

## GOVERNANCE

# Centering Earth in policy-making

A pair of authors advocate scaling governance structures to better address planetary crises

By Erle C. Ellis

“**W**hat would governance look like if our planetary condition was central rather than ancillary to our political self-conceptions?” ask political scientist Jonathan Blake and historian Nils Gilman at the beginning of *Children of a Modest Star*. Anyone concerned with life on Earth—and that should be everyone—can see that current systems of governance are fumbling in their efforts to address the planetary crises of our times. Blake and Gilman make the case that the problem is the nation-state, or rather its “absolute sovereignty,” and the solution is “deliberate multiscale governance.” By fitting the scales of governance to the most effective scales for addressing specific challenges—from local to planetary—“the habitability necessary to enable multispecies (and thus ultimately human) flourishing” can be ensured, they maintain.

Considering where we are right now, this might seem more like science fiction than a serious political proposal. Indeed, the authors caution readers not to expect “simple fixes to save the planet.” But this is a serious book that begins by convincing the reader just how recent, arbitrary, and insufficient national and international governance actually is. Building on this foundation of political history, in which the dynamics and possibilities of governance are foregrounded, the book proceeds, chapter by chapter, to build the case for planetary governance.

This is a visionary book that uses real-world examples to demonstrate the shortcomings of the current “condition of international anarchy” built on ad hoc arrangements that prioritize the needs of nation-states through multilateral agreements such as the European Union, international institutions such as the United Nations, and a mosaic of other governance units. It also clarifies how its model of planetary governance, or “subsid-

arity,” differs profoundly from a system of world or global governance, in which sovereign power would be centralized at the top. Instead, the principle of subsidiarity aims to push “as much decision-making as possible to as small a scale as makes functional sense.”

The authors maintain that for many challenges, such as local adaptations to water shortages, governance is most effective when it is local—at the watershed scale, for example. The challenges of deforestation in Amazonia should be governed by Amazonia—cutting across the nations involved. And for planetary-scale challenges such as global



Deforestation must be addressed with appropriately scaled governance.

climate change, planetary-scale institutions are the most effective solution.

What would a planetary institution look like? The book avoids prescriptions, but it does walk readers through idealized examples of “planetary governors” designed to address two challenges: carbon emissions and pandemics. In the former, “A Planetary Atmospheric Steward (PAS) would marry the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s (IPCC) function...with the authority to make and enforce decisions on limiting carbon emissions.” The PAS would have three roles, the first being “to improve knowledge of the Earth’s climate and its dynamics”—part of what the book calls “planetary sapience.” This would include advanced forms of globally networked Earth observing and modeling systems and an assembly of experts. But the second role is the hard part. Who is to

## Children of a Modest Star: Planetary Thinking for an Age of Crises

Jonathan S. Blake and

Nils Gilman

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decide the acceptable limits for carbon emissions? And how would limits be enforced?

The authors call for humility in moving forward, but this book is “an unapologetic call for empowering technocracy.” In their view, “some people know more and understand better than others about the planetary condition, and they should be empowered to speak for the planet.” Although the expert powers of the PAS might be tempered by some form of democratic oversight, one hardly needs to mention that this political position might at least raise a few eyebrows.

Fortunately, Blake and Gilman are aware of the political issues they raise and do not shy away from them. They systematically expose and address multiple challenges in implementing their proposals, including issues of inequality and the politics of who would allocate issues to the PAS. Still, too often, the argument for their approach comes down to highlighting that the existing system is “broken.”

One would not know it from reading this book, but the “new” thinking on planetary governance it highlights is not all that new. For more than two decades, a growing community of scholars has explored the subject of Earth system governance. This rich literature is barely touched on here—a disappointing limitation of the book.

One also wonders about the prospects of governance by design. As the book itself reveals, all existing forms of governance are more emergent products of a messy process of evolution—with partial fixes held together by ongoing problem-solving. Would the PAS operate any more effectively than the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Paris Agreement? As Nobel Prize-winning economist Elinor Ostrom decried years ago: there are “no panaceas.”

Limitations aside, this book is a mind opener. The possibilities it raises are as inspiring as they are challenging. In many ways, it serves more as a provocation than a proposal. Those seeking new opportunities to shape a better future on this increasingly human planet might learn something that matters—and will no doubt enjoy the ride. ■

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