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Book Review: The Price of Climate Action: Philanthropic Foundations in the International Climate Debate

By Diane Alalouf-Hall

The Price of Climate Action: Philanthropic Foundations in the International Climate Debate, by Édouard Morena. Palgrave Macmillan. London, 2016; 140 pp.: ISBN 9783319424835

At the heart of current issues, this publication explores the debates on climate change from the perspective of philanthropic foundations. In other words, Édouard Morena shows how a small group of private foundations (those whose endowments stem from an individual or family fortune, mainly from the United States) have influenced, and continue to influence, international discussions on climate. Based on the origins of international philanthropy's link to environmental issues and climate change, and its evolution throughout the past three decades, the book's thesis is that philanthropic foundations – via their grant-making and mobilization activities – play a significant role in international climate negotiations.

Morena, who is a lecturer of political sciences at the University of London Institute in Paris, has divided his book into six chapters. After a lengthy introduction on the fundamental theoretical debates concerning the role of foundations in climate discussions, the second chapter returns to the origins of the involvement of philanthropic foundations on the climate issue. The third exposes the strategic approach of “climate philanthropy” from the political context of the 1990s and of the positions taken in light of subsidies available at the time. In Chapter 4, Morena outlines how this context led to the participation of foundations in the debates of the Copenhagen Summit on climate in December of 2009 (Copenhagen Climate Change Conference or COP15). The author offers a case study of two initiatives whose main funders are very closely tied: the Global Call for Climate Action (GCCA) and Project Catalyst. The fifth chapter introduces a new initiative stemming from this same group of foundations: the International Policies and Politics Initiative (IPPI), which the author describes as elitist and non-restrictive. This sets the stage for Paris Climate Change Conference or COP21 discussions (addressed in Chapter 6). The book concludes with the announcement of a new dividing line within the climate community due to the game led by the IPPI since COP15 and the real lack of progressive funders in current negotiations.

From the mid-1980s up until the early 1990s, foundations facilitated the mobilization of climate discussions by organizing international meetings and by financing the research and education of international groups, but also by calling for increased participation of civil society in the “new international climate regime.” The book mentions several examples: the Rockefeller Foundation’s US\$90,000 grant to India’s Tata Energy Research Institute to establish a research centre on “global warming” in 1989, and a US\$490,000 grant in 1991 for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). The author highlights the fact that a few large foundations, invested in the cause since 1980, are also those that were born out of vast industrial empires or polluting businesses (whether traditional resource-extraction industries or modern technology companies).

Therefore, for the past 20 years or so, this small group of foundations has shared the same approach towards the climate issue and has agreed on the strategy to be adopted: take advantage of the relative advantage of philanthropy compared to the private and public sectors and distribute collaborative grants mainly focused on results and evaluation – all in an environment that is favourable for business. We also discover the co-financing of new foundations dedicated to the climate issue. For example, there is the ClimateWorks Foundation, founded in 2008, whose funds come from, amongst others, the Hewlett Foundation and the Packard Foundation. The author demonstrates that the strategies established by these foundations are comparable to those of the business world, as demonstrated by their language and positioning. This new wave of philanthropists and foundations tends to redefine the landscape of the fight against climate change while maintaining fundamental liberal principles and values – those considered by anti-liberal or anti-capitalist critics as being responsible for the climate crisis (Klein, 2014). Morena even qualifies these philanthropic organizations as “liberal foundations.”

Morena focuses on two events to illustrate the influence of foundations: the Copenhagen Summit (COP15) in 2009 and the Paris Summit (COP21) in 2015. It is a good comparison as the first turned out to be a failure in terms of the influence of foundations. But not so for the second, which these foundations, having learned the right lessons, see as more of a success. This study helps illustrate the book’s goal of showing the influence of foundations on international climate debates. The author himself states the difficulty in establishing causal links between the actions of foundations and the results of climate negotiations. However, he takes the time to show the strategic efforts that some of

these actors developed during the build-up towards COP21. IPPI, ClimateWorks Foundation, and others (including a significant number of “familiar faces”) teamed up in 2014 to encourage the United States to sustainably and efficiently reduce its carbon emissions while insisting on the ready-made solutions that clean energy offers. The conclusions of COP21 went in the same direction. Morena thus denounces the substantial role of foundations in the promotion and adoption of solutions that are in line with the interests of certain large companies.

Morena’s book sets many discussions in motion. For example, given the source of the funds that led to the creation of these foundations, what interest(s) is there in financing a “greening” transition when financial assets came from – and continue to come from – large polluters? The book does not explicitly cover the answer. The author indicates, however, in the case study of Project Catalyst, the discomfort felt by some of these foundations in broaching this subject. Additionally, given the involvement of these influential foundations in environmental issues since the 1980s, how do they contribute positively to the fight against climate change?

The book’s subject is timely and important in its approach to highlighting the networks between foundations and international organizations, which are inaccessible for most and are here broken down for the reader. In the current political context, this book, edited in 2016, appears as a new warning sign about the actual impact of liberal philanthropic foundations and their claim of being climate experts. Morena condemns the alignment of strategies around a single vision of climate change mitigation that is in line with the economic interests of liberal foundations. He notes that this approach risks excluding communities or organizations whose objectives are motivated by climate and social justice from the debate. As a whole, the book is a valuable addition to the critical literature on climate change politics in place and especially the relationships between philanthropy and the state, in particular, the progressive transfer of governmental obligations to philanthropic organizations (Lesemann, 2011).

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