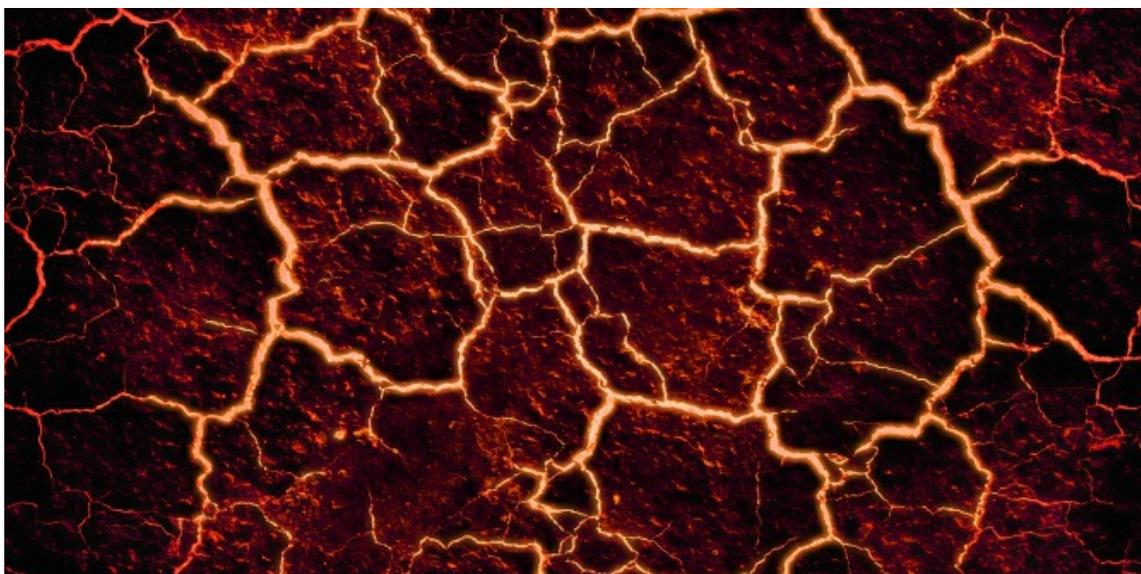


Heat, Greed and Human Need: Climate Change, Capitalism and Sustainable Wellbeing – Book Review



***Heat, Greed and Human Need: Climate Change, Capitalism and Sustainable Wellbeing.* Ian Gough. Edward Elgar. 2017.**

Find this book: 

The three terms in the title 'Heat, Greed and Human Need' reveal the main elements of the argument in this book. *Heat* refers to how climate change is threatening the limits of our planet. *Human need* is presented in terms of a universalist theoretical framework of basic human needs. *Greed* refers to capitalism, processes of accumulation and growth and the inequality these produce. This book is particularly valuable in the way it explains how these phenomena are interlinked. While it is widespread knowledge that climate change threatens human wellbeing across the globe and that capitalism shapes our mindsets, this book offers deep insight into how these processes work together.

Based on author Ian Gough's longstanding expertise in the study of social policy, he convincingly argues that the field has ignored the environment and the planetary limits within which the pursuit of human needs and wellbeing necessarily take place. In contrast, this book places climate change at the centre of discussions of the social dimensions of wellbeing. The argument is that climate change is global, long-term, persistent and cumulative. It not only confronts social policy with a qualitatively new agenda, but it will also make the pursuit of economic and social needs and rights more difficult.

The book is divided into two parts. The first covers conceptual and global issues, while the second concentrates on the rich world of the Global North. The two parts are connected by the argument that climate change is *the* global threat posing existential danger which is difficult to coordinate globally, but the affluent North has special responsibilities towards the planet and the peoples of the Global South. In brief, this responsibility is defined as decarbonising its production and consumption practices and funding mitigation and adaptation programmes in the South. However, climate policy alone could be unjust and inequitable, and it must therefore be combined with the pursuit of sustainable wellbeing for all living populations as well as for future generations.



The *universalist theory of human needs* provides the book's normative framework. This draws on [an earlier work](#) by Gough conducted with Len Doyal in 1991. The essential premise is that all individuals around the world have certain basic common needs, which must be met so as to avoid harm, to participate in society and to reflect critically. Gough argues that human needs can be identified on a universal scale. Needs are objective, plural, non-substitutable, satiable, cross-generational and they have a sound ethical grounding that preferences do not. Human needs should be given priority over preferences as they imply ethical obligations on individuals and claims of justice on social institutions. This way of defining universal needs makes it, according to Gough, possible to plan for and measure progress towards social and environmental goals. Even though needs might be defined universally, they are satisfied in different ways both across cultures and time. To solve this theoretically, Gough introduces a form of procedural rationality as a way of identifying need satisfiers, which are adapted to particular social settings. In practice, however, it is problematic to identify needs in a complex world faced with the uncertainties of accelerating climate change.

While this theory presents a normative standard for evaluating the social dimensions of climate change, Gough also develops a descriptive and analytical framework he calls an *eco-social political economy*. This is a multidisciplinary theoretical framework, which brings together the economy, ecology, social and political domains. The framework is useful to analyse how the global capitalist economy is a subsystem of human society, which in turn is a subsystem of the totality of life on earth. It not only captures how a capitalist economy is dependent on the reproduction of nature and human need; it is also a critique of how neo-classical economics have been the dominant paradigm framing analyses of the economy over the last four decades.

By applying a combination of normative and analytical frameworks to empirical cases, Gough maps some of the likely impacts of climate change in the rich welfare states of the North. Gough concludes by suggesting a transitional path in three stages from the present focus on green growth to a future of equitable and sustainable wellbeing. These three logically distinct, but not mutually exclusive, approaches to meeting climate change are: raising eco-efficient production within a green growth framework (though Gough views this as inadequate); recomposing consumption (again, still insufficient as it builds on economic growth); and more idealistic arguments for de-growth, where consumption demand is reduced in rich nations. In summary, the affluent countries in the North are criticised for not acting responsibly as the way they follow the strategy of green growth will not be enough. This strategy is designed to achieve long-term economic growth through environmental protection and carbon mitigation, which cannot eliminate poverty without destroying the planet. According to Gough, this leads to inequalities in income, consumption and emissions. A distributive dimension is therefore essential to implement sustainable production and consumption.

As Gough himself remarks, this suggestion is an optimistic view of how such a transition will work out in the future. Unfortunately, there are many reasons to be more pessimistic. However, both the normative standard inherent in the theory on human need and the analytical framework applied to understand the eco-social political economy are important to reveal and criticise how the current global capitalist economy – particularly in the affluent North – leads to both heat and human greed.



Notes:

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