Where Is the Key? Unlocking Ecological-Political Transformations

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Environmentalism and Global International Society. By Robert Falkner. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 320p. $99.99 cloth.

The Politics of Rights of Nature: Strategies for Building a More Sustainable Future. By Craig M. Kauffman and Pamela L. Martin. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2021. 290p. $35.00 paper.

Ecological Security: Climate Change and the Construction of Security. By Matt McDonald. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 200p. $99.99 cloth.

Collaborative Advantage: Forging Green Industries in the New Global Economy. By Jonas Nahm. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. 256p. $99.00 cloth, $29.95 paper.

As the environmental crisis has intensified, especially regarding climate change and biodiversity loss, we have increasingly recognized that responding adequately requires unprecedented social, economic, technical, and political change. Academic attention across many disciplines has thus turned to questions of what sorts of mechanisms might trigger such changes. We are no longer in a situation where we can satisfy ourselves with simply understanding political processes solely out of curiosity or to test some particular theory of choice: we need to be thinking about how rapid intensive change can be mobilized.

It is in that light that we might approach these four marvelous books. For they all, some more self-consciously than others, have much to teach us about this crucial question about humanity's future. They all in effect give different answers to the question of where the key to these transformations might be found. To be sure, they also help us see that my opening rhetorical question is perhaps misplaced—there is probably more than one key, and indeed multiple keys may be needed in different contexts or combinations.

The Changing Normative Structure of International Society

Robert Falkner's *Environmentalism and Global International Society* is the broadest of these four books, developing a big-sweep analysis of the historical development of norms across international society since the mid-nineteenth century. His overall argument is that since the mid-twentieth century we have seen the emergence and progressive embedding of a norm of "environmental stewardship," to the point that it has become a "primary institution" of international society.

The term "primary institution" indicates the conceptual framing of Falkner's book within the "English School" (ES) approach to International Relations. Indeed, one of Falkner's contributions is not only to have provided the first book-length ES account of Global Environmental Politics (GEP), but to have provided a really good introduction to how the ES theoretical and methodological approach works. As somewhat of an ES sceptic I found myself drawn in by Falkner's meticulous and creative account (chapter 2) of the approach and how it has developed in the last couple of decades, an account that is as good an introduction to the approach as you will find. He shows how ES scholars have considerably developed both the account of the relationship between International System, International Society, and World Society, as well as developing the account of the relationship between "pluralism" (a tendency towards variety in value systems across states that limits possibilities for universalist projects) and "solidarism" (tendencies towards universal rights or values and political projects to institutionalize them). The development of these ideas, and in particular perhaps the fuller account of World Society (the expansion of the roles of non-state actors and the tendency they bring towards solidarism) is particularly useful in helping the ES approaches account for the emergence of and dynamics within GEP in ways that many mainstream approaches in

IR struggle with. It does this through the insistence that International Relations is *both* a society of states *and* an unfolding world social system, and Falkner is thus able to integrate an account of both in his narrative about GEP.

Empirically the book in some ways revisits grounds familiar to many scholars in GEP but does so masterfully. Falkner starts with the emergence of environmentalism—both its key ideas and how it became institutionalized via a range of non-governmental organizations in Europe and North America from the mid-nineteenth century (chapters 3-4). In chapter 4 he provides an analysis of (failed) efforts to create broad international environmental institutions prior to World War I, a process I've not seen addressed before. Chapter 5 then turns to the long process by which the norm of environmental stewardship emerged. He describes this norm thus: "environmental stewardship posits a fundamental responsibility of the state, and of international society, to protect the natural environment" (p. 76). This definition is deliberately vague, in part because such primary institutions in international politics are themselves vague, but also because environmentalists themselves disagree considerably as to what such a norm should be. We might say that his choice of the term "stewardship" privileges certain sorts of Christian environmentalism where stewardship is the term of choice, although he doesn't discuss this explicitly.

Attempts to develop international environmental institutions were revived after World War II, particularly through the creation in 1948 of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), an interesting hybrid INGO driven by (Western) scientists but without any formal governance remit. This weak institutionalization of environmental ideas was both because it was an elite project with little broad social purchase even within the global North, and that it was fundamentally Eurocentric. As Falkner shows in chapter 6, it was only once mass environmental movements emerged in the 1960s, and there was a robust North-South geopolitical debate, that the norm of environmental stewardship emerged more fully at the UN Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm in 1972. Following Stockholm, he details the pattern unfolding that on the one hand, the norm becomes ever more deeply embedded through the expansion of environmental treaties across a wide range of issue areas and with the creation of the UN Environment Programme, and on the other hand, the specific content and meaning of the norm continues to be heavily contested along a number of dimensions—a twin process he terms as "between Consolidation and Contestation" (chapter 7).

Falkner finishes by returning to key ES themes: how the rise of solidarism has helped push for greater ambition in embedding the environmental norm in the daily practice of states (chapter 8); how enduring pluralism constrains environmental action but at times enables it principally through the potential of security concerns (the focus of Matt McDonald's book, discussed later) to trigger state action on the environment (chapter 9); and how the expansion of World Society (non-state actors and transnational governance, in other theoretical lenses) shifts the balance between pluralism and solidarism, albeit not decisively (chapter 10).

For Falkner then, the pitch is that it is the development and institutionalization of key norms within the practices of states and non-state actors that triggers shifts towards sustainability. The power of a norm that becomes deeply embedded in the logic of international society is ultimately that it changes the "moral purpose of the state" (p. 2, drawing on Chris Reus-Smit's work). The analysis is rich, consistently thoughtful, and nuanced—norm development is not a magic bullet but something around which there is continual political contestation, occasional setbacks, and considerable work required to realize its potential.

Embedding Ecological Norms in Political Practice

Craig Kauffman and Pamela Martin's *The Politics of Rights of Nature* agrees with Falkner's focus on norms but focuses more closely on both one specific norm—one giving formal legal rights to nature—and how such norms get instantiated and mobilized in specific states. In other words, if one of the limits of Falkner's book (necessarily, his book is focused at too high a level of analysis to capture these sorts of specifics) is about how such norms actually shape state practice and the state's "moral purpose," Kauffman and Martin fill this gap in important ways. And in doing so, they underscore the value of Falkner's focus on how the expansion of World Society tips the balance towards solidarist values and practices.

Kauffman and Martin focus on the "Rights of Nature" (RoN) approach that has emerged in a number of countries. Pushed by combinations of environmental NGOs, indigenous peoples' organizations, and environmental lawyers developing "earth jurisprudence," it entails embedding rights to non-human entities—specific species, ecosystems, mountains, or rivers, for example—in ways that are intended to tip the balance decisively in favor of their protection. The approaches to RoN are diverse both in how they seek to achieve this goal as well as in the countries that are active in pursuing RoN. On the former, the pursuit of RoN tends to coalesce around one or two models—a "Nature's Rights Model," where all of Nature within a jurisdiction has rights, and anyone can speak for Nature to pursue the protection of those rights, versus a "Legal Personhood Model," where specific aspects of Nature get recognized rights, and an institutional arrangement is created, usually with a specific guardian appointed to represent the part of Nature designated for protection.

One of the particularly interesting puzzles in the book is the diversity of places where RoN has become deeply embedded: in local governments in the United States, Latin American governments with strong indigenous representation, India, and New Zealand. Indigeneity is a strong line connecting the cases apart from India (and to an extent the United States, where Native Americans were mobilized politically but the institutionalization of RoN largely neglected their traditions in favor of Western liberal accounts of private property and its protection), but otherwise the cases are highly diverse.

The book starts by documenting the origins and spread of the RoN approach. These are analyzed within constructivist approaches to IR (similar as Falkner notes to the ES approach, although narrower in its focus), within the frame of the norm life cycle. RoN is thus a norm whose emergence, diffusion, and consolidation thus constitutes states' identities and practices over time (chapter 2). Kauffman and Martin use Social Network Analysis (chapter 2) to understand the key actors within the networks through which RoN has diffused and developed. One key puzzle is that the first legal RoN institutions emerged in different countries around the same time—2006—and there was a well-established transnational network promoting RoN within which the national experiments were embedded, but the design of these early laws was already heterogeneous. They then turn to analyzing key cases in detail, specifically Ecuador (chapter 4), the "failed" case of Bolivia (chapter 5), New Zealand (chapter 6), local action in the United States (chapter 7), and in India and Colombia (chapter 8). These cases show the diverse pathways for RoN principles to be embedded—through constitutional reform followed by social movement court cases and legal activism in Ecuador, through successful indigenous campaigns to sustain claims about the sacred traditional management of specific places in New Zealand, or through community campaigns to protect valued ecosystems in U.S. municipalities. They also show that protecting RoN takes sustained campaigning and is not guaranteed (as the stalled process in Bolivia shows), and contains a range of important tensions, notably over questions of private property.

From Norms to Security

But are norms the only way into thinking about how we might pursue sustainability and the transformations it requires? In *Ecological Security*, Matt McDonald provides one alternative. He shares with Kauffman and Martin an argument about the importance of thinking ecologically—that is, in decentering human societies and embedding them normatively and materially within their ecological contexts, and refusing a purely anthropocentric ethics as the basis for political activity. McDonald, however, then articulates these ecological ethics with the frame of security. Drawing on a long tradition of scholarship in environmental security, he develops an argument that connecting ecological ethics to traditional concerns for security among states might provide the trigger for more profound transformations.

The point of departure for McDonald is the dominance of security discourses and practices in political life. As with Falkner's arguments both about primary institutions and the "moral purpose of the state," pursuing security is taken as a primary purpose of the state. While this is a familiar argument, there is a broad tradition of analyzing how environmental concerns have been articulated with security ones, under what conditions this succeeds, and what the political dilemmas raised either for environmentalists or for states' security apparatus arise as a result. McDonald's distinctive twist is to take us through a sequence of ways in which environmental degradation might come to matter for security—national, international, human, ecological—to argue both practically and normatively for an ecological approach to security.

Like Kauffman and Martin, McDonald's approach is a constructivist one: "Security is socially constructed in the sense that it is given meaning in particular ways by particular political communities at particular times" (p. 21). This is the basis for his argument that both empirically, the meaning of security has started to shift to take into account environmental crises—in his book specifically that of climate change—but also that there is space for conscious efforts to reshape the meanings of security to address that crisis. This also implies both that security is *political* (in that it is frequently the object of struggle to change these meanings, and the successful establishment of specific meanings of security shapes power within and between societies) and that security is *ethical* (in that there are intrinsically ethical conditions and consequences of particular meanings of security and the practices that result from them).

After establishing this, he then outlines three principal climate security discourses (chapter 2). This is a reasonably familiar triad of national security, international security, and human security. In the first of these, climate change is articulated as a security threat either by state actors worrying about climate impact-induced threats such as via migration, but also by some environmentalists seeking to deploy national security discourse instrumentally to get climate change higher up the political agenda. International security is invoked because of threats to the stability of the "primary institutions" of international society (here McDonald deploys ES language along the lines seen in Falkner) such as peace, diplomacy, rule of law, and so on. Climate-induced conflicts threaten these, but so too does the depth of global cooperation needed to respond adequately to the climate crisis. Finally, human security discourses entail a broader focus on the threats that climate change poses to human lives and livelihoods, and enrolls a much broader range of agents.

McDonald deftly deals with these competing arguments, showing their various limits, in order to get to his preferred discourse of ecological security that he develops in chapters 3 and 4. His argument is that this is both normatively preferable—ecosystems as the most normatively appropriate referent of security—and practically possible. He concedes that this latter point is the argument with the biggest uphill battle—many would accept a shift to ecocentric ethics as the normative basis for security but argue that it is nevertheless utopian to think that contemporary political institutions might actually internalize such ethics into security practices. Both sides of this debate could perhaps use Kauffman and Martin's analysis of RoN here—on the one hand they show that there are pathways for incorporating ecocentric ethics into political practice, but on the other hand they show it is always highly contested and context-specific.

For McDonald, "changes in the way we understand and approach security is not just one possible site for this change … it is fundamental because security is central to why contemporary powerful institutions exist … engaging with security is therefore not only possible in the context of climate change, it is imperative" (p. 198). However, we can legitimately ask the question whether the more we get towards this vision of ecological security, the further we get from the importance of environmental degradation to the core purpose of the state. McDonald's argument relies on a broadening out to non-state actors as pushers of change, as with Falkner's shift to World Society. Indeed, by the time McDonald gets to outlining the vision of ecological security (chapter 3) and its agents and strategies (chapter 4), the closer he gets to an empirical account that looks much like Falkner's account of the emergence of an environmental stewardship norm, raising perhaps the question of how central "security" is to this process. Furthermore, the issue is that many of those within World Society pushing for sustainability are themselves rather reluctant to deploy security discourses to advance their case.

Perhaps It's Not about Norms and Discourse: Political Economies of Change

Lastly, perhaps the trigger has nothing to do with ethics, values, norms, or how we "relate to nature." After all, norms and ethics do not directly reshape the inherently material practices that need to be transformed. Perhaps the answer to my opening question is therefore, as the focus of Jonas Nahm's book *Collaborative Advantage* implies, in how patterns of investment, production, and innovation enable shifts from the fossil-fuel dominated energy system at the origins of so much of the environmental crisis towards a "clean" energy future centered on wind and solar energy. Common with many other political economists, Nahm grounds his analysis in the combination of comparative and international political-economic

processes driving patterns of innovation. If we are then to think about where the key might be, it is in understanding these sorts of dynamics more fully, even though Nahm's is the book among these that deals least directly with the environmental crisis itself, climate change politics being more backdrop than center-stage in his story.

Nahm's driving idea is the concept of "collaborative advantage." By this, he means that under conditions of globalization, firms engage not only in market competition but in extensive collaborative relations with each other, which thus enables them to compete effectively in specific markets. The book is thus embedded in debates about globalization going back to the early 1990s, particularly those about how globalization shapes national economic governance institutions (whether they converge around a common model or diverge to pursue specific niches in the global economy), and about recurrent efforts by states to maintain or revive national industries where the whole of a sector is contained within the national economy. Renewable energy (RE) technologies (wind and solar specifically—there is a nod to battery technology development in the concluding chapter) are, as he argues, ideal cases to test this since they have arisen as industries largely since the onset of globalization dynamics, and thus have relatively little legacy effects from the pre-globalization era either in terms of national economic institutions or of particular firm structures and strategies.

In relation to these debates, Nahm shows very persuasively that, at least in the case of the development of RE technologies, these efforts by states to construct national industries has failed. The rapid development and deployment of wind and solar in the last three decades has occurred through highly integrated global divisions of labor across the sector with no country being the location of entire industrial processes from invention through to employment. This is despite the fact that the key states that are the focus of his analysis—Germany, China, and the United States—developed very similar policies and strategies to promote wind and solar (reflecting at one level a "convergence" argument about globalization) but have nevertheless ended up with very different outcomes. These outcomes have in the end been determined more by broader institutional settings. In the United States (chapter 6), its global domination of R&D spending but weak and declining manufacturing leads to a focus on *invention.* Germany's strong vocational training institutions and policy support, and weak availability of venture capital, leads to firms selecting *customization*—adapting their existing capacities in production goods manufacture to produce parts for wind and solar products and manufacturing processes (chapter 4). China (chapter 5) expands manufacturing enormously to enable mass production of wind and solar, but this is not solely or even principally a question of low-cost assembly line

production but also entails *innovative manufacturing*—developing specific processes for mass production and scale expansion for wind and solar.

But Nahm's core argument is that these dynamics that lead to national specialization and a global division of labor in RE development are nevertheless largely collaborative at the firm level across these three key countries. For example, German firms developing new parts for production do so collaboratively with the Chinese firms that deploy them in mass manufacturing contexts, but whose innovations in manufacturing then enable them to adjust these products and license the adaptations back to the German firms to improve further (chapters 4–5).

The insight that we need to focus on how the development of RE has to be understood in terms of global divisions of labor, and thus not on which country is "winning the clean energy race," is an excellent one. I made a similar argument a few years ago with other colleagues (Erick Lachapelle, Robert MacNeil, and Matthew Paterson, "The Political Economy of Decarbonisation: From Green Energy 'Race' To Green 'Division of Labour.'" *New Political Economy*, 22[3], 2017). Nahm's contribution is much more nuanced and empirically rich than ours. I do wonder, however, about a dimension of this division of labor that would be worth integrating into the analysis. Solar and wind are generating massive expansions in demand for a huge range of critical minerals—lithium and copper are perhaps the poster children but the range is huge—cobalt, nickel, neodymium, zinc, tellurium, and so on. There are really interesting technical innovation processes (i.e., not just crude mining, just like manufacturing in China is not low-cost assembly line production as Nahm shows). But there is also considerable political contestation (more than reported in the aspects of the clean energy transition described here) that would be interesting to incorporate into the argument.

Conclusions

These books are all excellent reads: consistently thoughtful and thought-provoking, rigorously argued and researched, full of insight. Inevitably, there are aspects I wasn't always convinced by or found a little confusing, notably: the relative neglect of business in Falkner's account of World Society (given Falkner's own extensive and excellent work on that); Nahm's neglect of the literature on globalization in the 1990s and early 2000s that attempted to integrate comparative and institutionalist ideas with international political economy (e.g., Ronen Palan, Jason Abbott, and Phil Deans, *State Strategies in the Global Political Economy*, London, 1996) which could have provided additional resources for his analysis; Kauffman and Martin's Social Network Analysis, which seemed to me underutilized to explain the diffusion they saw; or McDonald's treatment of the dilemma in ecological security, outlined earlier, that seems to me to need further reflection. But these quibbles attest to the richness of the books and the future research that they will provoke.

Even taken together, these four books do not of course permit a definitive answer to the question I set out at the beginning. Indeed, it was rhetorical in the context of this essay. But it does seem to me it is a crucial question that scholars across political science, from various theoretical traditions or fields of the discipline need to pay urgent attention to. What is the potential for shifting norms, political-economic strategies, reconceptualizations of the meaning of security, or other dynamics we might focus on, to enable the rapid transformations that are needed in the next couple of decades to address various environmental crises? Are broad norms like "environmental stewardship" more important than narrow specific ones like legal rules around "Rights of Nature"? How do we embed ecological accounts of security within practices of states more used to national security frames? How can we turn the insight about global divisions of labor shaping the emergence of clean energy into interventions that deploy this more rapidly? And finally, how adept are any of these potential keys at unlocking the transformations we need to have politically contested? These books help focus our attention on such questions and provide us with invaluable resources to start our search.