

Book Review Essay

Theorizing and Teaching Global Environmental Politics

Henrik Selin

Chasek, Pamela S., David L. Downie, and Janet Welsh Brown. 2006. *Global Environmental Politics*, 4th edition. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Chambers, W. Bradnee, and Jessica F. Green, eds. 2005. *Reforming International Environmental Governance: From Institutional Limits to Innovative Reforms*. Tokyo: United Nations University Press.

As scholars, how do we theorize and write about global environmental governance? As teachers, how do we effectively transfer concepts and arguments from research into the classroom as we engage students who want to learn about global environmental politics and policy making? These are two fundamental questions that many readers of this journal and members of the gep-ed listserv debate and (sometimes) struggle with.¹ The two books addressed in this review broadly analyze global environmental issues and politics, and may also be used for teaching purposes. They are reviewed here based on their analytical approaches to the study of global environmental politics and governance, with an eye toward how they may be used in classrooms.

The study of environmental cooperation and policy-making is a major area of international relations analysis, partially as a result of the extensive work done by this journal's contributors. Institutional analysis is a central theoretical approach to the study of international politics. The study of international environmental policy making has greatly advanced institutional theory, not least with respect to interest-based and knowledge-based explanations. The authors

1. Gep-ed is an internet based listserv for people who research and teach global environmental issues broadly where members often discuss teaching related issues. For more information about gep-ed, including how to join, contact the administrator, Michael Maniates: mmaniate@allegheny.edu.

and editors of *Global Environmental Politics and Reforming International Environmental Governance: From Institutional Limits to Innovative Reforms* do not set out to advance theory, but instead use institutional perspectives to examine areas of global environmental politics and policy making past, present, and future.

The different editions of *Global Environmental Politics* have been required readings in many courses over the years, and the fourth edition is likely to continue to be used in classrooms. The book outlines the basics of global environmental politics, and as such is probably most appropriately used in introductory classes at the undergraduate level. At times, the book is a bit factually dense in its presentation of issues and data, but its straightforward approach and language means that it can be read by undergraduates across multiple disciplines and university programs. One of the strengths of the book is that it not only provides an overview of global environmental policy making, but also encourages students to think about the future of global environmental cooperation and governance as a critical challenge.

Pamela S. Chasek, David L. Downie and Janet Welsh Brown, as authors of the fourth edition, continue the general approach of earlier editions, with sections and case descriptions appropriately revised and updated. The three authors ground their book in the classic theoretical literature on institutions, actors and interests, and largely portray global environmental politics as the process of creating and implementing issue-specific regimes based on actors' diverging interests and preferences. The authors begin by providing a brief historical background to the emergence of environmental issues on the global agenda. They continue with a general discussion of the different roles that main actors of global environmental politics (e.g. states, IGOs, NGOs, and private corporations) may play in policy making.

The book introduces the reader to specific issues of global environmental politics through eleven case studies of regime formation. These case studies cover many of the major environmental regimes that have been created to date, addressing, for example, ozone depletion, climate change, biodiversity, desertification, and hazardous chemicals and wastes. With so many case studies, however, the book invariably provides only short descriptions of each issue. The authors identify obstacles to the effective creation and implementation of regimes, and discuss options for improving compliance and implementation. They conclude the volume examining issues critical to the future of global environmental politics, including the North-South divide, trade and the environment, and the sustainable development challenge more broadly.

W. Bradnee Chambers and Jessica F. Green, in their edited volume *Reforming International Environmental Governance*, explore institutional dimensions of improving environmental protection and governance. That is, the volume focuses on institutional reform as a means to improve global environmental governance and better facilitate a transition to sustainable development. Delineating "an agenda for reform," the editors in the first chapter outline three themes of *coherence* in governance, *centralization* of governance, and *compliance*

with legal obligations and international agreements. In the subsequent chapters, eight scholars and practitioners weigh in on issues central to current debates and efforts on institutional reform in the environment area within the United Nations.

Chambers begins the three chapters on coherence by providing a short historical introduction to thirty years of environmental cooperation from the Stockholm conference in 1972 to the Johannesburg summit in 2002. In addition, he briefly discusses institutional dimensions of global governance in the area of environment and sustainable development. Sebastian Oberthür analyzes challenges and obstacles to UN efforts on the clustering of multilateral environmental agreements and better coordination of environmental regimes. Richard G. Tarasofsky examines multiple ways to strengthen the role of the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP), arguing that there are several options to improve UNEP without changing its basic legal status (that is, without replacing it with a new UN environmental organization).

On issues of centralization, Steve Charnovitz, in contrast to Tarasofsky, discusses the need for a new World Environmental Organization to replace UNEP. Gary P. Sampson examines the role of the World Trade Organization, and trade and environment linkages, in efforts to improve environmental governance. The three final contributions on compliance focus more directly on issues of international law and the UN. Joost Pauwelyn argues that there are good reasons to establish a World Environment Court. Catherine Redgwell and Lorraine Elliott examine efforts to reform the UN Trusteeship Council and the UN Security Council, respectively. In their chapters they discuss what possible role these two organizations could play as mechanisms for improving the enforcement of international environmental law and enhance environmental security.

Reforming International Environmental Governance assumes that the reader has a certain amount of background knowledge in order to fully understand the issues discussed by the editors and the individual chapter authors. A shortcoming of the volume is that the three analytical themes (coherence, centralization and compliance) identified by the editors are not always explicitly present in the individual chapters. Moreover, a concluding chapter by the editors would have been useful to sum up and more extensively discuss the main arguments by all the chapter authors in relation to the three themes. For an edited volume, however, the chapters fit well together on a basic level based on their common focus on issues of institutional reform and the UN.

Because of its fairly narrow focus on states, IGOs, and issues of institutional reform, *Reforming International Environmental Governance* may be most appropriate for courses in international relations and political science designed for upper-level undergraduates and graduate students in these disciplines. Alternatively, it could be assigned together with another book that provides more background information, such as *Global Environmental Politics*, or another like it. The three chapters on international law ask interesting questions about ways to

improve governance through the creation of new organizations or new uses of existing ones. These chapters may also be appropriate in courses that explore legal perspectives of global environmental cooperation, as well as in courses on international organizations and the UN that include environmental issues.

The theoretical approaches and general ambitions of both volumes examined here are simultaneously their main strengths and their main weaknesses. The two books provide mainstream institutional accounts of global environmental politics and policy-making, and address issues of improved governance in an informative and conventional fashion. As such, they offer timely insights into ongoing debates and politics of global environmental issues from the perspective of much academic analyses of these issues. Such books clearly fill a purpose for both debate and teaching, and *Global Environmental Politics* and *Reforming International Environmental Governance* are two good options for course adoption.

Yet neither of the two books challenges the reader to “think outside the box.” Teachers who may want to push students to think critically not only about incremental reform of existing institutions, but also about the possible need for more fundamental change, would want to complement any of the two books with others advocating a more radical reform agenda. One alternative would be *Global Environmental Politics: Power, Perspectives and Practice* by Ronnie Lipschutz,² which provocatively discusses many fundamental issues that are not touched upon in the two books reviewed here. It should be noted, however, that the Lipschutz book may be most suitable for students in political science and international relations, and that many undergraduates would likely find it more difficult to read than the other two books.

Many of those of us who teach global environmental issues at academic institutions are tasked to introduce our students to the historical context of global environmental politics and current policy making on environmental protection and institutional reform. Yet we should perhaps also more actively challenge our students to think about whether we need gradual and piecemeal reorganization of existing institutions, or if more fundamental changes to the basic premises for human action and environmental protection and policy making are required. *Global Environmental Politics* and *Reforming International Environmental Governance* address the first set of issues in different, but partly overlapping ways. For literature that tackles the second set of issues, we have to look elsewhere.

Reference

Lipschutz, Ronnie. 2003. *Global Environmental Politics: Power, Perspectives and Practice*. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press.

2. Lipschutz 2003.

Copyright of *Global Environmental Politics* is the property of MIT Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.