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Governing climate change in a changing world

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Abstract

This commentary reflects on a longstanding interdisciplinary exchange across geography and political science, which has crystallised into the scholarship on climate governance. This debate has fundamentally shaped ideas on how climate change can be managed as a societal challenge and with what consequences. The analysis briefly maps the emergence of climate governance as a concept and its progressive embedding in climate policy discourse. Next, the discussion reflects on how the application of associated frameworks may become increasingly ‘stretched’, as theoretical toolkits travel far beyond the settings in which they were developed.

KEYWORDS

China, climate change, climate governance, climate justice, geography

1 | CLIMATE GOVERNANCE: CONSOLIDATION OF A CONCEPTUAL PARADIGM

The concept of governance represents the notion that societal steering can be achieved through dispersed, non-hierarchical forms of interaction. This idea is extremely relevant to climate research, which emerges as an incredibly fragmented challenge with emissions and risk distributed across actors and scales of action (Bulkeley & Newell, 2023). Studies on how to govern the climate have, as a result, been highly attentive to how to achieve interaction across social groups. Popular concepts include multi-level governance (Gupta, 2007), partnerships (Pattberg, 2010), co-production (Homsy & Warner, 2013) and many others, with analyses stretching from global arrangements (e.g., transnational networks, Andonova et al., 2009) to community-led action (e.g., Archer et al., 2014).

Closely aligned with studies on multi-actor interaction is research on the social outcomes of governance, collected under the umbrella of climate justice. This scholarship has progressively aligned with debates in environmental justice (Schlosberg & Collins, 2014), consolidating around the ‘three pillar framework’ of outcome, procedure and recognition. Justice in outcome, which explains distributions of resources and burdens, was initially focused on the historical injustice of global emissions. Yet, recent studies are diverse, ranging from themes like energy poverty (Middlemiss, 2022) to the adverse effects of renewable energy projects (Vargas, 2020). Ideas on procedural justice concern who gets to make decisions, how groups are included, and under what conditions (e.g., through participatory planning; Castán Broto et al., 2015). Justice in recognition relates broadly to conditions that shape access to decision making, including discrimination or

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devaluation based on sociopolitical identity (Fraser, 1995). This scholarship links with structural oppression, such as colonial legacies of climate change or recognition of subaltern knowledges (Olazabal et al., 2021; Sultana, 2022).

The permeation of these ideas in climate policy debates is remarkable. For instance, a review of nearly 500 policy documents on urban climate action demonstrated a pervasive focus on multi-actor coordination and a surprising harmonisation of language across organisations (Westman et al., 2022). Recent United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference of Parties displayed long lists of events concerned with multi-actor coordination (e.g., partnerships, stakeholder engagement, coalition-building), alongside activist groups rallying for climate justice. The summary of the most recent IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) report argues for interventions to include multiple levels of governments and stakeholders, encourage partnerships, and enable coordination (Lee et al., 2023, p. 34). The same report highlights climate justice through engagement with equity, inclusion, rights-based approaches, and epistemic justice (Lee et al., 2023, p. 33). While researchers in geography hardly can be single-handedly credited with this influence, concepts related to the climate governance literature have become deeply embedded in climate policy discourse.

Of course, these ideas have not remained fixed over time. Geography is a reflexive discipline, constantly incorporating and metabolising critique as a means to evolve. In climate governance scholarship, this tendency manifests through cycles that seem to follow consolidation of debates, growing critique, and the emergence of new theoretical angles. For example, interest in cities as a new arena of climate governance emerged around the 1990s and inspired a new domain of research for geographers (Betsill, 2001; Bulkeley, 2000). This work was attentive to a full range of dimensions central to geography, such as complex interactions across scales of action, politics and discursive contestation (Bulkeley & Betsill, 2005; Lindseth, 2004). The topic quickly grew in popularity. The 2000s is described as a phase of 'urban optimism' in global sustainability policy (Parnell, 2016), reflected in scholarship on cities as champions of climate action (Rosenzweig et al., 2010; Watts, 2017). In response, a critical branch of enquiry grew into a field of work on 'climate urbanism', capturing how urban climate action entrenches business-as-usual policy, inequality and systems of exclusion (Long & Rice, 2019).

This dynamism partially obscures a pervasive interest in core topics in climate governance research. A review of urban climate governance conducted in 2020 (Castán Broto & Westman, 2020) showed that a dominant share of studies remained concerned with the institutional arrangements that enable effective steering. This phenomenon is visible in other areas, such as climate adaptation governance. This field always contained critical elements concerned with tackling the structural conditions of vulnerability (Dodman & Satterthwaite, 2008; Moser & Satterthwaite, 2008), alongside a growing critique of tendencies in adaptation policy to reinforce dominant development modes (Eriksen et al., 2021). Simultaneously, there is a continued interest in multi-actor coordination and harmonisation of interventions across levels of action (Bauer et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2020) accompanied by evaluation of the effectiveness of different governance approaches (Olazabal et al., 2024). Climate governance scholarship encompasses practical recommendations for policy makers and critical reflection on its own tendencies to entrench power relations, providing a flexible framework that has remained relevant and influential for decades.

2 | CONCEPTUAL ASSUMPTIONS AND CONSTRAINTS

The popularity of climate governance concepts inspires their application all over the world. New challenges brought by climate impacts in diverse locations, as well as changing political realities produced by a geopolitical environment in flux, motivate researchers to translate these ideas to an ever-growing range of settings and concerns. However, a possible limitation of these frameworks lies within their capacity to travel beyond the settings in which they emerged. The climate governance scholarship developed primarily through empirical work in liberal-democratic political systems, with (at least initially) a dominance of work in Europe and North America. Challenges arise when these systems of thought are transported elsewhere.

China, a country with particular influence on global climate change, is a primary example. Considering multi-actor interaction, a central premise is an idea of society as organised into distinct spheres, with distinguishable divides between state, private sector and civil society. This imaginary is so pervasive that it often goes unstated. However, it becomes contrived when applied to China, where boundaries are not demarcated in this way. We do not encounter, for example, a free market, but rather, a 'market in state' (Zheng & Huang, 2018). It becomes misleading to search for patterns of interaction across groups, especially according to formalised, contractual and visible models familiar in Europe and North America. Similarly, the conceptual toolbox linked with climate justice derives largely from liberal democratic settings. Liberal

philosophy and ideas of a 'fair' distribution of goods inspired theories on just outcomes (Rawls, 1971). It is possible to analyse distributions of resources and burdens (pollution, green space, etc.) in China, but not necessarily according to preconceptions of what distributions are considered just. In relation to procedural justice, the application of democratic criteria tends to result in circular arguments on the absence of participation in processes not designed to be participative in a liberal democratic sense in the first place (Huang et al., 2020). Finally, while some debates on structural injustice are likely to be highly relevant to China (e.g., the impacts of closing fossil fuel industries on migrant workers), we cannot assume a direct translation of political identity struggles that have shaped this concept. These glitches illustrate the need for climate governance research to engage with climate change in different places on their own terms.

The examples above demonstrate the extent to which ideological and philosophical traditions are embedded in concepts core to climate governance research. While China is raised as an example, the logic may equally apply to other parts of the world. This argument is expressed amply in decolonial scholarship, which has shown how the application of frameworks developed in Europe and North America tend to be universalising or imposing (e.g., Álvarez & Coolsaet, 2020), or, at best, not very relevant to much of what is going on. The 'global' nature of climate change calls for geographers to explore questions of governance everywhere, yet the concepts at our disposal—concepts now so familiar that we may take them for granted—may not always be fit for this task. This dilemma brings us to questions surrounding the imperative of decolonising climate change research. Of course, this represents an incredibly comprehensive agenda, encompassing aspects such as university policies of hiring/promotion and student recruitment/funding, the politics of referencing, our praxis of reviewing and publishing, extractive forms of data collection, possibilities for equitable partnerships, and many more concerns. The future of research on climate changed geographies calls for assessment of the production of knowledge, for a form of reflexivity that relates to the power relations of our own institutions.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this commentary.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

No data available.

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