

Harris, Paul G. 2013. *What's Wrong with Climate Politics and How to Fix It*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.

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Harris takes on the difficult task of arguing that climate diplomacy, which many acknowledge is a failure, suffers from an affliction he refers to throughout his book as the “cancer of Westphalia.” Many international relations scholars agree that the outlook for effectively addressing climate change is dismal; the reasons vary, though, and this is where Harris’ contribution lies. Rationalists tend to explain climate governance failure using theories of collective action, the prisoner’s dilemma, or the tragedy of the commons—claiming that it is simply too costly for states to limit their greenhouse gas emissions if any doubts exist that other states will follow suit. Under the rationalist line of explanation, no state wants to submit itself to clean energy martyrdom. Others turn to political economy, pointing to the growth of transnational corporations—largely responsible for energy development in the twenty-first century—as the root of the problem. Harris’ approach blames failure neither on rationality nor on the capitalist global economy. Rather, he argues that the cause is a shortsighted focus on national interest that is fundamentally exclusionary to the notion of human wellbeing.

The book is divided into two parts; diagnoses and treatments. The first diagnosis Harris discusses is that Westphalian sovereignty today, just as in 1648, excludes a consideration of human security. His second diagnosis is that national interests impede international negotiations, in large part due to the objections of the two mega-polluters, China and the United States. The third diagnosis is that the world suffers from “affluenza,” an addiction to material consumption that will accelerate greenhouse gas emissions even if population growth rates level off.

Part II offers three sets of solutions: First, to fix state-centered approaches, time spent at international climate conferences should be devoted to discussing *people’s* interests rather than national interests, and the language in agreements should reflect this perspective. The second set of solutions pertains to reducing the so-called “malignancy” of the mega-polluters by not only addressing the stalemate between the United States and China on emissions reduction but also through domestic policies, including the elimination of fossil fuel subsidies and taxing carbon at its sources. The book’s true contribution, however, is most evident in the third class of solutions, which centers on alternative sources of wellbeing. Material overconsumption, here, is addressed both in terms of individual choice and policy design.

Reducing individual consumption not only directly targets a major source of emissions, but also enhances human wellbeing and perceived happiness. Harris argues that we should eschew the pursuit of material interests in favor of

building human relationships—borrowing from others’ work on “mindful consumption,” a happiness index, “voluntary simplicity,” and even “environmental sacrifice” as measures of success in place of economic growth. These are consistent solutions for the initial assessment that states are not the direct source of emissions and that a narrow focus on national interest cripples climate diplomacy, rendering it incapable of effecting real change for either reducing emissions or validating human security as a guiding principle.

A major takeaway from the book is that treaty-making is ineffective for achieving emissions reduction, as it allows states to cling to the singular pursuit of national security. Harris is absolutely right to point to this obstacle. Given the initial diagnosis, however, a move beyond treaty-making might factor higher on his list of prescriptions. Largely absent is the swath of alternative public policies—particularly those at the substate, local, and regional levels—and private market-based solutions like carbon markets. The first set of treatments contains the seeds of real change—moving state-based climate negotiations toward human security. Much of what is wrong with climate diplomacy stems from its neglect of how lives are affected, particularly in the poorest populations. Just as states themselves are not emitters, states do not suffer the direct consequences of a warming climate. Differentiated individual responsibility—in terms of displaced benefits and harms between the affluent and the poor related to the *causes* of climate change, as well as the responsibilities and burdens related to the *consequences*—is a key argument.

For continuity, it would be helpful if the principle of differentiated responsibility were more explicitly linked with action, particularly at the individual level. This gap in Harris’ analysis leads to some confusion as to why interstate negotiations should remain at the top of the list of priorities for climate action. Shifting the rhetoric toward individual obligations and harms is a crucial dynamic if we are to significantly reduce emissions, yet it seems inadequate that the first set of proposed solutions includes merely doctoring language in treaty agreements. It is admirable to want to fix what is broken within the bounds of the interstate system, but only in the third class of solutions, individual-level responses, are the prescriptions and treatments congruent with the initial “cancer of Westphalia” diagnosis. The focus on individual responsibility and action will resonate with students and scholars of global environmental politics insofar as it shifts the locus of change away from the arena of treaty-making into the realm of individual responsibility. With dedication and strategic action, these lessons have incredible potential to overhaul the politics of climate change.