



ANXIETIES OF DEMOCRACY PROGRAM | WG-CC, SUBGROUP #3

THE POLITICAL THEORY OF CLIMATE CHANGE: STATE OF THE FIELD

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The capacity of American democracy to address climate change—to produce and enforce policy at home and to participate in global efforts—is the most urgent question before us in terms of time frame and threat. It does not rise to the top of public concerns, however, and our subgroup, along with others, addresses this dilemma. Other challenges to democracy are critical, of course. But climate change produces and exacerbates problems of enormous scale (physical devastation, violent conflict, migration, changing economic systems, radical inequality of vulnerability). And climate change alone presents the possibility of catastrophic destruction of the human habitat. Climate change presents as a “world-historical” moment. Our work as political theorists has, necessarily, a strong moral undercurrent and element of activism.

“Political theory” is something of a catch-all label that intersects with philosophy and with intellectual and political history. Its approaches include analytic and conceptual analysis, theories of national and

international justice, and historical resources for understanding politics and ethics. The protean character of political theory presents a challenge when it comes to making selections for a literature review and identifying a limited and coherent research agenda on climate change. Our working group explores factors that may be less immediately remediable or testable than the other groups, but that arguably play important roles in shaping perceptions of climate change and the willingness and ability of political actors to respond to it. These factors all involve normative assumptions about the appropriate ways to construe threats and to mobilize democratic responses to them.

What questions have political theorists and historians not taken up? And what unexplored assumptions get in the way of addressing the problems posed by climate change? In setting out a research agenda we focus on three comparatively neglected areas.

First, what is the role of scientific expertise in democratic decision-making? What are the responsibilities of scientists and democratic publics—legislators, citizens, media, and other political actors and shapers of the climate narrative—for the use and abuse of science in understanding and responding to climate change? What are the tensions between scientific and political authority, and what are the responsibilities of citizens?

Second, what place does emotion, fear in particular, have in deliberations about climate change? Among the questions for research are the manufacture of fear to produce resistance to public policies that address climate change, the normalization of fear that produces procrastination and complacency, and the possibility of “rational fear” to motivate and sustain action in response to the challenge of climate change.

Third, there is close to a blank slate for research on adaptation to climate change. Political theorists have done work on the ethics and politics of mitigation—controlling greenhouse gas emissions. Adaptation raises political and ethical questions in a mostly domestic political context. Some mirror the work done on global justice, but many aspects of adaptation require independent study.

We make suggestions for research on all three areas below.

POLITICAL THEORY ON CLIMATE CHANGE: LITERATURE REVIEW

If political science as a whole is playing catch-up with regard to climate change, in some areas political theory has acquitted itself well. Our summary review of the literature finds that a number of topics long central to the field have been extended to environmental concerns generally and climate change specifically. For 25 years or more theorists have explored ecological questions directly, as the title *Green Political Thought* suggests (Dobson 1990). Increasingly, attention has turned to climate change. Initial studies explore climate change indirectly by using climate illustratively as a case study for examining accounts of distributive justice and other core themes developed to address other problems.

A map of the field shows that one avenue is comparatively well trodden: the family of questions that cohere under the label “climate justice.” Although climate has been cast as a public good, theorists draw attention to the fact that the burdens of climate change, mitigation, and adaptation are rivalrous and excludable (Hulme 2009). Work on climate justice ranges from global distributive justice to the related theme of intergenerational justice (Broome 2012; Gardiner et al. 2010; Gardiner 2011; Jamieson 2014; Shue 1999). The literature encompasses a family of themes: differentials in cause and effect of climate change and inequality

within and between the global North and South; assigning moral and causal responsibility to agents of harmful effects; theories of the fair allocation of costs and compensation of mitigation (tracking or separating “Who pays?” from “Who emits?”); consideration of whether the bearers of costs and payers of compensation should be states, individuals, or some other public or private entity. This literature focuses, then, on the assignment of liability for climate change and the burdens this should impose (Shue 1999; Caney 2005, 2009, 2010). This work in “applied” moral and political philosophy is written from various normative standpoints: consequentialism, Rawlsian theory, accounts of well-being, human rights, virtue ethics, and more.

Other standard concerns in political theory in addition to global distributive justice have been extended to climate change; theories of open/closed borders and migration, for example, have begun to attend to the distinct moral and legal problem of climate refugees and to the climate-caused or exacerbated problem of internal migration (Carens 2013; Rosenblum 2013).

A map of the terrain of political theory on climate change includes reflections on the transformation of consciousness and values that would seem to be required by the moral project of sustainability (Goodin 2010). Put broadly, theorists attend to the classic ideal of the “good life,” well-being, or human flourishing. They pose a version of Rousseau and every radical’s inquiry into our “second nature”: how can men and women, raised to be fossil fuel energy consumers and to have expectations of continuous economic growth, be transformed to support a new regime of sustainability? Ideal and non-ideal theories embrace these questions about the transformation of values and the reproduction of citizens and civic virtues for this historically unique moment. What virtues are now required (Jamieson 2002, 2010, 2014)? What are the obstacles to these changes? Does addressing climate change require identification as a

“global citizen”? Sometimes invoking ancient and non-Western philosophies and notions of cultural plasticity, theorists outline “virtues of the future” (Lane 2012; Thompson 2010).

Philosophy of history has begun to address the question of how climate change might invite or even require us to think differently about time and scale in history. Scale has spurred the reintroduction of notions of “species being” into normative theory—a focus on the common biological basis of humanity. Time frame has altered historical thinking as well: climate change is viewed not only in terms of the recent (industrial) past and its present consequences but in terms of an epoch in geological time: the anthropocene, “the sixth extinction,” and “the end of nature” capture this. At a higher level of abstraction is the question of whether the crisis in the human (and nonhuman) habitat can be illuminated by philosophies of history. Canonical Enlightenment theories identified humans as the agents of world-historical change. They identified distinct historical and technological turning points as well as the dynamic of change from one era to another; characterized the unique moment to which self-understanding had come; posited world-historical agents of change in universal terms sometimes invoking “species being”; and argued even in moments of political despair for liberating, progressive, sometimes utopian prospects. But philosophers now see the chasm separating us from Enlightenment mind-sets widened by a disconnection between past and future more dramatic than anything then imagined (outside apocalyptic religion); indeed the philosophy of history is challenged by the possibility of human futurelessness (Scheffler 2013; Chakrabarty 2009). One response has been a turn to discussions of radical hope and “prophetic” discourse (Kamminga 2008; Hulme 2009).

Most important for setting the parameters of our agenda, there is democratic theory on climate change. For the most part theorists have taken up climate change indirectly, as one case among others to illustrate

the moral and institutional problems of political participation and decision-making. Contemporary democratic theory looks at the norms, sites, “perspectives,” and information that shape public deliberation and judgment. One focus is the epistemic advantages associated with the special conditions established for citizen juries and other novel institutional designs (Fishkin 2009; Fung, Wright, and Abers 2003). In addition, promising work on decision-making within government uses climate change illustratively in the course of discussing constraints on legislative decision-making for the long term imposed by the electoral cycle and “political time” (Thompson 2005); institutional designs to address the problem of legislative irresolution and procrastination (Beerbohm, *If Elected*, unpublished book ms; Andreou 2007); and arrangements for representing the interests of future generations (Gosseries and Meyer 2009; Thompson 2010; Dobson 1996). Concepts of representation and institutional design also come into play in theories of international decision-making (Dubash, Fleurbaey, and Kartha 2014). On democratic decision-making as “muddling through” across a range of twentieth-century crises with a special caution for what overconfidence means for climate change, see David Runciman (2013).

RESEARCH AGENDA: SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE; RESPONSIBILITY AND FEAR; NORMATIVE QUESTIONS ABOUT CLIMATE ADAPTATION

Against this background we ask, What are some of the engrained assumptions—commonplace in political theory, democratic theory in particular—challenged by climate change? How is our understanding of democracy potentially altered by airing and questioning received wisdom? We suggest an agenda for research on three comparatively neglected themes.

SCIENCE AND DEMOCRATIC DECISION-MAKING

What is the role of scientific expertise in democratic decision-making, and what are the responsibilities of scientists, legislators, and citizens for the use of science in understanding and addressing climate change? We describe this as a “comparatively neglected” area, which may seem startling. After all, expert knowledge is central to the argument of Plato’s *Republic*, and since John Dewey the role of specialized knowledge has been judged indispensable to political outcomes.

That said, three different states of mind vis-à-vis scientific authority are discernible among political decision-makers and the public broadly: deference to expert authority; rejection of scientific consensus (in this and other contexts, “denial” of scientific authority as elitist, captured, partisan, or even the product of conspiracy); and “scientism,” meaning complacency that scientific progress will provide the answer to the problems science creates.

In recent years, several political philosophers have worked to strike a balance, challenging “epistocracy” and “technocracy” without deprecating specialized knowledge.

On the agenda, then, is the relationship between scientific expertise and democratic decision-making. One facet of research is the need to move beyond overly simple models that distinguish sharply between ends and means on the one hand, and facts and values on the other, in the expectations that we have of how citizens, political leaders, and scientists can constructively and responsibly interact. On the agenda is exploring rubrics for the responsibility of scientists to communicate expert knowledge to a variety of publics, and public capacity and responsibility to receive, understand, and employ this knowledge. This work entails attention to the institutional settings in which the several “publics”

deliberate and decide; rhetoric and modes of communication of expert knowledge; and whether and how scientists should communicate with a view to the ideological context and mind-sets that they know will greet their findings. On the agenda for study, too, is the inevitability of scientific uncertainty and how to represent and assess scientific claims in the face of uncertainty.

This raises questions about responsibility under conditions when scientists' standard attempts to meet doubt and disinformation with more technical information and more refined findings are futile or counterproductive. Given evidence to this effect, scientists must continue to disseminate scientific consensus, but should they do so with a social perspective? Why and how might they take into account the ideological context and mind-sets that will embrace or reject their authority? How might they combine expert knowledge and political knowledge in communication to the public—or to differentiated publics? The controversial question of scientists' attention to social and political reception calls for exploring where and under what conditions scientists have failed or succeeded in having a constructive eye on politics, and on participation qua scientists in democratic politics and policy decisions. The topic can be addressed through case studies of climate science communication that include normative considerations of how and when aspects of political responsibility come into play.

Another facet of this overarching theme of scientific communication is the model of global scientific assessment. These models, including what has been called by the chair of IPCC Working Group III Ottmar Edenhofer the “pragmatic-enlightened model” (Edenhofer and Kowarsch 2015), may not be able to stand alone. They need to be complemented by a transformed division of labor in the relationship between scientists and citizens. Just as in scientific assessments, the boundaries between means and ends and between facts and values cannot be sharply distinguished, so in the

broader framework of social and political theory, citizens cannot simply be allocated the role of deciders of value-driven ends with scientists relegated to the role of purveyors of value-neutral means. This facet of the agenda for political calls for a more differentiated way of thinking about the relationship between facts and values, and means and ends—including distinguishing between values that are inherent in science and other values.

One consideration is a new understanding of the division of labor that places concrete responsibilities of translation and gaining understanding on scientists and citizens alike. Scientists have an obligation—dischargeable largely by building institutions and intermediaries—to translate their science into something comprehensible to the layperson. At the same time, citizens have an obligation to become more proficient in the language of science. By creating a reciprocal and fluid communications system between scientists and citizens, a better foundation for a productive learning feedback loop in global assessments can be created.

In short, this research would grapple with existing accounts of decision-making in democratic theory.

EMOTIONS

The second thematic research agenda is the role of emotion, fear specifically, in democratic decisions. Anxiety (as in “anxieties of democracy”) is often chronic and diffuse. Fear, in contrast, has greater integrity. It is biologically fundamental, constructive, and a familiar factor in politics. Nowhere is the political significance of fear clearer than in matters of national security, where fear is acknowledged as central to the substance of political decisions and, to ensure popular support for costly policies, represented as necessary to meet the threat. Fear is embedded

in the logic of nuclear deterrence. Fear is central to the rhetoric and understanding of climate change and policies to address it as well. We propose an agenda that looks at the manufacture of fear to produce resistance to scientific consensus and public policy, the normalization of fear to produce procrastination and complacency, and the possibility of “rational fear” to motivate and sustain action for change.

Historians of science have done work broadly related to this theme: empirical studies, undergirded by normative claims, of the strategy of resistance to consensus science, focusing on how these strategies are applied to policy proposals to address climate change (Oreskes and Conway 2011). Does opposition to climate change policy rest in part on arousing a specific fear that policies in response to climate change are destructive of the “magic of the marketplace,” which is represented as a defining characteristic of American culture? From this perspective, public policies are said to pose an existential danger to the American way of life; ideology, political strategy, and group alliances arouse fear in order to sustain resistance to climate change policies.

The passion of fear has been foundational in much political theory, where fearfulness is proof of understanding, fear is motivation and justification for political authority, and it is a source of both reasons and energy for active political agency. Fear’s reputation as a cause of paralysis and an obstacle to reason and to good political decision-making paints with too broad and too unhistorical a brush. In many contemporary normative accounts of deliberation, passions are denigrated as irrational (understood variously but always in the negative), manipulable, and paralyzing. Fear is not only counterproductive, on this view, but is itself a threat to reasonable outcomes. One facet of research, then, is to identify and question democratic theory’s attempt—normatively both in terms of the acceptable forms of discourse and argument and in terms of institutional design—to cordon off emotion from decision-making.

Contemporary deprecation of fear contrasts with the canonical appreciation of fear in the history of political thought—opening another vein for study. Among philosophers Hobbes’s account of fear as “the passion to be reckoned with” argues that fear can be deliberately aroused in politics and directed to certain objects, that it can be put to constructive political use. What if anything is potentially useful here for stimulating responsibility for responding to climate change? Is there a disconnect between conditions that should generate rational fear and the apparent absence of this passion or the normalization of fear? Can memory and imagination be enlisted to spur and sustain rational fear?

In conversation with political psychology, this research agenda would look at how various narratives provoke fear in different individuals and groups: immediate personal danger, concrete and personally costly destruction in the foreseeable future (ranging from fear of flooding, say, to material costs), apocalyptic and existential fear. Like the narratives that accompany political polarization, these are taken up and amplified by groups. What does this suggest for democratic theory’s insistence on open, common, and inclusive political engagement and agreed upon terms of deliberation?

Finally, there is the question in the climate context of radical hope. Surprisingly often, climate catastrophe is represented as an opportunity to repair ethical failures (Pope Francis’s Encyclical) and for personal and collective greatness.

CLIMATE ADAPTATION

The third item on the research agenda is adaptation—the counterpart to the challenge posed by mitigation in response to climate change. Adaptation is written into the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, and policymakers have written up plans and produced

case studies for responding to and anticipating climate disasters, but political theorists have been absent from the field. Ethicists and political philosophers have given close attention the morals and politics of mitigating fossil fuel emissions, as our literature review shows, but they have had close to nothing to say about precautionary measures and recovery measures and transformative measures going on around us.

Adaptation entails distributive questions of costs and benefits, fragmented decision-making, divided authority—local, state, regional, and national—and the authority of experts. Like health, safety, consumer protection, and other regulatory policies, adaptation addresses the limitations of markets and the need for government to manage risk. Like mitigation policy, adaptation faces ideological opposition and vested interests. A set of normative questions is at the heart of every facet of adaptive responses to climate change.

Among questions for research, three sets stand out. One is the mind-set of “resilience” that is built into discussion of adaptation. What is this capacity, this virtue, of resilience? Is it connected to “normalization”; that is, to the notion of adaptation as bouncing back from the local effects of climate change? Or does resilience look ahead to larger climate awareness and the decidedly non-normal of life-altering physical and social change?

A second set of questions concerns distributive justice. This theme has dominated discussions of global justice and the costs of mitigating emissions. Do the same criteria and notions of assigning burdens apply to adaptation globally? Do they apply to adaptation in the domestic context? Notions of who is at risk, who should bear the burdens of costly adaptation, and what models of planning and implementation reflect due consideration of these normative questions are rich areas for study.

Finally, there is democratic theory's foundational question: Who should decide on flood-proofing New York City subways or saving the Chesapeake island Tangier or restricting coastal development in Miami? The corollary question is institutional design. This comes full circle to the uses and limits of scientific/technical expertise. Is there room in adaptation planning for participatory governance? What political arrangements encourage decision-makers and ordinary citizens to look past building concrete coastal barriers to the larger political challenge of action to address climate change?

CONCLUSION

Our group is aware of the many ways these themes—the responsibility of bearers of specialized knowledge, the role of emotion, and the normative challenge of adaptation—come together. We are also aware of the many places in which these discussions intersect with research agendas proposed by the other subgroups. We anticipate a rare opportunity for mutual enrichment.

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