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Review of Brian J. Gareau, *From Precaution to Profit: Contemporary Challenges to Environmental Protection in the Montreal Protocol*

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Disciplines

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Comments

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Book Reviews

Brian J. Gareau. 2013. *From Precaution to Profit: Contemporary Challenges to Environmental Protection in the Montreal Protocol*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. 362 pages, ISBN 978-0300175264 Cloth (\$55.00).

Since the disastrous 2009 Copenhagen climate talks, global climate governance has roiled in crisis. Michael Grubb, a long-time influential advocate for a binding global climate treaty, has warned that the world could enter its “darkest hour” (Grubb 2011). Other scholars now argue that small clusters of countries should negotiate treaties amongst themselves, and expand their clubs over time (Victor 2011). Some have even suggested a “G-2” solution decided by the United States and China alone. On the left, climate justice and “system change” activists are more likely to reject talk of any carbon-trading settlement altogether, despite the occasional radical defense of a global cap-and-trade scheme (Hahnel 2012). Still, a universal treaty remains on the global agenda. And the Montreal Protocol is the precedent most often cited as a uniquely effective example of global environmental governance, thanks to the steep reductions in ozone depleting substances it has achieved since entering into force in 1989.

Yet as Brian J. Gareau shows in *From Precaution to Profit: Contemporary Challenges in the Montreal Protocol*, this ostensible success story is misunderstood, with important implications for global climate politics. Gareau argues, first, that the role of consensus science in the Protocol’s inception has been greatly overstated; second, that the treaty’s real successes are largely explained by a pre-neoliberal, precautionary political context that no longer prevails; third, that under neoliberalizing conditions, U.S. intransigence, and a newly challenging technological setting, the Protocol’s effectiveness has dwindled; and finally, that global civil society (including public science) so far lacks the tools to compel nation states to do better. Gareau musters impressive ethnographic and historical research, supplemented with careful readings of new radical geography, environmental sociology, Bourdieusian theories of social capital, and Foucauldian literatures on power/knowledge and governmentality. And his presentation is clear and cogent even as it navigates the proverbial alphabet soup and dull bureaucratic procedures of treaty governance. In terms of sweeping global developments, he narrates the extraordinary capacity of California’s commercial strawberry industry to enlist the United States government’s assistance in hijacking a vital environmental treaty, this despite “the rather inconsequential role that strawberries play in society” (Gareau 2013, p. 149). Readers of this journal may not be stunned to read about the ability of powerful corporations and the U.S. government to bring global environmental institutions and poorer countries’ aspirations to heel (see Park and Roberts 2007). But they will learn much about the concrete mechanisms whereby global inequalities are translated into legal victories for some core countries on the negotiating floor.

From Precaution to Profit is divided in two. The first section argues that over the course of the 1990s, global environmental governance neoliberalized, with devastating implications for governments’ ability – and willingness – to resolve the contradiction between markets and environment in the latter’s favor. The second explores in ethnographic depth the controversy over methyl bromide (MeBr), a toxic chemical gas used to pre-sterilize tomato and (most importantly) strawberry fields to prevent infestation by pests. MeBr, whose continued use the

American “polluter-industrial complex” has vehemently insisted on, also happens to be a significant ozone-depleting substance, and the most important target of regulation through the Montreal Protocol, now that it is successfully drawing down use of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs).

Gareau’s book builds on a growing new literature showing that in the Montreal Protocol’s initial 1980s negotiation, the role of science was more mixed than the protocol’s champions – and climate science boosters – typically recognize. Research on ozone-depleting substances then was far less conclusive than research on anthropogenic climate change today. On the other hand, at that time replacing CFCs with alternative substances actually offered the world’s major chemical companies the prospects of significant profits. These companies had not yet worked out precise replacements, but they reasonably expected that slightly costlier solutions would allow them to squeeze smaller competitors out of the market. The problem for Gareau is that this economic argument undermines his second claim for the Montreal Protocol’s early success, namely that a “general interest” mood of precaution prevailed over neoliberal market logic in the 1980s. If the economic ramifications of regulation were not especially frightening, perhaps the discourse about prevention, and the willingness to use “command and control” regulatory methods, was just rhetorical residue from the 1970s. Gareau alludes to U.S.-based civil society pressure as a key force in the late 1980s, with reference to others’ scholarship. More detail is needed here. Other accounts of the shifting terrain of environmental governance in the 1980s suggest that a pro-market shift was already well underway at that time, particularly in the U.S., with business-friendly NGOs like the Environmental Defense Fund taking full advantage (see Meckling 2011, Oreskes and Conway 2010, Pooley 2011). Had Gareau briefly compared the politics surrounding the agreement of the Montreal Protocol with other high-profile environmental struggles of the time, he might have made his periodization more persuasive.

In any case, Gareau’s definition of neoliberalization, which draws on radical geography arguments about its processual and uneven character, powerfully illuminates two key dimensions of the 2000s’ MeBr controversy, where the United States insisted on special exemptions for California strawberry growers, thus undermining the phase-out of MeBr across the globe. The first is the hypocrisy of Northern governments, which, while promoting trade liberalization in general, nonetheless engaged in protectionism for favored industries. In the many meetings of the Montreal Protocol that Gareau attended, the United States refused to engage in debates about the overall global economic implications of the phase-out, instead insisting, in a marked shift from the tenor of earlier negotiations within the Protocol, that no regulation should impose costs on any *particular* industry. The second, linked dimension pertains to the role of scientific knowledge in governance and the ability of NGOs to meaningfully contest core countries’ claims on behalf of a general, global interest. In the 1980s and 1990s, global public science offered the only legitimate grounds for negotiating reductions in ozone-depleting substances. But once the MeBr controversy erupted, American negotiators insisted on the particular, private knowledge produced (or funded) by California growers. Gareau argues that neoliberalization was as much about the United States defending its favored science as defending any particular industry. When NGOs would appeal to the United States, EU, and other countries to resist this agenda, however, they usually had no effect. This leads Gareau, leaning on Bourdieu, to theorize that powerful actors were vertically penetrating the Protocol’s seemingly horizontal social networks. And in what Gareau reads as Foucauldian processes of power/knowledge and governmentality, the United States in particular was able to use its leverage to compel poorer countries to submit to the U.S.’s protectionist agenda, all while legitimizing its actions by clouding the scientific debate, and by compelling NGOs to adopt neoliberal discourses about avoiding “market

disruptions.” But if the United States is the clear villain in this story, the European Union (EU) plays a more ambivalent, even positive role. It remains unclear to what degree this reflects a fundamentally different approach to reconciling economic and ecological imperatives.

On the whole, Gareau’s claims are persuasive and amply supported by his research. Their implications, unfortunately, are daunting. He ends on an ambivalent note, suggesting that a MeBr phase-out may well end up occurring because of very recent technological progress and expanded organic growing practices. Yet he insists that the controversies of the 2000s demonstrate a distressing neoliberal turn and the worrying fragility of the best global green treaty on offer. What is to be done? Gareau makes vague arguments about the need for greater civil society mobilization, especially in the U.S., and he argues that the relationship between science, civil society, and policy-makers needs to be re-aligned in favor of a precautionary approach. Is this enough to get the Montreal Protocol back on track? And even if so, does what worked for ozone politics in the 1980s really provide a helpful analog for contemporary climate politics? With climate change, actually implementing a “precautionary” approach likely means long-term, economy-wide planning. But the historical reference for such interventionist U.S. government planning extends much further back than the 1980s, to the New Deal and its immediate aftermath, and to the militant labor movements that fought for that era’s decommodifying welfare policies. Clearly, the context has changed. And is a global climate treaty the right goal? *From Precaution to Profit* makes it clear that nation-states are the decisive actors, and that global institutions have limited power to coerce the most powerful national governments. Gareau has helpfully specified the ways that neoliberalization is undermining global environmental governance. But it will fall to other scholars and activists to apply its lessons in work on what sorts of leverage particular civil society actors already have, and the sorts of leverage they will need to build, to keep the profit imperative from devastating efforts to slow climate change.

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