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Political Theory and Global Climate Action: Recasting the Public Sphere

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Developed countries are morally responsible for making the largest share of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions reductions and for funding both emissions reductions and adaptation measures in developing countries. First, the overwhelming majority of GHGs released since the start of the industrial revolution were emitted in developed countries and these countries now have a responsibility to address the harmful problem those emissions created. Second, developed countries are wealthy and can help poorer countries to achieve emission reduction and adaptation goals without greatly threatening the well-being of their populations.

Yet, developed countries as a whole have achieved minimal reductions in emissions and have made insufficient financial commitments to climate aid. Moreover, the 2015 Paris Agreement allows all parties to set voluntary commitments and there is no requirement that they accord with any moral principles. Thus, some might think that the Agreement is a ‘moral failure’ that allows developed countries off the hook.

In her agenda-setting book, Boran argues that this position is blind to the way in which the post-Paris governance architecture aims to facilitate cooperation and rising ambition among all parties. It also misses the increasing interconnection between the UNFCCC process and a global public sphere of nonstate actors engaged in climate-related activity. The important role of a multiplicity of actors in the intergovernmental process has been decisively recognised and Boran argues that this opens new possibilities for ‘transformative action to create a phase transition towards a low-carbon, climate-resilient, and sustainable future’ (p. 77).

Boran thinks it is important to develop a political theory that will help us better understand but also critically reflect upon the possibilities in this distinctive political space. Boran regularly attends UNFCCC meetings as an accredited observer and has organised a number of interdisciplinary side-event panels there. Her distinctive perspective is in part the result of these experiences, which has led to her book’s call for a specifically ‘public philosophy’ of climate change.

It is important to note that *Political Theory and Global Climate Action* was published as part of the Routledge Focus on Philosophy series. The purpose of this series is to spur discussion on topical issues via short format publications released within three months of

submission. It also aims to present interdisciplinary philosophical research in a digestible format for a wider audience of scholars, researchers, students, professionals and practitioners.

In Chapter 1, Boran reviews the existing literature on theories of climate change justice. She argues that theorists have tended to develop moral theories of climate change in an ‘axiomatic’ way that has been insufficiently attentive to transformations occurring in climate governance and to the activity of actors other than national governments.

In Chapter 2, Boran summarises the increasing activity of nonstate actors, their increasing engagement with the UN-led multilateral process, and how that participation can transform the landscape of climate change governance. She argues that we not only need a better empirical understanding of the global ‘public life’ of climate change but also a critical political theory that is sensitive to changing practices, focused on actors and not principles, and she explores historically-contingent conditions of possibility.

In Chapter 3, Boran develops a conception of the global public life of climate action by examining three approaches to the public sphere: liberal, republican and Habermasian. She argues that liberal theory is valuable because it shows us ‘the value of enabling environments for innovation and experimentation, and with it concepts of facilitative, inclusive public space for transformation’ (p. 50). From the republican view she takes the importance of shared goal setting by means of public dialogue. Finally, a key element of public spheres for Boran is their ability to transform accepted norms. Boran argues that nonstate actors’ participation in climate action has the potential to create momentum, send important signals, enhance visibility and create new public expectations and norms. Even so, Boran notes that public spheres can create forms of domination and exclusion.

In Chapter 4, Boran reflects on the issues of justice and equity specific to the global climate public sphere. She notes that governance researchers disagree whether nonstate actors are effective at producing both transformative and equitable action. On the one hand, ‘greater engagement of nonstate actors has empowering effects on actors that once had little to no visibility’ (p. 65). For example, the importance of cities in low-carbon transformation is now recognised. On the other hand, scholars find that increased activity in the public sphere may reinforce the marginalisation or exclusion of the voices or needs of developing-country actors.

The greatest strength of *Political Theory and Global Climate Action* is that it breaks new ground in the political theorising of climate change. It is one of the first political theories specifically developed for the evolving post-Paris governance architecture. Furthermore, I think Boran is right that normative theorists of climate change have sometimes been

insensitive to the actual political realities that can serve as both severe feasibility constraints, but also, as Boran emphasises, open transformational possibilities as well.

Boran's work should appeal to its wider intended audience because it is both topical and accessible. Because of its format, however, it reads like the start of a research project rather than its culmination. The chapters are short, and some key aspects are underdeveloped. Boran puts a lot of stock in the potential of the global climate public sphere but does not engage with the broader literature on the public sphere or social transformation. Are there examples of other situations where activity in the public sphere has led to social transformations of the scale with which Boran is concerned? And while Boran has pointed out some normative issues internal to public sphere, is there any reason to think such activity will not only be able to catalyse transformation but also ensure that what results might conform at least approximately to some principles of climate change justice?

Political Theory and Global Climate Action can be read as a call to other scholars to join in the project of providing deeper conceptual, normative and empirical support to what is already happening in the global climate public sphere. Boran has opened up crucially important new research directions that I hope she and other scholars will pursue.

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