

**The Paris Agreement
Climate Change, Solidarity, and Human Rights**

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The Paris Agreement: Climate Change, Solidarity, and Human Rights

By Judith Blau

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Reviewer: Alexander M. Stoner, *Northern Michigan University*

This book attempts to address the pressing question of we might meaningfully address the myriad challenges posed by global climate change (GCC hereafter). Blau's central thesis is that because climate is "collectively and globally shared," the only way to solve the problem is "through acting in solidarity" (7). In contrast to the cutthroat individualism characteristic of American values, Blau emphasizes the importance of recognizing the environment as part of a "collective commons." Focusing on the Paris Agreement as the most ambitious international effort to address GCC to date, this short book offers a succinct, readable overview of GCC and the framework of international human and environmental rights. The book is organized into ten short chapters (10-12 pp. each), though a quarter of this material (approximately 25 pp.) consists of "information boxes"—typically presented in bulleted lists (e.g., impacts and indicators of GCC).¹ As such, *The Paris Agreement* may be more appealing to an advanced undergraduate readership, perhaps as a supplementary text for environmental sociology, political sociology, and/or social movements courses.

Problems and contradictions notwithstanding, Blau contends that globalization increases our awareness of universal human equality and difference, thereby strengthening social solidarity and paving the way for transnational cooperation to combat climate change. In chapter one and chapter ten Blau further elaborates the importance of social solidarity as the foundation for effective transnational climate mitigation strategies. After summarizing international environmental governance since 1979 (chapter three), Blau turns to America's role as a leading greenhouse gas emitter. Chapter five, in particular, provides a substantive discussion of the paradox of American exceptionalism—"that what binds Americans together (as exceptionalists) are the very values that pull us apart (individualism)" (45). For Blau, the paradox of American exceptionalism explains why GCC denialism is so prevalent among Americans (more so than any other country). American exceptionalism also needs to be taken into account when confronting the nation's GCC policy lacuna. The remainder of the book provides an overview of environmental rights, emphasizing the importance of recognizing the environment as part of a "collective commons."

Blau's emphasis on the importance of social solidarity in relation to GCC mitigation is important. Unfortunately, the author's high expectations for meeting the Paris Agreement's goal of holding global warming below 2 degrees Celsius appears dated from the vantage point of the present (less than a year after the book's publication). This is especially so in light of the UN's Emissions Gap Report 2017, which assessed the current national mitigation efforts that comprise the Paris Agreement. The authors of the report conclude that the gap between current carbon cutting pledges and reductions required is "alarmingly high." The report also warns that if the U.S. follows through on its promise to leave the Paris pact, then "the picture will become

¹ Excepting roughly 19.5 pp. of notes, references and index, the book is about 100 pp. in toto.

bleaker.” To be sure, these findings were not disseminated until after the publication of Blau’s book.

At the same time, however, one must recognize critically the pace of GCC, which continues to advance at an increasingly rapid pace—often more rapidly than societal, institutional, and/or individual responses to them can be formed. What makes *The Paris Agreement* less pertinent in this regard is the author’s inattention to the economic imperative of capitalist production and the force this imperative exerts on all aspects of modern social relations (Dahms 2018). For Blau, the ideal and norms and values of social solidarity automatically facilitate international cooperation on GCC—as if material power (economic domination) and the normative aspects of social action (cooperation and solidarity) comprise two mutually exclusive dimensions of social life, which they do not. American social institutions have long since adapted to capital’s environmentally-destructive “growth imperative,” modifying the personality structure accordingly. Blau’s discussion of American exceptionalism indicates that the majority of Americans have identities that would resist the prospect of social solidarity with all means available. Yet, when it comes to justifying the ideal and norms and values of social solidarity, the author takes a different route: “We are justifiably proud to be Americans and that is compatible with being good global citizens – just as long as we recognize that capitalism and values that accompany capitalism need to comply with good global citizenship and global cooperation” (109). Blau’s statement is problematic, since it is not at all clear how such (*mis*)recognition might lead to cooperation and solidarity. (I say misrecognition because the values that accompany capitalism arguably do not comply with the values of global cooperation). Blau takes the fusion of capital and social relations for granted and, in doing so, is unable to grasp the actual workings of power and domination as key impediments to social solidarity.

This failure is evident in Blau’s abstract portrayal of the function and role of constitutions and their connection to environmental law (79). The contradiction that apparently evades Blau is that the discourse of solidarity and mutual recognition embodied in environmental legislations of many countries exist within a matrix of social forces premised on limitless growth, which in turn greatly inhibits transnational cooperation. As I alluded to above, Blau tacitly assumes the mutual compatibility of economic growth and environmental sustainability. Yet, key indicators suggest that the particular form economic growth takes in advanced capitalist societies is antithetical to social and environmental sustainability. Inattention to power is also evident in the author’s positive appraisal of environmental organizations like the World Wildlife Fund and Greenpeace, which have and continue to be reshaped by the economic imperative of capital. The organizational structure of Greenpeace, for example, has become increasingly bureaucratized in recent years. 98% of Greenpeace’s revenue comes from individual donors, while the organization’s younger, more idealistic “foot soldiers” are tasked primarily with fundraising—typically by using Facebook to increase the number of “likes” for particular environmental campaign issues (Dauvergne 2016). Blau does not question this logic of market environmentalism, which emphasizes the power of the autonomous eco-consumer (*ibid.*), but rather affirms it as the predominant mode of contemporary environmentalism. Moreover, Blau contends that individual solutions such as recycling express social solidarity because they promote the public good (108-109). This is perplexing in light of the book’s overarching concern with social solidarity, since the autonomous eco-consumer is a more likely expression of competitive, individualistic value systems; that is, the *absence* of social solidarity.

The focus on social solidarity is both the book's greatest insight and its greatest failure. It is the book's greatest insight because GCC mitigation strategies must be pursued through international cooperation and solidarity if humanity is to avoid a dystopian future. The book's strongest chapters in this regard are those dealing with the ideational context of American society, especially in relation to Americans' attitudes about GCC and the nation's relative inaction on GCC policy. But the strength of this insight is weakened by the book's failure to consider the ways in which the logic of capital creates structural circumstances that continuously thwart social solidarity. In this sense, *The Paris Agreement* puts the cart before the horse by failing to confront adequately the problems of alienated consciousness and forms of reification, which is a necessary precondition for the cooperative solidarity the author calls for. In short, what is needed is a vision of how the link between social structure and personality structure might be changed so as to create a less destructive—and indeed, more collectively “sane” —relationship with nature and ourselves.

References

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