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96. Political science, global environmental change and sustainable development

by
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Political science is key to understanding national and organisational responses to climate change by states and other actors. Recent learning about globalisation has many applications for political scholarship in the context of global environmental change, as the International Political Science Association (IPSA) reports.

Only recently have political scientists started to inquire and reflect on environmental change, mostly by analysing the emergence of international environmental policy and the political impacts of climate change. Certainly these are important fields: the development of environmental diplomacy, for example, is a striking recent evolution that modifies traditional international alliances, the role of knowledge in multilateral negotiations, and even the training of civil servants and diplomatic corps.

International environmental policy and the political impacts of climate change are two crucial, lively and central research topics, but they are only two angles from which to approach a complex set of social-environmental issues and challenges that could attract much wider attention from political scientists worldwide. Many other issues remain marginal, and deserve to become part of the mainstream research and teaching agenda in political sciences.

The International Political Science Association (IPSA) is beginning to take steps in this direction. Its most recent congress in Madrid in 2012 included several panels on social-environmental issues. Four dealt with climate change in a comparative, global context; two touched on the theoretical aspects of climate change; one discussed the rescaling of environmental governance; and another tackled international environmental politics. The IPSA World Congress in Montreal in 2014 will focus on contemporary governance, and includes global change as a main topic. But despite this growing interest, none of IPSA's 52 international research committees deal primarily with global change. National associations are probably doing more than IPSA in this respect. International research groups are already active and are paving the way for future endeavours.

More can be done, and more will be done by international political sciences in the coming years. Despite limited attention thus far, the political sciences are in a strong position to address the many important issues raised by global environmental change. More specifically, the vast amount of research on globalisation carried out over the last few decades is highly relevant to this area and can be further developed.

Three questions need to be debated and considered. What methods of effective and applicable development strategies can nation-states shape today? What role can civil societies play in redefining world governance? How can changes at the global scale satisfy the needs and aspirations of human beings?

Let us begin with the state. The emergence of globalisation and the internationalisation of policy issues never meant the extinction of traditional governments. Recent decades have shown that the reorganisation and restructuring of state power, however protracted, demanding and conflicting it may have been, remains (Lachapelle, 2005; Lachapelle and Trent, 2000). In its 2004 report, *Fair Globalization: Creating Opportunities for All*, the World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalization emphasised the need for a renewed role for the state (World Commission, 2004: 14).

If states continue to play an important role, it is nonetheless undeniable that they are no longer in a position to single-handedly direct economic and social regulation in this new context, which is characterised by global competition (Strange and Stopford, 1991). New alliances of actors are also emerging – a typical feature of globalisation – and research has linked it with the rapid development of new forms of partnership between governments, the private sector and civil society. This dynamic has been obvious during recent international summits on environmental issues, where nation-states remained central but the discussions included new political actors, involved new partnerships, and offered new multi-level governance opportunities.

In theoretical terms, some notions used to approach globalisation can be mobilised for research on global change. An analytical category such as subsidiarity is key to studying the territorial pacts and joint treaties between nations, multi-level and sub-state entities, and the ratification of transnational and cross-border co-operation agreements, typical of globalised politics. It could be just as valuable in analysing the new forms of partnership between governments, corporations, labour unions, local authorities, co-operatives and other stakeholder entities currently emerging to address the social and political impacts of environmental change.

A condition for political participation and decision-making processes in the globalised era is information, and methods for the steady dissemination of information on policies. A Global Environmental Policy Forum, composed of international organisations and set up to analyse the policy impact of national and international regulations, would be helpful in this regard. It could provide a new model for global governance of the social impacts of environmental change.

This last proposal raises the question of potential "solutions", and what political sciences can contribute to answering global change. Any solution would require the fulfilment of at least three conditions: the reassessment of established government practices, the strong participation of civil society in the evaluation of the impact of global change, and the greatest respect for each and everyone's cultural habitat.

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