EEEP Week 10: Climate Change

"[W]hat is wrong with us? What is really preventing us from putting out the fire that is threatening to burn down our collective house? *I think the answer is far more simple than many have led us to believe*: we have not done the things that are necessary to lower emissions because those things fundamentally conflict with deregulated capitalism, the reigning ideology for the entire period we have been struggling to find a way out of this crisis. We are stuck because the actions that would give us the best chance of averting catastrophe—and would benefit the vast majority—are extremely threatening to an elite minority that has a stranglehold over our economy, our political process, and most of our major media outlets. That problem might not have been insurmountable had it presented itself at another point in our history. But it is our great collective misfortune that the scientific community made its decisive diagnosis of the climate threat at the precise moment when those elites were enjoying more unfettered political, cultural, and intellectual power than at any point since the 1920s. (Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything*, 25, emph. supplied)

Questions for discussion:

1. How do attitudes to climate science reflect different attitudes to risk?
2. Do economic analyses of climate change indicate the need for global or local environmental solutions?
3. What are the main obstacles to effective solutions to climate change? How are these obstacles related to broader themes in the module?
4. What is the single most important lesson of debates around the ethics and economics of environmental protection?

A lightning rod for ethical, economic, and political conflicts

Debates over the significance of climate change encapsulate many of the moral and economic dilemmas considered in this module. They also indicate the frequently bitter nature of these debates, and how difficult it is to retain the detached, scientific perspective that, ideally, would characterise academic research. The gravity of climate change is such that even physicists—who for decades held a firm professional line on political neutrality—have in recent years sought to intervene in policy debates. If the people don't know what's in their interests, then, the reasoning goes, they need expert advice, lest they fall prey to the pseudo-science offered by denialists, cranks, and the simply ignorant. However, we might reasonably suggest that things are either better, or worse, than physicists seem to recognise. They might be better just to the extent that, as we have seen, scientific warnings of environmental damage have been prominent in policy debate since (at least) the mid-1970s, when *The Limits to Growth* was published. However, just to the extent that the debate is almost fifty years old and, despite its growing significance in the public consciousness, has not seen any clear agreement or resolution, we might worry that it is naïve to assume that *this time* the warning will spur us into action. Our central problem is that in contrast to the leaps and bounds made by natural scientists in the last half century, it's difficult to point to even one clear "advance" in the *social* sciences, on which policymakers rely.

As we have seen, how scientific warnings about the likely consequences of environmental damage (and c.c.) should be linked to practical policy choices depends on how we understand the connection between social behaviour and environmental outcomes, which interpretation of the precautionary principle we think should be adopted, and whether one adopts a rights-based or consequentialist approach to environmental ethics. Layered over these debates are further disagreements about the nature of human action (is there some clear, consistent, and universal cause of human behaviour that can be used to shepherd us, or not?) and the tools available to governments (can all human behaviour be treated as though it is an efficient market, or will we always defy predictions, such that a *real* market would usually be better?). Which institutions, norms, and policy mechanisms would therefore provide a better solution to climate change? It's difficult to avoid the conclusion that the experts, at least, do not know the answer—or even if one of them does, none of the others can see it. Debates in environmental protection, then, are not likely to be solved any time soon, even as climate change becomes ever more pressing. But we can surely say one thing for sure. Insofar as there is no scholarly agreement on either principles or policies, then we cannot simply assume that our opponents are badly motivated. Instead, we must find a way of engaging with them *despite* our disagreements. What does this mean in practice? And what does it mean for policy debates? How do we avoid traducing the humanity of others by treating them as simply obstacles to our preferred utilitarian solutions? If climate change shows that the economics of environmental protection are still unclear, then it surely shows as well that its ethics are even more obscure.