

## Student Feature – Theory in Action: Green Theory and Climate Change

Written by Hugh Dyer

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HUGH DYER, SEP 29 2019

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

Climate change is the dominant environmental issue of our age, caused by our dangerous reliance on fossil fuels. Green theory helps us to understand this in terms of long-term ecological values rather than short-term human interests. These interests are generally pursued by states through investments in technology, but there is no easy technical solution to human-induced climate change. From the perspective of green theory, this technical impasse requires a change in human values and behaviour and therefore presents an opportunity for political innovation or even a transformative shift in global politics. IR theory can explain why climate change is a difficult problem for states to solve because of economic competition and disincentives to cooperation. However, it cannot provide an alternative framework to explain how this might be addressed. IR remains overly focused on states and their national interests rather than other actors that may be more cooperative, such as cities and communities or non-governmental organisations and green social movements.

A green theory perspective on climate change understands it as a direct consequence of human collective choices. Specifically, these choices have led to historically anthropocentric economic practices of historically arbitrary political groups (states), who have exploited nature in their own short-term interests. Climate change presents a clear case of injustice to both present and future humans who are not responsible for causing it and to the ecosystem as a whole. Therefore, a solution requires an ecocentric theory of value and a more ethical than instrumental attitude to human relations in our common future. Green theory helps us to redefine issues such as climate change in terms of long-term ecological values rather than short-term political interests.

At the international level efforts have been underway since before the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio, which gave rise to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and other environmental agreements. As with many issues caught up in the direct tension between environmental goals and developmental goals, any bargains struck are inadequate compromises. For green theory there is no such tension in an ecological path to development, even if that path seems more costly in the short term. This is not least because some countries have developing still to do and hold already developed countries historically responsible for climate change – and no national actor is willing to bear global costs. After faltering efforts to address climate change through the terms of the UNFCCC's Kyoto Protocol, an outline agreement was eventually achieved in the Paris Accords of December 2015. Whether or not this effort will actually address the sources and consequences of climate change remains to be seen, but green theory suggests that a focus on human values and choices in communities is better than a focus on bargaining between states.

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In a world of states with primary responsibilities to their own citizens, finding acceptable trade-offs between immediate economic wellbeing and longer-term ecological well being is difficult. There is some prospect of powerful states (like China) nor groups of states (like the European Union) leading the way and altering the structural parameters. However, the common ground available from an IR perspective of competing states is unlikely to be anywhere near the common ground envisioned by green theory. More fundamentally, it is unlikely to meet the challenge of climate change. Even with some political agreement, there remain significant differences about responsibility for historic climate change and the costs of adapting to an already changing climate that is affecting the least developed populations hardest. While it is possible for states to cooperate in order to make helpful environmental commitments, this is not directly related to action or change.

In any case, while international agreements are formally implemented by governments and other constitutional bodies, the key agents of change are a much wider range of non-state actors, smaller groups and individuals, which may suggest a kind of anarchy rather than hierarchy. In sum, a green solution to climate change could involve global governance institutions and communities working together – largely bypassing the state – in order to reduce damaging emissions, protect the climate and preserve the planetary ecology on which humans depend.

Green theory equips us with a new vantage point for analysing these developments. It also allows a broader ecological perspective on our common human interests and emphasises choices made within the ecological boundaries of climate change, rather than the political boundaries of economic advantage. For IR, the contribution of green theory helps us re-examine the relationship between the state, the economy and the environment. IR normally sets this in the context of globalisation viewed from the limited perspective of states and markets – but globalisation also involves opportunities for developing shared global ecological values. Green theory has the potential to radically challenge the idea of sovereign nation states operating in competition and is thus part of the post-Westphalian trend in IR thought. Of course, the greater contribution of green theory, or its capacity for critical engagement with IR, lies in its very different origins – taking planetary ecology as a starting point and looking beyond our current political-economic structures. Green theory is thus able to offer not just an alternative description of our world but also a different logic for understanding it – and how we might act to change it. IR theory is likely to be disrupted and re-oriented by green theory, not so much because greens will win the arguments but because IR theorists will inevitably have to provide a coherent account of how we all live sustainably on our planet. This means that at some point we may have to stop theorising about the state-centric 'inter-national' and find another political point of reference in human relationships, such as policy networks or social movements.

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