

Review

Heat, Greed and Human Need: Climate Change, Capitalism and Sustainable Wellbeing

Ian Gough. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2017. 283pp.

Gillian Brock*

In this wonderful book, Ian Gough shows how we can deal with climate change sensibly, by developing eco-social policy that promotes human wellbeing. The result is a tour de force. Demonstrating sophisticated knowledge of several relevant fields, Gough combines important multidisciplinary insights with his previous groundbreaking research on human needs. The result is a coherent, usable framework that has considerable value in guiding policy discussions. This impressive work is bound to become essential reading for anyone working on policy, climate change and sustainable human well-being.

As most readers will be aware, catastrophic climate change poses a formidable challenge to the planet. The book examines the economic, social and political factors driving climate change. At the heart of the problem is capitalism and its focus on accumulation and growth. A global system of nation states constitutes another formidable

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barrier. Attempts to deal with climate change will have to acknowledge these two obstacles and offer ways to navigate them.

Gough offers us important ideas about how to move from green growth to “degrowth” through a transitional strategy of recomposing consumption in affluent countries from high-carbon luxuries to low-carbon necessities (2). This three-stage process seems to him to be the only way to move from the “‘greed’ and technological might of contemporary capitalism to an ethical, just and sustainable future” (2).

The normative framework he uses relies heavily on the influential body of work he has been developing—now for at least three decades—on human needs. As he plausibly argues, all human beings “everywhere in the world, at all times present and future, have certain basic needs. These must be met in order for people to avoid harm, to participate in society and to reflect critically upon the conditions in which they find themselves” (3). Armed with such an understanding, we can plan for relevant social and environmental goals, both now and into the future. While there are many ways in which cultures satisfy these universal needs, we can and should distinguish between the needs themselves, which are the same for everyone, and the satisfiers, which can vary. The basic needs of future generations will be much like our own and we have obligations to plan our need satisfaction mindful of intergenerational equity. Overall, human needs can provide a robust standard for sustainable wellbeing, as Gough convincingly argues.

Much of the book is concerned with “climate capitalism.” Drawing on political economy and social theory he develops a multi-disciplinary, eco-social political economy approach that provides a useful framework for exploring core concerns. Policy instruments that can help us recompose consumption include “taxing luxuries, rationing carbon and socializing consumption” (149). There are many insightful discussions about policies and he offers many plausible reasons why we should reject some of those gaining a wide following, such as policies of universal basic income. As he astutely notes, participation in productive and reproductive activities, along with making contributions to collective welfare, are important to our well-being and need satisfaction. For instance, these activities promote self-respect, cognitive development and a place for meaningful social activity. Policies of universal basic income do not adequately acknowledge the important needs that work can fulfill. Tony Atkinson has suggested an alternative policy of universal participation income, as he discusses on pages 185–86, and it constitutes a welcome

improvement over universal basic income in that it better promotes the active wellbeing that is core to Gough's views. Another policy he favors is that of reduced working time.

Overall, Gough has applied insights from multiple relevant disciplines and combined them with his groundbreaking work on universal human needs. The result is a coherent and compelling analysis of how to deal with the considerable challenges climate change has presented. This very important book offers many innovative ways to avoid catastrophic climate change and is bound to set the course for further discussion on these topics.