

Book Review: What's Wrong with Climate Politics and How to Fix It

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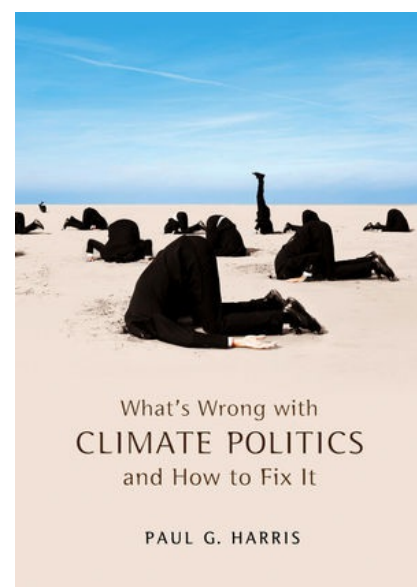
*Paul G. Harris prescribes several remedies for the failed politics of climate change, including a new kind of climate diplomacy with people at its centre, national policies that put the common but differentiated responsibilities of individuals alongside those of nations, and a campaign for simultaneously enhancing human wellbeing and environmental sustainability. Ultimately, Harris's book offers some very sensible reasons for reducing consumption amongst the most wealthy, but the book repeats the same mistakes of the majority of texts arguing for changes in patterns of consumption, writes **Christopher Shaw**.*



What's Wrong with Climate Politics and How to Fix It. Paul Harris. Polity. June 2013.

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In this analysis of our dysfunctional climate politics, [Paul Harris](#) identifies three barriers to reducing greenhouse gas emissions: self interest of nation states in general, the self interest of US and China in particular, and the self interested behaviour of individuals. For a student or interested citizen wishing to delve deeper into some of the issues behind the current climate policy impasse, this well researched book offers an accessible and engaging read. However, the book does not quite live up to the promise of telling us how to fix it. This is because Harris draws heavily upon a pre-existing stock of ideas which have already failed. In presenting these ideas as the limit of the possible, Harris' book risks doing as much to entrench the problem as solve it.



The problem of climate politics, according to Harris, is that atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases are continuing to rise, twenty five years after climate change first appeared on the political agenda. The cause of this problem is diagnosed as self interest – the self interest of nation states in general, the self interest of the US and China in particular, and the self-interest of individuals, chasing happiness through consumption. The solution offered by Harris is a people-centred politics. A large part of the book is concerned with running through the numbers of rising emissions – where the emissions are coming from, and the historical trends in the distribution of greenhouse gas emissions, from developed nations in the 20th century to the rising powers of China and India in the 21st century. In this review I will discuss what Harris sees as the problem of excessive consumption (Chapter 4), and the remedy for this (Chapter 7). In doing so I draw on the relationship between the state and the individual, which Harris returns to throughout the book.



Chapter 4 details the evidence to show that consumerism can never provide truly lasting happiness; indeed, is the root of much unhappiness. Despite this, the virus of affluenza is spreading, and threatens climatic doom for humanity. It is not always clear how much agency, and hence blame, Harris lays at the foot of the individual for this malaise. At one point Harris argues that individuals should be at the centre of climate policy, in part because it is individuals who cause climate change. This is pretty much the same as arguing it is ordinary foot soldiers who cause war. Elsewhere Harris suggests a more structural reason for the failure of climate politics, and argues that the value system underpinning modern capitalism must be replaced with a less materialistic culture. To do this, individuals must accept sustainable levels of consumption.

In Chapter 7 Harris outlines the ideas which might guide humanity to this promised land. Not unreasonably he contends the rich must consume less, so the poor can consume more. Harris suggests in order to bring about this change in attitudes to consumption it will be necessary to encourage particular sections of society (for example the young) that true happiness cannot be found in constant consumption. To do so, messages ought not identify such changes as sacrifices, but should instead focus on highlighting the benefits of these changes. Governments should no longer encourage consumption, and should instead treat excessive consumption as socially taboo. The people have a role in this change, 'because the choices and behaviours of individuals can determine how the distribution of power and resources shape the world around us'. This is all standard fare, which has dominated left of centre liberal discourses on climate change for over a decade.

One cannot fault Harris's definition of excessive consumption as a hollow and futile means of achieving fulfilment, nor its role in driving atmospheric concentrations skyward at a record speed. But this is old news. Perhaps it is because Harris frames climate change as a tragedy rather than a crime that he is willing to distribute the blame. However, if he had understood the harm being caused by climate change as a crime, he may have been moved to ask much more difficult questions, such as, what sort of climate politics is possible in societies where the state draws on a wide range of surveillance techniques to monitor, infiltrate and undermine the activities of civil organisations which seek to promote the very lifestyle changes Harris sees as the solution? Harris makes clear the solutions he offers are only partial, but given the well established literature on the role of the media in shaping people's understanding of climate change, his failure to include the media as a part of the problem is particularly difficult to explain. If Harris is concerned to see an end to unsustainable consumption, the corporate media should be firmly in his sights. In fact, it may well be that we have to accept that climate politics isn't broken, that the intention all along is to overcome any crisis of legitimacy, by simply giving the appearance of doing something while waiting for a geo-engineering fix which leaves the neo-liberal project intact, whilst brushing the emissions under the carpet.

Ultimately, Harris's book offers some very sensible reasons for reducing consumption amongst the most wealthy. Unfortunately, in making the assumption that simply proposing good ideas is enough for change to happen, the book repeats the same mistakes of the majority of texts arguing for changes in patterns of consumption. The dearth of ideas is not our problem. The combined efforts of state, corporate and media actors in promoting unfulfilling and unsustainable consumption is the problem of climate politics, and it is misguided to think this power will simply dissolve away in the presence of some good ideas.

Christopher Shaw returned to academia as a mature student and in 2011 was awarded his DPhil by the School of Law, Politics and Sociology at the University of Sussex. He currently works as a Research Assistant for the *Climate Crunch* project, based at the Environmental Change Institute, University of Oxford. Christopher also works as Research Fellow on the *Climate change as a complex social problem* programme at the University of Nottingham and is a Visiting Fellow at Science and Technology Policy Research (SPRU), University of Sussex. [Read more reviews by Chris](#).