

The Politics of the Anthropocene, John S. Dryzek and Jonathan Pickering (Oxford University Press, 2019), 224 pp., \$78 cloth, \$26 paper, \$25.99 eBook.

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Foregrounding both justice and environmental integrity, *The Politics of the Anthropocene* offers a vision of how to manage a world in which human activities have extensive, lasting effects on the Earth and its human and nonhuman inhabitants. Setting aside the question of whether we are in the Anthropocene (spoiler: we are), authors Dryzek and Pickering instead outline its unique characteristics and the accompanying implications for global governance that upholds social and planetary justice.

The book envisions new institutions for the new epoch. In doing so, the authors depart from most scholarly work on the Anthropocene and the environment more generally. Many scholars of environmental governance have dissected the designs and efficacy of our current institutions with a view toward improving them—usually arguing for more or better institutions. The Anthropocene, argue Dryzek and Pickering, requires wholly *new* institutions. It is characterized by instabilities and even catastrophic changes in the Earth system. The politics of the Anthropocene, argue the authors, will require similarly dramatic shifts in governance.

The organizing concept of the book is “ecological reflexivity,” which the authors define as a process that brings together the Earth system, humans, and nonhumans to reflect and respond to emerging challenges. Dryzek and Pickering seek to disrupt the “pathological path dependence” of existing institutions by replacing them with ones that will prioritize such reflexivity. They outline how to better listen to the Earth system in order to unite human activities and governance with the

changing environment. Such reflexivity is inherently dynamic, allowing agents to learn, adapt, and even rethink their goals, rather than remain locked into a given set of rules.

The book then explores how ecological reflexivity can safeguard, and indeed improve, justice and sustainability in the Anthropocene. The changes faced in this epoch will exacerbate current justice and sustainability issues and likely create new concerns. Dryzek and Pickering present reflexivity as a bulwark against such dire trends and propose ways to think about the duties that the citizens of one country may have to the citizens of other countries, to future generations, and to nonhumans. While the book avoids a definitional debate over the term “justice,” it does tackle the concept of sustainability and its co-optation by corporations and others that attempt to “greenwash” their practices in an effort to appear sustainable as a way to advance their own brand. Reflexive sustainability as outlined in the book, with its focus on learning from the natural world and grounding discussion in ecological realities, can counter greenwashing and other attempts to appropriate the idea of sustainability. The dynamic nature of reflexive sustainability allows those who practice it to attend to ecological instability while also being inclusive, justice oriented, and farsighted. These are high bars for future institutions, involving balancing dynamism with durability. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, Dryzek and Pickering find current institutions dealing with climate change, biodiversity, and sustainable development to be, at best, partial examples of reflexive governance.

Yet those looking for a how-to manual for building institutions that can realize ecological reflexivity will be disappointed. The book identifies which actors might advance the reflexive politics of the Anthropocene, called “formative agents,” who, as the authors explain, demonstrate how justice and sustainability should work in principle and practice. These include scientists and experts, those most vulnerable to ecological change, cities, nonhumans (through proxies), and norm entrepreneurs, such as social movements or individuals. While the book does not offer a model for how these actors could realize a new form of governance, it does examine a wide repertoire of modes of contention for these agents, including argumentation, rhetoric, and deliberation, as well as less discursive acts, from violence to leading by example. These agents employ this diverse repertoire of actions in what Dryzek and Pickering term the “formative space,” an arena where “the sum of activity encompassing the creation, questioning, and developing of principles for collective action” (p. 128) takes place. Here, they hold out hope that democratic principles could, and should, address ecological crises.

Hopefully the authors’ future work will grapple further with inequalities, particularly related to the formative agents, and how these problems could influence the deliberative politics of the Anthropocene. Many of the formative agents discussed in the book are marginalized from power. While these actors may be able to disrupt pathological path dependence precisely because they are not central to current (global) institutions, this puts a considerable onus on people who already face daily systemic challenges. Dryzek and Pickering acknowledge this dilemma and briefly explore the how to represent vulnerable groups while not diminishing their moral authority, but ultimately the book asks marginalized groups to do more

than their fair share in order to safeguard their—and the planet’s—future.

Inequalities are also evident in the various fault lines within and among formative agents, which could undermine deliberative processes. The categories of formative agents are broad and heterogeneous. Civil society at UN climate conferences fractured ten years ago and has only recently begun finding areas of convergence and cooperation again. Cities of the Global South may have less capacity to engage in reflexivity than their counterparts in the Global North. Some actors may simply be heard more loudly than others, for reasons unrelated to the validity of their claims. For example, traditional ecological knowledge struggles for visibility and validity compared to expensive, Northern-based science. These are deeply political problems that could challenge ecological reflexivity.

These are, however, matters for future studies. The book is persuasive and beautifully written, bringing forth a realistic and optimistic account of how humans can reorganize themselves to better govern in the emerging epoch. It is agenda setting, providing new ideas for progress on a variety of fronts—from the environmental, to the social, to the political—and giving us new ways to think about environmental governance in uncertain, unstable circumstances. Overall it stands as a novel and robust treatment of the Anthropocene and the core issues of global governance. Perhaps most importantly, the book offers hope that human reason and communication with one another and with the Earth system can rise to the challenges of the Anthropocene.

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