

# It's the politics, stupid! Global environmental change and power

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## Abstract

Politics is crucial to understand collective and individual responses to global environmental change, and climate change in particular. However, power dynamics are difficult to formalize, quantify or grasp empirically. This, and perhaps the influence of natural sciences and the IPCC, encourages power neutral representations of climate change, which is portrayed as a problem external to the evolution of socio-political systems. Attempts to formalize climate politics have focused on governance regimes; including norms, rules, regulations, political will, and decision-making procedures. This focus on governance entails a realist approach, which only accounts for those incremental changes in power that can be objectively justified in terms of solving specific problems. This allows studying power without challenging the status quo of power relations, and without compromising science's neutrality credentials. Yet, it ignores a long idealist/humanist tradition (e.g., Aristotle, Spinoza, parts of Hegel, Marx, Gramsci), which would highlight the potential of climate politics to liberate humanity from elite-based constraints. Thus, instead of perfecting (or proofing) current socio-politics, idealist positionings would seek to transform the socio-political causes of climate change. This also involves problematizing the relationship between science and the powerful. However, as illustrated by the Copenhagen's fiasco, liberal democracies may lack the capacity to effectively address global environmental change challenges. Hence, it is crucial to inquire about the foundations and dynamics of power from a global environmental change perspective.

## Introduction

Global environmental change research needs to dedicate more analytical attention to social power; not only due to justice and other moral imperatives, but because power relations will determine how societies choose to respond. In the case of climate change I argue that socio-political transformations will required beyond ecological modernization and revamping the energy grid with renewables. First, the gloomy spectacle offered so far by international climate negotiations suggests that any global response will be hindered by traditional, twentieth century, politics as well as by global power asymmetries (Parks and Roberts, 2008). Second, consensus is forming around the idea that temperatures will continue to rise no matter what we do in terms of cutting emissions (Hansen et al., 2008). Consequently, we will have to learn to live in notably different climate regimes; to which contemporary social structures are not adapted. Third, climate change is just one dimension of a likely scenario of broader global environmental changes. In fact, it might be the only dimension for which a straightforward technological response is plausible.

It is conceivable that the ingenuity, innovativeness, adaptability and resilience of our current socio-techno-political systems will be capable of stabilizing global temperatures around a safe average. However, the continuation of these systems, which are grounded in industrial capitalism, will still depend on the constant pursuit of surplus, production expansion, and capital accumulation (Foster et al., 2008). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that at some point we will need to revamp this development logic and this is foremost a socio-political business. Then, climate researchers shall

expect to be increasingly pressed to think beyond legislative or market reforms, international agreements, behavioural changes and policies conceived and implemented within current socio-political frameworks. The question is how to equip climate researchers to tackle this unavoidable power/political dimension.

My main point is that climate research would benefit from diving into the vast literature discussing power relations in the context of radical social transformations. This literature is rooted in an idealist/humanist tradition that can be traced back to Socrates/Plato/Aristotle's notion of virtue, and their ethical systems in which humans are considered as inherently good and ontologically free (Manuel-Navarrete, under review). For idealists, the exercise of power is primarily a moral issue concerned with high human motivations and the achievement of human well-being. Unfortunately, climate change research has been inclined towards either paying little analytical attention to power itself, or embracing a realist stance that can be traced back to Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, and Montesquieu. I argue that the first step to bringing social power fully into the climate equation is to acknowledge the limitations of apolitical stances and then discuss the pros and cons of realist versus idealist political approaches.

### **The need to analyze power and politics**

Assuming climate change as external to the evolution of socio-political systems has the advantage of discussing mitigation and adaptation as unproblematically carried out from, and by, these systems; without challenging them in any significant fashion. This permits the objectification of climate change as an external threat to social stability; a threat that can then be elegantly compartmentalized into meteorological, biological, social, economic, or psychological risks. Thus, mitigation and adaptation can be neatly defined as strategies to reduce the overall threat and to cope with its multiple risks so that humanity's development can continue unaffected. In addition, climate response can draw on security and securitization discourses, and even build on military metaphors (combating climate change or the war on climate).

Apolitical or power neutral approaches may help to bring together people holding disparate interest under a common banner. In fact, leaving the messiness of politics outside the equation allows science to focus on providing technologies and knowledge that can be translated into explicit policies or actions. For instance, emission reduction targets, new accounting schemes, vulnerability indexes, adaptive management strategies, or climate proofing, to mention a few. Thus, science can keep a healthy distance from the ethical and political dimensions of social changes, which are to be discussed within democratic and stakeholder arenas.

Chief amongst the inertias pushing towards apolitical climate research is the dominance of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which is in turn influenced by governments. This might have reinforced a process of self-editing in the academic community where the significance of one's own work is measured by its inclusion in IPCC reports and, to a certain degree, one's own reputation is linked to personal involvement in the IPCC. In both cases the focus is on policy and technical solutions not on power. As a consequence, power itself is seldom analyzed. The "human dimension" tends to be reduced to singling-out the parts of the social fabric that need to be "adapted" or "proofed"; so that the system as a whole, more or less in its current state, can weather the challenges posed by climate change.

Unfortunately, apolitical or power neutral responses are too simplistic. They fail to see that climate change is not a policy problem, but rather an affair which is endogenous to all the dimensions of human life (Hulme, 2009), including politics. Furthermore, as pointed out by Lahsen (2010:2???): "A growing body of empirical work reveals a more complicated picture than that portrayed by rational actor models and the associated 'linear' understanding of policy uptake and societal benefit as automatic consequences of the production of scientific knowledge. Decision-makers' conceptual frameworks are embedded in socio-cultural and political enclaves".

### **Political realism and global environmental change**

Political realism assumes a pessimistic stance of human nature. People need to be controlled in order to avoid self-destruction or the harming of others. As a consequence, coercion, and/or legitimation through consent (*i.e.*, authority), are preconditions for order and security. The success of political

systems are measured in terms of stability and consensus between rulers and ruled, rather than ideals of fairness, justice, or freedom. Thus, corruption and oppression are to be avoided through appropriate “checks and balances”. This realist position is particularly convenient to validate the liberal State and property institutions as grantors of stability. In fact, in the present historical moment, this realistic stance often leads to uncritically embracing neoliberal economic rationalities, which are commonly assumed to provide the basis for coordinating conflicting interests in modern societies.

In climate research, the realist agenda has mostly developed around the notion of regimes and global environmental governance (Newell, 2000; Smith et al., 2005). Governance refers to the wielding of power and authority by government institutions and other social actors in order to influence and enact public decisions and policy. This acknowledges the exercise of power, but from an utterly realist basis. Indeed, governance stretches Montesquieu’s “checks-and-balances” thesis beyond the three powers of the democratic government (executive, legislative, and judiciary) to include the role of private actors or markets, and non-governmental organizations or civil society. This allows reifying political actors in terms of “stakeholders”; holding particular interests, resources, values and cultures. Accordingly, politics can be conveniently represented as stakeholders’ negotiations towards solving specific problems; such as, for instance, emission reductions or shielding development from disasters. Politics may include incremental adjustments of governance structures or institutional architectures, but these changes must be justified by expected improvements in the performance of these structures to solve problems. Thus power distribution is brought to the background so that attention can be directed towards goal setting, problem solving and policy outcomes.

At the core of realism is the assumption that modern society is politically in “close to equilibrium”, and orbiting around a liberal democratic attractor. This attractor emerged during the enlightenment and got institutionalized with the consolidation of industrial capitalism. This evokes a sense of final destination, the end of political history towards which Western societies perceive themselves to have been tending during the last centuries. This semi-equilibrium politics allows conceptualizing the holding of power as the intrinsic quality of prototypical actors and institutions; rather than the outcome of unstable historical processes and social struggles. Social actors negotiate, in the light of scientific findings, the re-arrangement of markets, norms, institutions, regulations or decision-making procedures, while retaining their power share. Justice and fairness belong to the policy process, rather than being intrinsic to social structures. Thus, (unrealistic) aspirations for universal justice can be reoriented towards pragmatic targets such as the implementation of transparent, inclusive, and accountable policies; even if carried out in a context of inequality and mere representative democracy. The staging of climate international negotiations is a case in point. Developed countries, developing countries, corporations, scientists and NGOs are to follow pre-assigned roles and bargain our way out; without even discussing the possibility of altering power or pursuing any form of social transformation. Instead, the debate is centered on national emission targets, technological incentives, setting a price for carbon, and the transfer of economic resources to compensate those who will bear the highest costs.

A promising realist development consists of addressing power from a discursive critical perspective (Demeritt, 2006; Pettenger, 2007). Unfortunately, the excessive fascination with knowledge/power interfaces, policy rhetoric, and discourse analysis (which becomes the theoretical substitute of stakeholderism), impairs the potential of constructivism to link climate change with idealist understandings of power. In fact, the fixation with knowledge and discourses often leads to stagnant critiques of dominant policy frameworks, such as the Kyoto Protocol, but providing little as an alternative (Manuel-Navarrete, under review).

### **Political idealism and global environmental change**

Climate researchers have good reasons to avoid idealist approaches. The current emphasis on performance (measured as “policy impact”) and accountability to clients (Kenway and Langmead, 1998) (such as “tax-payers” or “decision-makers”) is cornering science as a toolbox to find solutions to specific problems. The focus on problems creates a sense of urgency and pragmatism which discounts idealist calls to problematize climate change. In addition, power changes are not easy and their study might be at times discouraging. As noted by Brechin (2008:471): “Inertia is inherent in any social system. Current arrangements are always favoured and protected by those benefiting from those arrangements. Hence change is always difficult, especially if it calls for fundamental reorientations of patterns of interactions and power relationships”.

In spite of the difficulties, the overwhelming global consequences insinuated by climate change provide at least an opening line to focus on transformative political action and revitalize the idealist tradition. This reviving is meant to go beyond problematizing certain ideologies and discourses, or denouncing particular power relations. Instead, it involves understanding climate change as a manifestation of elitist values and rationalities, which in turn hinder human freedom and the sustainable stewardship of the planet. Some climate researchers might already tiptoed into this vast territory. For instance, Verweij et al. (2006) call for “clumsy solutions” that re-combine our ways of organizing, perceiving and justifying social relations. The examination of climate “winners” and “losers”, the emphasis on values, and the questioning of uncritical approaches to climate change governance are other promising developments (O’Brien and Leichenko, 2003; O’Brien, 2009; Okereke et al., 2009).

Genuine idealism, though, also entails acknowledging the political character of science. Scientists are to be viewed as agents of socio-political change rather than neutral policy designers. Science is expected to raise awareness about our collective ability to steer and transform socio-political patterns; rather than to just provide technological or policy solutions which incidentally lead to stabilizing these patterns. For instance, raising awareness on: exploitative forms of power over other humans and non-humans (which may benefit a few at the expense of many), neo-colonialist inertias leading to unsustainable patterns of development, the informal power systems through which elites and powerful agents influence the democratic game, and the legitimation of opportunistic and greedy pathological behaviours.

From an idealist viewpoint, climate change is not “a problem” to be solved (Hulme, 2009), but a symptom of certain socio-cultural and political circumstances, which climate change response may in turn contribute to transform. Thus, even if we stabilize emissions and manage to collectively cope with climate variability, the current unbalances in power will yield new, or already on-going, global environmental challenges (e.g., mass extinctions) for which no such fixes can be even envisioned. The kernel is to offer insights into how to reformulate dysfunctional power relations according to the socio-ecological imperatives of the planet. This type of reformulations has happened in the past. One just has to think about the abolition of slavery. Power sets the preconditions for exploitation, but also for autonomy (of empowered individuals) and the capacity to live in community (creating integrative power). The “power turn” in climate research evoked by idealism would redirect climate research towards transforming power patterns instead of “shielding” them against external threats. This forces us to redefine who we are, not only as individual agents, but as humanity in this historical moment. To the extent that we are part of power systems, independently of how much powerful or powerless we might be; we contribute to their evolution. As expressed by Ingold (2005:503): “[A]ll creatures, human and non-human, are fellow passengers in the one world in which they all live, and through their activities continually create the conditions for each other’s existence”. Therefore, climate change response is not as much something we “do” to resolve a problem as it is what we become; not least because we “are” the problem.

## Conclusion

In 2009 Nobel Peace Prize Lecture, Barack Obama made the observation that: “[T]here has long been a tension between those who describe themselves as realists or idealists – a tension that suggests a stark choice between the narrow pursuit of interests or an endless campaign to impose our values”. The President added: “I reject this choice”. This rejection points to the convenience of transcending realist/idealist divides and could be interpreted as a yearning for the post-World War consensus through which liberal democracies seemed capable of providing a rising tide to lift all boats, a consensus fatally broken by the still on-going neo-liberal globalization. The 2008 financial crisis and climate change are providing the opportunity to reconsider this form of globalization. If climate researchers are to seize this moment, then they need to review the neo-liberal rationality that has saturated many of their approaches. A rationality in which power is seen as unproblematically exercised along perfectible institutional architectures and existing stakeholder networks, and towards the achievement of objectified adaptation goals or, more recently, “climate proofing”. Climate adaptation demands far more than removing contingent perverse incentives, incorporating more stakeholders into decision arenas (i.e., multi-level governance), or eliminating institutional barriers and constraints (e.g., red tape).

In the presentation speech same of President Obama Nobel Prize ceremony, Thorbjørn Jagland, Chairman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, expressed that: “The [Nobel Peace Prize] Committee

knows that many will weigh his [Obama's] ideals against what he really does, and that should be welcomed. But if the demand is either to fulfill your ideals to the letter, and at once, or to stop having ideals, we are left with a most damaging division between the limits of today's realities and the vision for tomorrow. Then politics becomes pure cynicism. Political leaders must be able to think beyond the often narrow confines of realpolitik. Only in this way can we move the world in the right direction". This expresses a grave concern for the lack of idealism in formal politics. Perhaps echoing this concern, I have argued that climate research has disregarded idealist approaches to power. Yet, current power relations need to be fundamentally challenged, not only in cases of extreme poverty in which disempowerment averts the basic exercise of adaptive capacities, but more broadly in the examination of the power patterns brought about by modernity and globalization at the local and global scales. That is, by examining the processes of exclusion, coercion, sovereignty, authority, legitimacy, control, persuasion, freedom, participation, or consent that are constantly structuring human agency. Climate change is not a "collateral effect" of globalization, or a market externality. It is rather a persuasive civilizing force pushing us towards reframing the rules and power relations under which globalization takes place.

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