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Book Review: Climate Change Policy in the European Union: Confronting the Dilemmas of Mitigation and Adaptation?

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Since the latter part of the twentieth century, the subject of climate change has been on the agenda of governing bodies from supranational bodies such as the United Nations and the European Union to grassroots groups at the domestic and local levels worldwide, and in the United States. The issue is polarizing, and has served to widen the ideological gap between the North and the South, the “Developed” and the “Developing,” the “Rich” and the “Poor.”[1] In the book, *Climate Change Policy in the European Union: Confronting the Dilemmas of Mitigation and Adaptation?*, the authors skillfully weave a tapestry of “dilemmas” to bring home the stark and painfully obvious truth that actions to combat climate change are rendered impotent by competing domestic and international political interests.

At the outset, the authors posed a myriad of questions to forecast the main ideas of the text. These questions include:

- What choices have been made during the past 20 or 30 years?
- Who has made them and on what basis?
- How willing and able were governors to confront the associated dilemmas?
- What might policy and governance look like 10 or 20 years from now?

To communicate the problems inherent in policy-making, the authors wrap the discussion of climate change policy in the European Union by using the brilliant literary device of metaphors. This use of vibrant language is effectively used throughout the text to symbolize the complex structure of the EU, and the daunting task of articulating the issues that undergird climate change. The authors employ powerful metaphors such as “Eurosclerosis” (pg. 48), “coxswain,” and “wicked” (pg. 4).

The authors' main objective is to explore and understand the inner workings of the EU. The Introduction to the text at once sets the stage and opens the curtains on a series of acts that foretells the catastrophe of climate change. In the foreword to the text, Anthony Giddens laments, albeit hopefully, the serious threats posed by climate change, and the EU’s attempts at remedies (pg. xi.). This foreboding introduction to the text helps the reader understand the historical struggles the EU faced in its attempt to tackle the divisive topic of climate change while at the same time trying to harmonize the Union by bringing in other countries. This position is in keeping with the suggestions put forward by other scholars in the field of climate change policy and the environment.[2]

The explanations and definitions of terms of art such as “governance vs. government,” and “dilemmas"
assist the novice, and less sophisticated reader to grasp the main argument of the book (i.e. the struggles of the EU to deal with climate change). The authors dispel the romantic narrative of European unity to lay bare the myriad complexities that plague the Union. The “governance without government” motif is woven throughout the text and adequately captures the impotence of the EU as an actor on the global stage to deal with climate change. In fact, the text uses the issue of climate change to reveal the many fissures that threaten to dismantle an already fragile Union.

The European Union has always been at the forefront of climate change policy. In *Climate Change Policy in the European Union*, however, we learn that climate change is an issue that belongs to a particular category of problems described as “wicked.” Wicked problems are defined as those that challenge established social values and institutional frameworks, defy analysis, and have no obvious solutions. The ineffectiveness of the EU in determining climate change policy and the myriad governing groups within the organization would have one believe that it is not only climate change that is a “wicked” issue but also the constitutive European Union and its policy making process. At certain points in the text the authors appear to communicate a longing for a United States style of federalism. The authors lament at the “lack of a coherent core executive” in the EU compared to that of the United States (pg. 41).

The authors introduce us to the structure of policy creation and the different methods typically employed by the European Union to determine policy. The book notes that the European Union has always had lofty goals when it comes to climate change but has, throughout the years, found it difficult to implement these goals because they lack the necessary power (Chapter 1). This dilemma, according to the authors is one of “timing and sequencing,” which is best understood when juxtaposed with the reality of physical separation of the various powers within the EU (page 41).

Climate change policy is unique in this bloc of countries because, while these countries have been effective in speaking with one voice about climate change, the EU has found it very difficult to implement anything because it cannot enforce its policies. The lack of taxation power and centralized governing system means, according to the authors, that most of the EU climate change policy proposals are just “lip service” to the world. It is also worthy to note that while much of what the EU does on climate change is “lip service” they are still the leaders in climate change policy and have employed a variety of methods to alleviate the human impact on the planet.(Chapter 2).

The book examines the haste in which many policies have been created, often in reaction to current issues. It shows how this process of patch-fixing climate policy is fraught with difficulties and inefficiencies but also notes that the essential structure of the EU creates this situation where established policy cannot simply be done away with but has to be fixed before a new and more effective policy can be created (Chapter 3).

The authors note that one of the main issues with climate change policy in the EU is that no one has properly examined the issue and defined the problem. While the general concern is the impact of everyday life on the environment, this issue has not been scaled or perhaps cannot be defined and
narrowed into a problem that has parameters within which one could possibly find a solution. This broad definition or non-definition of the issue has hindered the EU from properly tackling a solution. Burden sharing, however, remains one of the most popular methods of addressing climate change in the European Union.

Chapter 2 of the text weaves a parade of “horribles” by exposing the subsidiarity principle as a medusa-like monster. This chapter also indicts the law making process as frozen in the face of politics and enforcement. This pronouncement on the law is in stark contrast to the salutatory articulation of EU legislation on the environment articulated in other texts.[3] The image of Brussels is captured as a “bureaucratic machine extending its tentacles ever deeper into national affairs”(pg. 40).

The authors also address the issue of burden sharing, which has been the EU’s method of addressing climate change. They note that the concept of burden sharing has been given a negative connotation and in an effort to make it seem more user-friendly to nation states it has been renamed effort sharing. Burden sharing is the process by which the EU allocates the allowable greenhouse gas emissions to its member countries. If a country goes over its limit it can buy a credit from another country or pay a fine (Chapters 4 &5).

While burden sharing has always been embedded in EU climate change policy the actual articulation of a policy by that name was not done until the 1990s. The authors claim that burden sharing is ineffective because the quotas are well below what is actually needed to be effective.

Although some change has occurred in EU climate policy, improvements in the implementation and enforcement powers have not developed in tandem. The authors claim that the reason for the lack of progress in implementation and enforcement powers is that emission reduction goals have been met. The EU’s tendency for setting targets at undemanding levels means that member states will always beat their expectations and it will always seem that Europe is a world leader in climate change policy when in fact they are doing as little as any other developed country in the world. (Chapters 9 &10).

The text is divided into four sections. The organization of the text is a dream for students or any scholar interested in further research on the topic. The text is structurally written in that each chapter introduces the issues with a clear thesis, and takes the reader through the analysis to a clear conclusion, with a comprehensive reference section at the end of each section of the book. The references appear to be in direct support of the themes set forth in the introduction and the first chapter of the text.

Academics, students and scholars interested in Climate Change Policy in the European Union will be best served to read this book with one that provides an explanation of the EU’s supranational legislative powers.[4] By way of criticism, this book focused on policy creation and how it is done but offered very little in the way of new solutions. In a way, it addresses all the problems that the EU has in creating and implementing climate change policy but did not provide solutions to the main questions asked in the beginning. Perhaps the authors believed that addressing all the issues would create a framework by which to guide readers in how to be effective in creating climate change policy in the EU. If this is the intent of the text, then the authors have succeeded admirably. The lack of answers posed by the overarching
questions is understandable if the reader properly positions this book as a critical comment on the effectiveness of supranational legislation when it comes to the environment.


