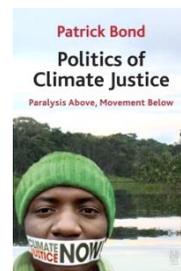


BOOK REVIEW:**POLITICS OF CLIMATE JUSTICE:
PARALYSIS ABOVE, MOVEMENT
BELOW**

PATRICK BOND

Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu
Natal Press, 2012.

ISBN 1869142217, 267 p., paperback



The concept of climate justice has been in wide use since the start of the 2000's. It is heavily influenced by the environmental justice movement which first appeared in 1980's, and the global justice movement, which came into prominence in the late 1990's. The movement began as an effort by several transnational NGO's to bring together concerns about global warming and issues of social inequity; especially those between the so called global North and the global South. The movement regards global warming as fundamentally an issue of justice. Industrialized countries' historical greenhouse emissions are seen as the foremost cause of climate change and as such low income and generally disadvantaged communities are disproportionately affected by the effects of warming through increased exposure to environmental hazards, higher health risks, decreased access to vital resources, social and cultural disruptions and increased financial burdens. The movement's claims are mainly focused on (a) demands for policies to mitigate global warming; (b) appropriate adaptation measures that protect vulnerable communities; (c) wider environmental justice claims that ensure the right to live, work, learn and play in a safe environment; and (d) financial and technical support from rich countries to implement policies to realize these demands. The movement had its highest moment during the COP15 of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) climate summit in Copenhagen where up to 135.000 people marched in support of a comprehensive climate treaty to regulate the aftermath of the Kyoto Protocol, which expires in 2012. This trend in the increased prominence of the movement, at least in discourse, is in direct contrast with the failure of the UN track to formulate an equitable and comprehensive successor to the dramatically inadequate but still legally binding Kyoto Protocol.

Patrick Bond's recent book has exactly this dichotomy in focus. The book is aptly subtitled "Paralysis Above, Movement Below". It offers a very useful overview of the last three years of climate change negotiations, starting with the 15th Conference of Parties (COP15). Written largely from the perspective of the transnational climate justice movement and with a strong Southern focus, it compares the approach of nation state elites negotiating at the international scale and within the UNFCCC to those of the "new movement that best fuses a variety of progressive political-economic and political-ecological currents to combat the most

serious threat to humanity and most other species face in the twenty-first century” (p. 185).

The book adopts a two pronged analysis of the UNFCCC negotiations. The first critique is structural. The current UNFCCC system with its protocols is portrayed as part and parcel of the problem. The commodification of carbon through the so called flexibility mechanisms is in target. Carbon trading is the main culprit here. The expectation, in a nutshell, is that capping the carbon equivalent of total greenhouse gas emissions and setting a price on “pollution permits” would allow markets to self regulate through the supply and demand mechanism. The price of carbon quotas would increase and thus force carbon industries to use greener technologies in production processes. However, even leaving aside issue of self regulation of markets, there were problems from the outset. For example, in the European Emission Trading System, the largest such system in the world, permits were first distributed freely, and they were never that hard to procure cheaply through the use of other flexibility mechanisms such as Clean Development Mechanism. Moreover, the energy sector was kept largely exempt from the EU ETS, considerably lessening the effectiveness of the system. Newer flexibility mechanisms such as the scheme to reduce emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD) keep on pumping more carbon into the system and thus keep the price of carbon credits next to nothing. As a result the EU ETS crashed three times since its inception. Thus it became clear that any system based on commodifying carbon and trying to regulate it through market mechanisms is subject to both inherent market failures and to market manipulation efforts.

The other critique focuses on the issue of agency. Here, the problem is provided as dependence on existing policies at the UNFCCC level. This happens through two distinct mechanisms. The first of those is path dependency. “In other words, the highest-profile leaders are not failing because of their inadequacies [...], but because of their loyal adherence to systemic power and their inability to conceptualise or locate political alliances that break out of the box in which they are confined” (p. 76-77). The other mechanism that influences agency is interest group activity. Powerful interest groups such as the fossil fuel lobby and are pitted against climate justice movement activists. These groups do not only use disinformation campaigns against climate science, but also influence governments to act in alignment with their interests. Bond cites *WikiLeaks* cables that lay bare the US government’s efforts to bribe or financially punish Third World governments as an example (p. 90-93). These two mechanisms then form the basis of the ‘paralysis above’ because elites do not consider any possibility of bottom-up movement towards the objectives of climate justice and consequently persevere with politics of climate capital (p. 77).

By comparison, Bond inserts the concept of ‘climate debt’ at the heart of the climate justice movement. In a nutshell, the climate debt narrative borrows heavily from decolonization literature. The Global North (or rather rich industrialized countries) as ‘the master’ must stop relying on fossil fuels. Moreover, having damaged the climate in the first place, it is the responsibility of these states to shoulder most of the financial burden (p. 142). Although the demands of climate justice activists are by no means uniform, 50% GHG cuts by 2020, 90% GHG cuts by 2050, financial support for poor countries to adapt to the unavoidable effects of climate change and the decommissioning of carbon markets were common grounds before COP15 (p. 186) and have been raised by activists and movement organizations in subsequent COPs. However, it is clear that this perspective is entirely incompatible with that of the climate policy elite, who often openly state that they perceive carbon markets as a new venue for financial gain. The result is a situation in which the global climate policy elite increasingly ignore and try to marginalize these demands and in return are disowned by activists. All in all, international climate change negotiations largely reflect the systemic political shortcomings of its participants (nation states): Politics are heavily skewed to the favor of strong interest groups (mainly industry lobbies) and claims by disadvantaged groups are underrepresented politically. The conclusion is that an equitable result cannot be expected from international climate change negotiations until either these shortcomings are alleviated at the actor level or a transnational movement rises to bypass these national limitations.

However, the transnational climate justice movement is currently too weak to apply sufficient and consistent pressure on national governments, who are in the end, sole decision makers at the UN level. The alternative is to give up on the UNFCCC process altogether and develop an alternative method to combat climate change. Bond seems to adhere to the second alternative and draws from experiences of eco-socialism and eco-feminism to arrive at a set of suggestions for a stronger transnational climate justice movement. The obvious problem with this approach lies in the nature of climate change (or most other environmental issues). It is strictly a global phenomenon and requires a global consensus for effective response. Besides the above mentioned suggestions, Bond’s book fails to offer a direct answer to this conundrum. Yes, the UNFCCC is a ruefully ineffective platform but it is still the only currently available platform to develop an international response to climate change. Hopefully, a much more effective alternative, outside the nation state paradigm, can be conceived in the future. Nevertheless, there is no time to wait for such an alternative to form on its own. Bond’s book is a valuable exposé of the deep seated ineffectiveness and corruption of the UNFCCC system and the book also gives a sense that this failure is actually a symptom of wider, international polity based problems. However, there is very little in the book to actually redress these problems. This is no omission. No readymade measures exist at the global

level. In fact, this fact is voiced by Bond himself in the book and is the main reason behind his suggestions for the future of the movement. Written from a southern and critical perspective, and keeping its limitations in mind, this is a valuable addition to the growing list of books on the post-Copenhagen failure of the UNFCCC system for those looking for a comprehensive list of problems of the UNFCCC track.

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