Book Review: Institutionalizing Unsustainability: The Paradox of Global Climate Governance by Hayley Stevenson

Climate change is a global phenomenon that requires a global response, and yet climate-change governance depends on the ability of individual states to respond to a long-term, uncertain threat. Focusing on the experiences of India, Spain, and Australia, **Hayley Stevenson** *aims to show how these countries have struggled to integrate global norms around climate-change governance with their own deeply unsustainable domestic systems, leading to profoundly irrational ecological outcomes. Reviewed by* **Tim Forsyth**.

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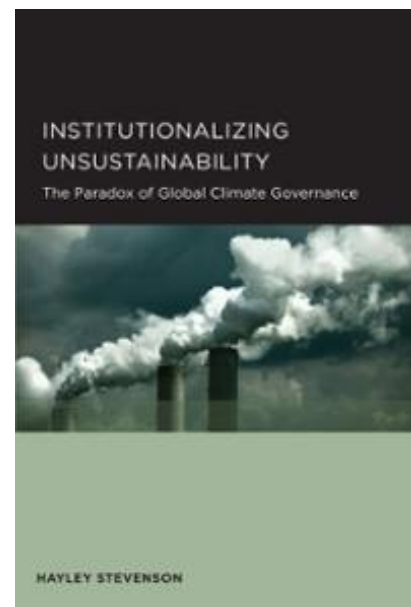
[Hayley Stevenson](#) is a lecturer at the Department of International Relations at Sheffield University. *Institutionalizing Unsustainability* seeks to advance debates about climate change policy in two ways. First, it seeks to question the appropriateness of a policy framework that requires countries (and their citizens) to achieve progress through largely technical and remote activities such as garnering carbon credits or investments overseas. Second, it proposes a largely Habermasian framework to understand the specific contexts of how climate change policies have developed within the three indicator countries of Australia, India, and Spain. Together, these analyses represent a strong contribution towards a non-positivist or interpretivist comparative politics of climate change policy, and a criticism of climate change policy based on 'global' norms of rationality.

At the heart of Stevenson's argument is what she calls the paradox of global climate governance. The paradox is that 'although successful global action to avoid climate change depends on states complying with international agreements, the present system induces states to comply with global norms in ways that actually exacerbate unsustainable development' (p.4). This paradox has occurred at the same time as a shift in international negotiations from historic emissions to future emissions, and from domestic mitigation to transnational mitigation. Simultaneously, the policy instruments designed to address climate change tend to focus only upon technical interpretations of quantities of greenhouse gases, rather than the social purposes these serve, or the differences in greenhouse gas sources. Hence, 'by inducing wealthy states to offset their ecologically insensitive policies, practices, and systems in distant, poorer states, global climate governance is institutionalizing unsustainability' (p.x).

These points, of course, are well known to scholars who have been skeptical of the Kyoto Protocol's so-called flexible mechanisms. These mechanisms have allowed countries to achieve some of their emissions targets by engaging in cap-and-trade schemes, or climate-friendly investment in foreign countries. Stevenson states these points boldly, but adds to the debate by focusing on how these technical approaches to climate change policy evolved globally. She then analyzes how different countries have (or, more accurately, have not) adopted what these policies were supposed to achieve.

Stevenson adopts an interpretivist and historicist approach, which asserts that 'the social world is constituted by "webs of

meaning" that vary across time and space' (p.6), and which aims to uncover the beliefs or meanings that make practices possible. A key focus of this approach is to identify how global climate norms have emerged within the climate change negotiations and then diffused to national contexts. This analysis owes a lot to theories of deliberation, where Stevenson argues 'ecologically irrational reasoning processes' (p.16) create 'remoteness' (p.13) between the local discussions and perceived needs for climate governance and the technical and spatially distant outcomes such as emissions offsetting and carbon credits.

To illustrate this argument, the book first provides an historical account of how current norms of global climate governance emerged within international negotiations. This section reviews how crucial moments of framing emerged at specific moments, such as the discourse of 'common but differentiated responsibilities' (p.29) and the unequal national targets of Kyoto (pp33-34). As a result, 'the international community has constructed a climate change regime that obscures the underlying drivers of excessive emissions' (p.39).

Stevenson then proposes a theoretical response to this regime's technical rationality by using constructivism and green political theory, often citing the writings of feminist ecologist Val Plumwood. This approach challenges dominant rational, (neo)-realist, and neo-liberal approaches within International Relations (pp40-52). Crucially, she argues that the norms of supposedly fast and cheap mitigation under Kyoto have been 'deeply institutionalized through the process of domestic congruence building… in liberal democratic political institutions, and policy paradigms oriented towards such goals as infinite economic growth and maximizing international competitiveness' (p.60).

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book's empirical chapters then demonstrate how global norms have achieved local congruence in Australia, India, and Spain. These chapters follow the same structures of detailing each country's economy, social structures, and politics, and then the history of climate change policy. Australia is studied as an energy exporter. It oscillated between a lax Kyoto target in 1997 and suddenly stronger targets in 2008, demonstrating that domestic politics and institutions have more influence over policy than Australia's predefined status as an energy exporter (p.106). India's case presents various tensions. On one hand, Indian climate negotiators have emphasized how current anthropocentric climate change is not the result of India's historic emissions, yet it has actively adopted investment via the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) – another Kyoto offsetting mechanism (p.147). Meanwhile, national policy has failed to acknowledge the immense inequality of fossil-fuel use within India itself (p.152). Spain is a net importer of energy, yet it has also engaged strongly with the CDM as an investor, especially in Latin American countries (p.197), rather than integrating climate change policy sufficiently into domestic policy.

As a conclusion, Stevenson argues that global climate governance has been weakened because supposedly rational and technical solutions have only ended up institutionalizing unsustainable practices. Rather than norms being developed in

places, and among people, where they will have meaning and acceptance, climate change policies have been developed by 'state elites and bureaucrats' (p.214) with a tendency to avoid responsibility.

Stevenson's book contributes strongly to a sociological analysis of why climate change policies seem remote from the countries and societies that need to take action. It relies somewhat heavily on a model of norms and deliberation that jumps over some other debates about what constitutes risk, sustainability, and political action. For example, there is little discussio about how climate risk is experienced in varying ways, or about which specific networks of institutions and actors legitimized Kyoto's market-based mechanisms, and how. But this is a rich and informative book that advances the growing debate about comparative global environmental politics, and the need to understand local contexts within climate change policy. It deserves to be read widely by students and scholars of International Relations and global environmental policy.

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Prof Tim Forsyth has worked at the LSE since 2000. He is a specialist on the political aspects of environment and development, and works especially on the interface of local and global environmental policy. He has also worked on these themes at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Institute of Development Studies, Sussex, and at Chatham House, London. He is the author of *Critical Political Ecology: the politics of environmental science* (Routledge, 2003), and *International Investment and Climate Change: energy technologies and developing countries* (Earthscan, 1999) He was also a co-author of the chapter on climate change in the 2005 Millennium Ecosystem Assessment. Read more reviews by Tim.