climate change differ between developed and developing countries? How are consequences of severe climate change (unequally) distributed between different segments in society? How do courts adjudge climate change responsibilities, liabilities, and accountabilities? At the same time, climate change has changed and is still changing political and policymaking processes. The outlook and threats of significant climate change are radically changing environmental politics and policymaking, and many of the political and policy innovations developed over the past decade or so find their application – if not their origins – in modern society’s attempts to cope with climate change.

In pursuing the question of how actors can produce the normative analysis and argumentation sufficient to confront the climate change problem, the contributors to this special issue emphasise the importance of understanding the political space in which political and policy choices are made. Part and parcel of this discussion is the question of who inhabits this space and how the balance of perspectives and world views in articulated. Which perspectives are incorporated into the governance response that global actors are attempting? Although the governance debate has often been sunk in protracted theoretical and definitional discussions, there are increasingly strong voices suggesting that the state and public authority remain with us (Pierre and Peters 2000, Bell and Hindmoor 2009). The more significant question now is establishing the degree to which this public direction has involved a wider range of actors and how both sides have sought to exploit this relationship in order to shape the definition of problems and solutions.

Lisa Vanhala presents a very provocative account of the roles that litigation and courts play in shaping climate change policy agenda and outcomes.
Comparing Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, Vanhala’s is partly a response to the increasingly prominent argument that legal action occurs to fill national gaps in governance. It also warns against overstressing the significance of the peculiarities of the United States’ political, legal, and judicial system and how it has shaped environmental and climate change politics.

Vanhala questions the linkage between the presence or absence of national regulatory activity and the intervention of legal activity in the courts. She moves away from top-down institutional analysis of cases by looking at the bottom: what groups form to pursue litigation, and how do the legal processes and decisions shape the status of these diverse groups? Pulling together a range of cases where the decision directly mentioned an issue or law involving climate change, she finds that the three Commonwealth countries differ substantially in terms of legal mobilisation. As those familiar with the public policy literature would expect, this strongly reflects differences in national and institutional contexts. However, Vanhala stresses that there is an entire research agenda to be pursued concerning the different types of actors pursuing cases and how they are mobilised. Corporate actors, environmental activists, and even state and subnational governmental actors have brought cases, with varying degrees of success. The data offer a cautionary tale, as the actual policy outcomes of the cases, some of which have been held to be landmark cases, usually do not reflect substantive change.

Eleftheria Vasileiadou and Willemijn Tuinstra directly address how public authorities engage with society in order to shape public policy concerning energy. They focus specifically on how the European Commission Directorate General for Energy has used a battery of stakeholder consultations to (at least in theory) build in expertise, consensus, and perhaps even democratic input and legitimacy. Given the potential of these processes for defining the EU agenda, the authors ask what is the potential for these processes to tackle one of the fundamental challenges to climate change governance: the integration of two distinct policy priorities (energy and environment) which each carry a strong societal weighting and normative valuation, both in their specific policy sector as well as across international politics. Jordan and Schout (2006) warn about the heightened challenges of such network co-ordination of a policy integration effort, particularly across a multilevel institution such as the EU.

Vasileiadou and Tuinstra find some evidence for the impact of network governance as stakeholder forums have had some input into EU energy policy, but their impact on climate change discussions remains potential rather than real. Here, their evidence supports arguments made by Smith (2009) that such participatory bodies will always tend to emphasise certain core values (in this case, expertise and inclusion of concerned actors) over other potential values (e.g. the balance of different voices). Vasileiadou and Tuinstra remain optimistic about the potential for network governance to shape climate change actions, but they note the importance of the design of the processes as well as political will. Smith’s book and Schout and Jordan’s more sceptical assessment indicate that network
governance and institutional design are not likely to be panaceas for the absence of political will to tackle climate change.

Yvonne Rydin’s advanced and innovative social network analysis of zero-carbon built environment issue networks can be read as an ideal-typical form of modern governance of climate change mitigation. A large variety of interdependent state and non-state actors (in her case in the UK) advance zero-carbon emissions in the built environment using specific resources, a common normative stance, a business model that shapes activities of different organisations, and an internal communication structure. By the same token, her analysis can also be understood in terms of Castells’ (2009) *Network Society*, in which power in and of networks and the role of communication and information flows through these networks is key to understanding how societies cope with global and local risks and threats. It is the powerful hubs in the issue networks around zero-carbon built environments that, through brokering and information flows, have a major influence on the functioning and outcomes of these forms of network governance.

Hence, Rydin shows us in much detail and with an advanced qualitative-cum-quantitative analysis that climate change mitigation policy and politics can no longer be understood in terms of state agencies that have and use the power to formulate and implement policies. Climate change policy and politics are inherently socialised, power is distributed (albeit still unevenly), actors have become widely independent, and we thus need different models to analyse, understand, and also advance climate change mitigation. This underlines the end of state-centred environmental politics, but also the call for societal inclusiveness of climate change mitigation.

Rydin explicitly develops and applies new models of understanding and advancing climate change mitigation politics and policies in developed countries. Ward et al. apply in a more implicit way a similar approach to climate change politics and policy, focusing especially on climate change adaptation in different socio-economic and political settings. Cities have become main actors in climate change governance, no longer just as implementing institutions of internationally negotiated and nationally codified climate polices, but as leading agencies, sometimes even in global city networks (Bouteligier 2013, Kern and Mol 2013). At the same time, in adapting to climate change, cities cannot be understood as unified actors. They themselves consist of networks of state and non-state actors such as water boards, business, city authorities, and civil society actors. Philip Ward et al. analyse how cities – as networks and in wider multi-level networks – in developed and developing countries adapt to the increasing threats of flooding following enhanced climate change.

The findings of Ward et al. underline once again the centrality in the climate change debate of global inequalities, not only in GHG emissions but also in climate change adaptation capacities. Compared to developed cities like Rotterdam, developing cities such as Jakarta fall short in adaptation capacity, institutionalising adaptation strategies, building flexible approaches and
regulation, and systematic (rather than ad hoc) measures and strategies. These inequalities and injustices should not surprise us, since climate change adaptation is a product of an unequal and unjust world. Despite analyses of inequalities in climate change, and calls for solidarity in addressing the consequences of climate change through mitigation and adaptation, Ward et al. make clear that these normative analyses and calls do not easily spill over into climate change politics and policies. This further underlines the need of norms in climate change mitigation and adaptation science.

All the contributors to this issue raise the question of how the complex problem of climate change results in the need to make normative choices. Thus, we can observe how climate change is reflected back on human modes of thinking and acting, offering an opportunity to rethink central normative concepts, principles, and ways of thinking. Perhaps Mike Hulme (2009) is correct in his assessment that:

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\text{climate change is not a problem that can be solved in the sense that, for example, technical and political resources were mobilised to solve the problem of stratospheric ozone depletion \ldots We need to ask not what we can do for climate change, but to ask what climate change can do for us. (p. 326; emphasis added)}
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There is no way we can escape being thrown back upon ourselves, having to face the rather obvious point that we cannot conveniently ‘read off’ how to cope with climate change from scientific analysis, nor can we ‘outsource’ the solution to climate change to natural science and technology. Thinking through climate change, while it does of course require expert and specialist knowledge and will require technological – and perhaps more importantly social – innovation (Barry and Ellis 2010, Cato and Hillier 2010), is not something that can or ought to be left to experts. Science and technology can only offer insights into climate change once we recognise its core normative dimensions, both in moral/ethical terms as well as in political/policy terms.

References


