

Student Feature – Theory in Action: Global Justice and Climate Change

Written by Alix Dietzel

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ALIX DIETZEL, SEP 17 2019

This is adapted from *International Relations Theory* (2017). Get your free copy of the textbook here.

Climate change requires actors from around the world to come together and agree on how to move forward. As temperatures continue to rise and the global response lags behind what scientists recommend, global justice scholars are becoming increasingly interested in climate change and its global (mis)management. Spurred on by the global nature of the problem and the injustices it presents, global justice scholars have also turned their attention to climate change for several important reasons. Although global justice scholars agree that climate change will affect individuals and are therefore concerned with addressing the problem, scholars have different ideas on what exactly is at stake and what should therefore be prioritised. For example, Simon Caney (2010) defines three distinct rights that are predicted to be threatened by climate change: the right to life, the right to food and the right to health – and any programme combating climate change should not violate these.

First, climate change is undoubtedly a global problem and global justice scholars are keen to engage with such problems. Greenhouse gas emissions cannot be confined within a state, they rise into the atmosphere and cause global temperature changes within and outside of their original state borders. Although it is difficult to establish direct blame or fault, it is nonetheless undeniable that virtually all individuals, states and corporations contribute to some degree to climate change. In this sense, the global nature of the climate change problem defies conventional assumptions about state sovereignty and justice, which is what makes it so interesting to global justice scholars.

Second, climate change requires a global solution, which suits global justice scholars who are interested in providing recommendations for problems of global cohabitation. No one state can stop climate change on its own. There is no doubt that combatting climate change will require a collaborative effort, implying the need for global agreements. Coming to such agreements will inevitably involve discussion about which actors must lower emissions and by how much or even which actors should contribute to the costs of climate change – such as helping certain populations adapt to rising sea levels or extreme weather. These are, by their nature, questions of distributive justice and are therefore of interest to global justice scholars.

Third, climate change presents an unfair distribution of benefits and burdens between morally equal individuals, who are the key concern of global justice scholars. Climate change will most negatively affect those living in less developed countries who have done the least to contribute to the causes of climate change, while those living in developed countries, who have contributed the most emissions, will likely suffer the least. This is because less developed countries are more often located in areas which will bear the brunt of the problems associated with climate change. Furthermore, developing states typically do not have as many resources as developed states to adapt to dangerous weather patterns. For example, the Solomon Islands has already lost five small islands as a result of climate change and yet it is one of the lowest emitting countries in the world. Paul Harris (2010, 37) argues that the climate change problem 'cries out for justice' because the effects of climate change fall disproportionately on people who are already vulnerable, cannot adequately protect themselves and have not significantly contributed to the

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problem.

Tim Hayward (2007) defines a right specific to the climate change problem: ecological space – a human right to live in an environment free of harmful pollution adequate for health and wellbeing. Hayward's approach differs from Caney's because his priority is not protecting human rights that already exist in international law but rather creating new climate related rights that must be defended.

Patrick Hayden's (2010) conception of rights encompasses both environment specific substantive and procedural rights. Hayden's substantive rights include the right to be protected from environmental harm and his procedural rights include the right to be fully informed about the potential effects of environmental hazards, the right to participate in democratic procedures for climate policymaking and the right to complain about existing conditions, standards and policies (Hayden 2010, 361–362). In this sense, Hayden is concerned not merely with basic rights but also with fair procedures. The debate about rights is important because defining who deserves what can help guide a discussion on what should be done about climate change and who should be responsible for climate change action. For example, if the right to health must be protected, this could imply that lowering emissions is not enough and that populations must be protected from disease in other ways – for example, by inoculating vulnerable people against certain diseases or providing clean drinking water in drought-prone areas.

The question of who is responsible for climate change action is another key point of discussion amongst global justice scholars. The discipline of IR is traditionally concerned with relationships between states. Some scholars following this tradition and these debates usually focus on which states should contribute how much to climate change action. Henry Shue (2014) advocates for the Polluter Pays Principle, which is based on examining who caused the problem to determine who should pay (and how much) for climate change action – and the Ability to Pay Approach, which asserts that the responsibility should be borne by the wealthy. Thomas Risse (2008) takes issue with these approaches and advocates for an index that measures per capita wealth and per capita emission rates, then groups countries into categories. In this sense, the debate concerns how responsibility for climate change should be allocated, which is important for international relations as it reflects ongoing discussions between states, most recently when putting together the 2015 Paris Agreement. Other scholars are keen to include non-state actors in their conceptions of climate justice and responsibility.

Dive deeper

“Balancing Environmental Responsibilities: Issues and Challenges of Biocultural Rights” podcast from the Bologna Institute for Policy Research

David Miller's speech “Global Justice and Climate Change: How Should Responsibilities be Distributed.”

From the University of Edinburgh, What if the Universal Declaration of Human Rights were redrafted today?

Paul Harris points out that cosmopolitanism is traditionally concerned not only with states but also with individuals. For this reason he studies how individuals are affecting climate change and discovers that it is rich individuals who produce the most greenhouse gases, regardless of which state they live in. As he puts it, ‘affluence is the primary and disproportionate cause of global environmental degradation’ (Harris 2010, 130). These individuals have responsibility to act on climate change by (for example) travelling less, reducing meat consumption and buying fewer luxury items. Simon Caney (2010) argues that all agents (not just the wealthy) who contribute to emissions and have the means of lowering these, including individuals, states, corporations, sub-state political authorities and international financial institutions, should be held accountable.

These debates about the climate responsibilities of non-state actors are important to IR theory, which is traditionally concerned with how states relate to one another. By discussing which other actors might be responsible for climate change, global justice scholars are able to move the discipline of International Relations in a new direction. International relations theory has traditionally been overly concerned with global (dis)order. Global justice scholars have contributed to widening the scope of IR theory by shifting the focus to individuals, on a planetary scale, and

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thereby approaching problems of global cohabitation in a new way. Yet despite signs of progress in academia, states seem to be more focused on managing conflict, distrust and disorder than on reaching global agreements and treating one another fairly. For that reason, global justice as an issue has been underrepresented in policy and global justice scholarship has not yet reached the same prominence as mainstream IR theories such as realism or liberalism. Nevertheless, in times of transnational terrorism, rising global inequalities, migration crises, pandemic disease and climate change – considerations of global cooperation, fairness and justice are more important than ever.

About the author:

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