

Book Review

Shue, Henry. 2022. *The Pivotal Generation: Why We Have a Moral Responsibility to Slow Climate Change Right Now*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

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Henry Shue's *The Pivotal Generation* is an ethically charged call for ambitious climate action, here and now. The prominent ethics scholar extends his seminal contribution to the international climate justice scholarship to craft a convincing reflection on the urgency of climate action against the backdrop of justice imperatives. We are the "pivotal generation." And because developed countries have disproportionately contributed to the crisis, Shue argues, they are to shoulder this urgency and expel any delusion of possible delay. This book is directed to them and their citizens. Will we choose greed and exploitation over solidarity and justice? The book exposes us to this ultimatum.

Why now, why us? Shue begins by drawing from the science three consequences of delayed climate action to support his qualification of today's generation as "pivotal." Flunking the urgency test would mean, first, greater costs and difficulty to tackle the crisis; second, heightened climate threats with no upper limit to their detrimental extent; and third, the passing of critical tipping points that launch irreversible and unbearable socioclimatic conditions. If scientific facts seem to insufficiently move people today, Shue contextualizes them within climate justice realities and subjects them to an ethical assessment in a pressing, affective account that serves as an impetus for action taking through moral and emotional arousal.

At the heart of the book is a reflection on the distribution of costs, benefits, and risks associated with climate change and climate action. We are called to rethink our responsibility and agency in light of our embeddedness in space and time—a moral framework that translates into a vision of international and intergenerational justice. To this end, Shue proposes the concept of *sovereign externalization*. He argues that the system of sovereignty allows states to absolve themselves of responsibility for the socioecological impacts of their economic activities. The idea is that externalization is essentially *exploitative*: while the benefits of economic activity are nationalized and enjoyed principally in the present, the climate costs are imposed upon future generations and other states, who often are worse off and, crucially, can only suffer the repercussions of decision-making in which they took no part. For Shue, this is "a paradigm case of a stronger party silently exploiting the vulnerability of a weaker party in order to pursue its own advantage" (51). On those grounds, he dismisses any justification for delayed

climate action. Using the perhaps too simplistic developing country–developed country dichotomy, he presents the moral imperative for *developed* nations of this pivotal generation to own their past and to grasp the mantle of leadership for ambitious climate action today. Failure to do so is to unilaterally and coercively exploit present and future people in ways that exacerbate international and inter-generational inequality. Articulating a moral and political vision operating between temporality, power, and the struggle for justice, Shue provides an aesthetic account of what it means to be a human embedded in history, in relation to others, including our past and future selves. Through this shrinking of temporality, the book makes its most compelling contribution.

Written in a pragmatic, substantive fashion characteristic of nonideal philosophy, *The Pivotal Generation* marries climate research, philosophy, economics, and politics to engage with contemporary policy debates surrounding the energy transition. Shue is unforgiving of the lies of fossil fuel industries that engage in misinformation and greenwashing campaigns and denunciatory of politicians who support and legalize these practices by way of fossil fuel subsidies and deficient policy. He critiques how the energy transition is currently played out. He debunks arguments for delayed action that rely on the saving grace of carbon removal technologies, to which he dedicates a full chapter, surveying the science to show that these approaches are a gamble. He calls for a just transition that does not merely deploy alternative energies but puts them directly in the hands of the poorest and dismantles the hegemonic system that has vested interests in safeguarding the fossil fuel status quo. The book is a call for action: Shue prompts us, citizens, to join forces and restore democratic control of our politics, destiny, and legacy.

Yet, while the book addresses essential debates of international and inter-generational justice, Shue's ecological vision remains technical and reductive in its almost exclusive treatment of carbon emissions. First, framing the climate crisis as a mere matter of reducing emissions falls short of holistically considering other complex disorders that increasingly plague the ecosystem (e.g., water use, plastic pollution, soil degradation). But it also stands as crude economic thinking. Shue's critique does not address modes of production and consumerism, the very reasons for energy use in a profit-driven economy. The idea that "getting the prices right," reflective of hegemonic market ideology, might drive the transition is lacking nuance. His grand appeal to what it means to be responsible, moral beings arouses a desire for fundamentally and qualitatively reconfigured social relations—a yearning that finds little fruition in its narrow application to the technical and quantitative field of carbon emissions. Desirable social interaction is reduced to nothing more than greener and fairer economic transactions. A more socially imaginative account would have been a welcome move away from mainstream status quo narratives. Yet, as a rich, politically engaged, action-prompting and effortless read of a book, *The Pivotal Generation* will appeal to anyone new or seasoned to the nexus of climate justice and is devotedly approachable to lay readers.