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Jonathan S. Blake and Nils Gilman, *Children of a Modest Star: Planetary Thinking for an Age of Crises.* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2024). ISBN: 9781503637856.

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Introduction by Glenda Sluga, European University Institute and the University of Sydney

At a recent Berggruen conference in Venice, the authors of *Children of a Modest Star: Planetary Thinking for an Age of Crises*, Jonathan S. Blake and Nils Gilman, and employees of the LA/Beijing/Venice-based Berggruen Institute, presented their ideas to a large and eager audience from diverse, even unpredictable, backgrounds who were gathered in a glamorous canal-side Venice Palazzo to listen to a Planetary Summit.[1] The turnout was testament not only to the philanthropic Berggruen Institute's organizational capacity, but, just as significantly, to the appeal of its declared mission: "to develop ideas and shape political, economic and social institutions for the 21st century," in an "age of crises."

Think-tanks have a well-established role in the long history of philanthropic interventions in questions of global governance: think the Rockefellers, Ford, Carnegie, Aspen Institute, even the department-store mogul Thomas Filene's Twentieth-Century Fund.[2] Their prominence and influence reflected the twentieth-century economic and political dominance of the United States, even if each engaged, in more than one way, the same specifically planetary goals. Most recently, in 2014, the Rockefeller Foundation co-sponsored a Lancet Report that defined the concept of "Planetary Health," which has become a powerful paradigm for rethinking not only health policy on a global scale, but also inspiring political, economic, and social ideas that spin on the selling point of the need to re-imagine the world we have.[3] The Berggruen Institute is leaving its own high-profile mark in relatively focused ways, including hiring academics out of increasingly fiscally depleted university settings, and setting ambitious global policy goals, of which the book under review here is one expression.

Children of a Modest Star takes its title from a W.H. Auden poem published in another age of overwhelming world crises, 1940.[4] Its message, according to the authors, was of human humility in the context of planetarity, which is here defined not in the conceptual terms of the Subaltern philosopher Gayatri Spivak's political reimagining, but as "the inescapability of our embeddedness in an Earth-spanning biogeochemical system" (8). The book's intent is firmly practical, not poetic, and definitely not meant as a "hopelessly utopian ideal political theory" (xii). Although the book is framed by academic debates (*vedi* its bibliography), and written by Blake and Gilman (a political scientist and historian respectively), they insist, and one of its reviewers here notes, it is purposely not an academic text. Indeed, Blake and Gilman declare it has been written for "political leaders."

The reviewers offer us extremely interesting and distinct framings for how to read the book, bringing to bear their own overlapping knowledge resources. Sabine Selchow, who herself writes about many of the

[1] "Planetary Summit," Berggruen Institute, https://berggruen.org/projects/planetary-summit.
[2] See for example, Matthew Schmelzer, "Born in the Corridors of the OECD," *Journal of Global History* 12:1 (2017): 26-48; Ludovic Tournès, *Philanthropic Foundations at the League of Nations: An Americanized League?* (Routledge, 2022).
[3] See Sarah Whitmee et. al., "Safeguarding Human Health in the Anthropocene Epoch: Report of The Rockefeller Foundation–*Lancet* Commission on Planetary Health," *The Lancet* 386:10007 (2015): https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(15)60901-1.
[4] W.H. Auden, "New Year Letter," in *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Vintage, 1991), 208.

governance issues and historical contexts relevant here, helpfully outlines the chapters.[5] She also carefully parses its possibilities through a listing of what it is not, using the authors' own guidelines. All the reviewers note the book's emphasis on the nation-state as *the problem*; some of the book is devoted to a (not uncontestable) historical overview of the origins of the national form of territorial sovereignty and the ways in which it has shaped current global governance institutions, and their shortcomings. The authors show less interest in the place of capitalism in their account of a planetary future. Nor do they engage any of the existing scholarly discussions focused on radically alternative indigenous forms of planetarity, as a guide to a functional "planetary subsidiarity."[6] The emphasis here instead is on how multiscalar governance—planetary, national and local—might work.

Ultimately, the three reviewers here do not fully agree on a reading of where the study fits. For Stephanie Fischel, an IR scholar, the book is accessible, conversational and useful for teaching.[7] For Selchow, the unanswered questions outweigh the book's proposed solution. Simon Dalby, who researches environmental security, feels that despite the authors' anti-academic protestations, the book is a "welcome addition to contemporary social science discussions of what it is that needs to be done," extending discussions of "planetary social thought." [8]

The authors' response to these reviews suggests that it may be difficult for specialist scholars to review the book given its more applied or practical intent. That said, as they themselves acknowledge, even as a provocation their study leaves a long list of practical questions unanswered. What it does provide is a reminder of the power of ideas, and the urgent importance of bringing what we know, including having a strong sense of history, and its complexities, to bear on the challenges of the present "age of crises." The reviews here underscore both the potential of their thinking, its long lineages, and the hard work still to be done.

While *Children of a Modest Star* does not situate itself in any particular genre, dreaming of new worlds has a long history of responses to crises. The global, like the "international," which are both now subject to critique, were equally responses to the limits of the national state in particular.[9] And as Blake and Gilman proffer, it is time for a new lens on how we might be and think in the universe, as children of a modest star. In Venice, at the same time as the Planetary Summit was taking place in November 2024, another event was

[5] See Sabine Selchow, "Planetary Disasters: Moving the UN Disaster Risk Reduction Framework into Cosmopolitised Reality," *Environmental Politics* 31:1 (2022): 28-48.
[6] See for example, the essays in Ann McGrath, Ann and Lynette Russell, *The Routledge Companion to Global Indigenous History*, 1st ed., (Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2022).
[7] See Stephanie Fischel, "The Global Tree: Forests and the Possibility of a Multispecies IR," *Review of International Studies*. 49:2 (2023): 223-240, and Fischel, "Can Climate Nationalism Save Us?" *New Perspectives 29*:2 (2021): 208-214.
[8] He is author of *Pyromania: Fire and Geopolitics in a Climate Disrupted World* (Agenda, 2024), *Rethinking Environmental Security* (Edward Elgar, 2022) and *Anthropocene Geopolitics: Globalization, Security, Sustainability* (University of Ottawa Press, 2020).
[9] See for example, Jeremy Adelman, "What is Global History Now," in *Aeon*, 2 March 2017, https://aeon.co/essays/is-global-history-still-possible-or-has-it-had-its-moment; or Frederick Cooper, "What is the Concept of Globalization Good for? An African Historian's Perspective," *African Affairs* 100:399 (2001), 189-213.

open to the public down the road: the South African artist William Kentridge's playful series of COVID-made studio videos, which ponder the significance of the gap between the world we have and the world we want in order to emphasize the importance of utopia as a goal. And while Gilman and Blake eschew their book's utopian and poetic dimensions, and insist on the importance of both being practical and reaching a wide audience, their offering fits into the increasingly acknowledged and accepted need among scholars and policy-makers alike to imagine alternatives to the present way of doing politics. We have been here before, but this time the stakes are higher.

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Nils Gilman is Executive Vice President at the Berggruen Institute and Deputy Editor of *Noema Magazine*. He is the author of *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), co-editor of *Deviant Globalization: Black Market Economy in the 21st Century* (Continuum, 2011), and co-author, with Jonathan S. Blake, of *Children of a Modest Star: Planetary Thinking for an Age of Crises* (Stanford University Press, 2024). His current research focuses on the epistemology of the future.

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Review by Simon Dalby, Wilfrid Laurier University and University of Victoria

The necessity of addressing the multiple current global crises seems to have become ever more pressing. It is time for scholars to turn their attention to how to do so, and a very necessary preliminary step must be one of simply thinking about the appropriate contextualization for both analysis and policy prescription. Many existing institutions are ill-equipped for tackling what is now often referred to as the polycrisis.[1] Likewise, it has long been clear that many existing institutions are mostly premised on contextualizations that are if not dangerous, simply outdated. Global institutions have so far spectacularly failed to effectively grapple with the rapidly accelerating phenomena related to climate change as well as other issues of biodiversity, artificial intelligence, financial instability, and economic disparities.

Not least, existing governance arrangements are frequently not constituted at the appropriate scale to be effective. Notions of subsidiarity—of governance at the smallest spatial unit for efficacy—are one way into a discussion about scale, mandate, and competence. This is the route into questions of governance that Blake and Gilman take in their volume. Geography matters! It is, however, rarely the whole story, despite popular articulations of geography as destiny and the usually unquestioned invocation of geographical terms in political discourse.

Likewise current institutions mostly do not have arrangements to plan effectively for long-term matters, climate being only the most obvious.[2] Both biodiversity and climate change are matters for the long term even though short-term decisions are urgently needed to keep long-term options open. Climate change has become very urgent precisely because of the failure, over the last few decades, to grapple with its long-term consequences. We are now living in the future that climate scientists warned us about more than a generation ago;[3] warnings that were not heeded, not least because the planetary context itself was not taken seriously by decision makers. The continued failure to do so is leading us all into increasingly perilous times.

These are not new questions, but the concatenation of difficulties in recent years makes addressing them urgent. The global heat anomaly of 2023 and early 2024, marked by both terrestrial and ocean surface temperature records being broken at record pace, is especially alarming to anyone watching the transformation of the earth system. Hence, focused as it is on the need to think carefully in terms of this context, of "planetarity", *Children of a Modest Star* is a welcome addition to contemporary social science discussions of what it is that needs to be done. It usefully extends discussions of both planetary social

[1] Michael Lawrence, Thomas Homer-Dixon, Scott Janzwood, Johan Rockstöm, Ortwin Renn, and Jonathan F. Donges, "Global Polycrisis: The Causal Mechanisms of Crisis Entanglement," *Global Sustainability* 7 (2024): https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/global-sustainability/article/global-polycrisis-the-causal-mechanisms-of-crisis-entanglement/06F0F8F3B993A22197115 1E3CB054B5E .

[2] Thomas Hale, *Long Problems: Climate Change and the Challenge of Governing Across Time* (Princeton University Press, 2024).

[3] Stephen H. Schneider, *Global Warming: Are We Entering the Greenhouse Century?* (Sierra Club Books, 1989).

thought and reflections on how remarkably persistent notions of territorial sovereignty are despite the economic and social transformations of recent decades.[4]

It is especially welcome because it attempts to grapple with the changing material context in which novel governance mechanisms are needed. The pernicious separation of natural sciences from the social sciences that has bedeviled both research and policy formulation in so many fields for far too long is gradually being questioned, and the condition of planetarity—of human societies being participants in a dynamic ecosphere, rather than appendages on a separate planetary substrate—is one of the key necessary contextual corrections that is obviously needed. It adds usefully to the ongoing discussion of the category of the planetary in contrast to the global,[5] and simultaneously avoids the trap of simply moving from international relations to a politics of the world without thinking through how this move fails to escape grappling with the difficulties of persistent sovereignty claims.[6]

There is a now a long history of attempts to tackle the global *problématique* with its complicated interconnection of technical and political matters in various genres. The recent cinematic reconstruction of the history of the development of the atomic bomb in the award-winning *Oppenheimer* movie includes the key theme of whether these devices should even be considered for use as weapons.[7] Once loose in the world how might they be controlled? And once politicians who are interested primarily in dominance get control of the devices, what then is the responsibility of the scientists who made them? The aftermath of the Second World War offered tantalizing glimpses of a world that might have been different if the Baruch plan for international control of nuclear technologies, or something similar which supported international control of the weapons and related nuclear technologies, had been instituted.

But geopolitics triumphed: mutual suspicion and attempts to dominate a divided world overcame the better instincts of nuclear scientists and diplomats who were anxious to confront the novel dangers generated by the Manhattan project, and its imitators, first in the Soviet Union and subsequently elsewhere. Blake and Gilman ruefully remind us that the initial promise of the United Nations in terms of a peaceful future dissipated even while the other agendas, in terms of what quickly was codified as development, took shape. Movements such as the world federalists, and assumptions that a world government was needed to deal with nuclear technology, mostly faded from view to be replaced by the reassertion of *raison d'état* and a Cold War rivalry that endangered one and all. Crucially, too, the authors remind us that a world order that is based on territorially sovereign states did not have to be the outcome of the mid-twentieth century

[4] See respectively: Nigel Clark and Bronislaw Szerszynski, *Planetary Social Thought: The Anthropocene Challenge to the Social Sciences.* (Polity, 2021) and Daniel Matthews, *Earthbound: The Aesthetics of Sovereignty in the Anthropocene.* (Edinburgh University Press, 2021).

[5] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *One Planet, Many Worlds: The Climate Parallax.* (Chicago University Press, 2022). See also "From the Global to the Planetary: A Conversation with Glenda Sluga, Stephen Macekura, and Jonathan Blake," H-Diplo|RJISSF Roundtable Discussion, 01 June 2023; https://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/jrd-2023.pdf.

[6] Robert B. J. Walker *After the Globe, Before the World* (Routledge 2010).

[7] *Oppenheimer*, directed by Christopher Nolan (Universal Pictures, 2023).

political reorganization that came with the end of European empires. But states are what emerged, often justified by at least the promise of "development."

Simultaneously, attempts to grapple with the related matters of food supplies, population growth, persistent poverty and health crises, and then pollution extended the discussion about development into a larger discussion of the global *problematique*.[8] Noteworthy is the Stockholm United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in 1972 with its background report that specified matters as *Only One Earth*.[9] Institutional innovation has generated numerous new organizations and think tanks that monitor all manner of things, many of them based in Washington given the prominence of American policy in driving global concerns. They mostly emerged from what is usually called the environmental movement, but despite this, the gravity of the situation has not been incorporated into governance priorities even if some notable narrow successes, such as the ozone layer regime, have tackled key issues.[10]

This success with stratospheric ozone, notably because it was a flexible arrangement that encouraged innovation and research as part of its process, illustrates Blake and Gilman's argument that governance needs to focus on practices, rather than territorial units. But alas: such modes of thinking repeatedly run into overriding claims of sovereignty and spatial arrangements. The initial responses to COVID-19, and the subsequent arguments about its origin and who was responsible, made it clear that planetary health issues remain hostage to territorial state prerogatives, which are not the appropriate mode of governance. The vector of disease in the form of that mutating virus is not sensitive to borders and passports. While quarantine measures may be partly effective in some situations, they are at best a stopgap and temporary measure. The deference shown by the World Health Organization (WHO) to nation states, and the cost of guaranteed, albeit constrained, access to states, hampered both investigations and the coordination of health interventions.

The sheer number of international treaties and agreements, with related agencies to monitor and report, should suggest that matters are firmly in hand.[11] As Blake and Gilman note, however, in the last few years when the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, the accelerating global extinction event, and, in Washington, a rebellion in what is supposed to be a functioning democracy, have marked news coverage of current events, clearly governance of many things is failing to make a better, safer, or more sustainable world. This is the case not least because of multiple failures to take the condition of planetarity seriously in politics or governance. Zoonotic diseases, of which COVID-19 is just the latest, are generated by human interactions with animals, and as wildlife's range is constrained and farm animals come to dominate terrestrial biomass, more will emerge.[12] This emphasizes the point that humanity is part of a rapidly changing biosphere, rather than apart from it in any meaningful sense.

[8] Richard Falk, *This Endangered Planet: Prospects and Proposals for Human Survival* (Random House, 1971).
[9] Barbara Ward and René Dubos, *Only One Earth: The Care and Maintenance of a Small Planet* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972).
[10] Robert Falkner, *Environmentalism and Global Society* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).
[11] Michael Zurn, *A Theory of Global Governance: Authority, Legitimacy & Contestation.* (Oxford University Press 2018).
[12] Andrew P. Dobson et. al., "Ecology and Economics for Pandemic Prevention," *Science* 369:6502 (2020): 379-381.

Most telling perhaps, in Blake and Gilman's discussion, is the comparison between the success of smallpox eradication and the failure to deal with malaria. The human-to-human transmission in the former case made it possible to tackle disease spread directly. The matter of the mosquito vector in malaria transmission led to a failed attempt to use pesticides to eliminate mosquitos in some ecosystems, and hence indirectly limit the disease. This revealed the key point that humans are part of an ecosphere, not distinct from the earth. Hence the importance of planetarity, recognizing that governance has to focus on the material circumstances that need attention, not on isolated vectors apart from the larger ecological situation. How to think about a multispecies politics in order to ensure that ecological fecundity is a key principle in planetary governance follows on from this.[13]

The difficulties are immense, but for all the innovative thinking in *Children*, there is a danger that the territorial sovereignty premise persists despite the focus on scale as a key consideration. Thinking about matters at the global scale might actually suggest that these are matters that do not have any obvious spatial dimensions to how they are governed. There are technical matters, such as airline safety, radio frequency demarcations, and vaccinations that rightly should not have any spatial dimensions. Is this a matter best considered as scale at all? This might seem to be a quibble, but it does suggest that the implicit geographical vocabulary in all this might be usefully interrogated even more carefully. The image of the territorial state as the sine qua non for governance seems to have snuck into Blake and Gilman's narrative.

The use of the loose framework of planetary means that national and local issues run into questions of scale directly, as the authors note, given the patchwork of jurisdictions that comprise the state framework that supposedly houses nations (9). Quite what Tuvalu and China, or Bolivia and Monaco have in common as useful political or administrative categories is rarely clear. Nonetheless, the vocabulary of governance is caught up with these entities. As Blake and Gilman note too (226, n 10), this is even more complicated when de facto independent states persist, with ambiguous citizenship for their residents, and aspirations in many cases for full recognized independence. If the authors' suggested planetary atmospheric steward, or for that matter their other suggestion, the planetary pandemic agency, are to be effective, this question of sovereignty must be confronted. In Paris in 2015 the planetary problem of climate change was deputed to sovereign states,[14] and that has not worked very well, at least so far, given the continuous rise in carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere.

The point about practices rather than spatial units takes on a particularly interesting twist in terms of environmental management. Best practices should be applied in particular ecosystems, and these not only cross frontiers in many places but are also to be found in politically diverse regions of the world, even if they are very similar in terms of landscapes, climate, and species mixes. Here Blake and Gilman's argument nicely parallels John Head's work on governance regimes for biomes where traditional state spaces and sovereignty are an obstacle to adopting best practices in similar ecosystems regardless of where they are on

[13] Stefanie Fishel, *The Microbial State: Global Thriving and The Body Politic* (University of Minnesota Press 2017).
[14] Robert Falkner "The Paris Agreement and the New Logic of International Climate Politics," *International Affairs* 92:5 (2016): 1107-1125.

the planet's surface.[15] While this is not exactly subsidiarity, focusing on practices and places rather than sovereign jurisdiction offers innovative governance possibilities.

A further wrinkle comes from concerns about climate change and extinction; biomes need to move in response to changing climates and invasive species may be those that are forced to move as habitat migrates. Once again, fixed spatial jurisdictions are a problem rather than a solution to much needed governance. But the geography is not a matter of scale, it is a matter of the multiple places that matter, something that international agreements, such as the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, suggest can be tackled by thinking of best practices subject to the specifics of particular places. That said, the contrast between what is practical in Rotterdam and Jakarta, two cities facing inundation which are discussed in this volume, emphasizes the point that, in Dipesh Chrakabarty's terms, while the planet is one, the human condition, and the capabilities of actors in different places are not.[16] Rotterdam has all sorts of hydrological engineering options that Jakarta simply cannot afford, at least not yet.

Working at the smallest scale may be a good principle, but the practicalities of local administration are often hostage to reactionary impulses and are always vulnerable to invocations of sovereignty to deny the importance of the ecological matters that stretch beyond the local context. Property developers who try to build on ecological refugia in small but crucial ecosystems on migration flyways are emblematic of the difficulties of assuming that small is necessarily beautiful. Self-determination may be a widely praised virtue in political discourse, but in a world that is best understood in terms of planetarity, in many cases it does not necessarily help. It may indeed be anything but useful where local tyrannies persist. Thus, scale too is a contested political formulation, one that unavoidably haunts Blake and Gilman's text.

The most important point in all this is the emphasis on humanity as embedded in a dynamic planetary context, one that the rich and powerful are now shaping by their investment decisions, which determine what gets produced with what consequences. This crucial shift in focus to thinking about humanity as shaping the future configuration of the planet's biosphere is a welcome one. The rich and powerful among us have effectively become geoengineers, reluctant though most analysts are to accept that this has already happened.[17] But this is the world in which we now all live, and matters of how to rethink key political notions that are more appropriate for these novel circumstances are now unavoidable.

One notable silence in *Children* concerns notions of national security, which is often regarded as the most important priority for states. It too implies, although frequently fails, to operate on the basis of implicit territorial logics. But it does so usually with the related pernicious implication that this is a matter of protection from external threats, and a matter of rivalries between spatial entities.[18] The relative silence in this volume on this theme is actually useful precisely because the condition of planetarity makes the

[15] John Head, *A Global Corporate Trust for Agroecological Integrity: New Agriculture in a World of Legitimate Ecostates* (Routledge. 2019).
[16] Chakrabarty, *Climate Parallax*.
[17] Gwynne Dyer, *Intervention Earth: Life-Saving Ideas from the World's Climate Engineers* (Random House. 2024).
[18] Gerard Toal, *Oceans Rise Empires Fall: How Geopolitics Hastens Climate Catastrophe* (Oxford University Press, 2024).

imposition of such modes of governance the problem to be addressed in many cases, not the solution to difficulties that ostensibly originate "out there" somewhere.

The related question is one of where discourses of protection might actually be useful in these new circumstances. The increasingly artificial world of the Anthropocene focuses attention on what is produced and how it shapes dangers, rather than on taken-for-granted contexts which may be dangerous.[19] This is of course not a new insight; the dangers of nuclear warfare made this point clear long ago and raised issues of global security to a priority in international politics. Reducing the spread of nuclear weapons, which was a matter of non-proliferation in the terms of the arms control regime that was established to attempt to reduce the dangers, is now being invoked as another approach to climate change.[20]

Given the existential threats to many peoples that climate disruptions present, this suggests to many activists that reducing the production of fossil fuels, and in particular stopping the further exploration and exploitation of new sources, is an essential addition to the so far ineffectual efforts to reduce emissions under the Paris Agreement. Such questions of how to manage the planetary system are no longer avoidable, and Blake and Gilman have done all social scientists a favor by focusing our attention on the necessity of thinking about planetarity and subsidiarity together. They have also usefully indicated how difficult it is to do so.

[19] Simon Dalby, *Rethinking Environmental Security* (Edward Elgar, 2022).

[20] Peter Newell, Harro van Asselt, and Freddie Daley "Building a Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty: Key Elements," *Earth System Governance* 14 (2022): https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esg.2022.100159; Newell and Angela Carter, "Understanding Supply Side Climate Policies: Towards an Interdisciplinary Framework," *International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law, and Economics* 24 (2024): 7-26.

Review by Stefanie R. Fishel, Planet Politics Institute and University of the Sunshine Coast

I teach International Relations (IR) and Global Environmental Politics at a small university on the east coast of Australia. My classes are part of a small Bachelor of Arts program and mainly serve as electives for programs outside of my school. As a result, I do not teach my discipline as much as the other larger programs, but rather I play to my strengths and focus on how my students might understand their wider world in more connected and ethical way, asking them to consider the nature of their personal relationship with the wider world. Therefore, my biggest goal in the classroom, as in my research, is to gently question the world "as it is" and reflect on how we could live differently to support human coexistence with this remarkable planet and its myriad beings. I do not worry if the students have not read the canon or remain ignorant about IR and its "great debates," but I do care about giving students the needed skills to be thoughtful and engaged global citizens.

Children of a Modest Star would serve as an excellent text for these classes, while also being a serious scholarly work. Written in an accessible and engaging way, Jonathan Blake and Nils Gilman's narrative embodies the book's title: it is modest, but it points toward a productive way in which global institutions could be reoriented toward the realities of a changing planet. The writing style is conversational, and they have translated complex debates and conceptualizations about the planetary into a form that policy makers and the interested lay reader alike can understand. Their commitment to thinking deeply about the enormous and rapid changes that will be needed to respond to the polycrisis named the Anthropocene is apparent in all the work they do at the Institute and in this book.[1]

Importantly, it stands as an example of an institutional analysis that meaningfully includes the more-than-human at the planetary level. They accomplish this by beginning with global issues and problems rather than starting with already existing institutions. They ask, "What would governance look like if our planetary condition was central rather than ancillary to our political self-conceptions" (4)? They push the reader to think, imagine, and build beyond the nation-state supported by a clear discussion of how the nation-state became hegemonic and the issues this hegemony created.

My long-term intellectual project has also been this very question along with the attendant critique of the nation-state as container for (post) modern politics. Blake and Gilman work through issues of governance, rather than my path, which is through the ontological, ethical, or perhaps even the moral implications of the planetary crisis, especially at scale. How do we reimagine planetary politics as more ethical, more just, more equitable—kinder and gentler to humans and the more-the humans with whom we share this earth? Beginning with "Planet Politics: A Manifesto for the End of IR,"[2] continuing in *The Microbial State*,[3] and in my forthcoming book with Anthony Burke, *The Ecology Politic: Power, Law, and Earth in the Anthropocene*,[4] I

[1] I write as an erstwhile colleague of the authors through the Berggruen Institute and the Multispecies Constitution Project: https://berggruen.org/projects/the-multispecies-constitution-project.

[2] Anthony Burke et al., "Planet Politics: A Manifesto from the End of IR," *Millennium* 44:3 (June 1, 2016): 499-523.

[3] Stefanie R. Fishel, *The Microbial State: Global Thriving and the Body Politic* (The University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

[4] Burke and Fishel, *The Ecology Politic: Power, Law and Earth in the Anthropocene* (The MIT Press, 2025).

have thought about how humans could live, and maybe even learn to thrive, on a complex and magical planet transformed by human technology.

A planetary approach must put a habitable planet at the forefront.

All institutions must foreground this habitable planet and all those advocating for the planet must demand accountability. At the end, questioning of the status quo must put care of planetary systems at the top of its concerns. Will we be able to breathe? To eat? Will the Earth regress to a more primitive level of biodiversity? How do we remember that the condition of possibility for human politics is a living planet?

Children of a Modest Star answers this question clearly in the plans for two planetary institutions: one for the atmosphere and one for the microscopic with a "baseline level of stable planetary habitability" (164) as the goal. Rethinking planetary institutions[5] is a project of mine (especially in my collaborations with Anthony Burke) where we have thought about how "nature" or natural systems might be represented at the UN through the creation of Ecological Security Council with planetary governance divided by bioregions where states, Indigenous peoples, and scientific knowledge (both Western and Indigenous) are accountable to the human and nonhuman through transparent and democratic processes. The proposals in *Children of Modest Star* are complimentary and balance the most pressing of global crises— anthropogenic climate change and the global health crisis most recently playing out with the COVID-19 pandemic—with a pragmatic view of existing institutions and how they could be reformed. The book takes existing frameworks and makes them more responsive to what the authors call "seeing like a planet" (175-179).

In what I assume to be a respectful nod to one of the best books on the logic of the state, *Seeing like a State* by James C. Scott,[6] the authors' concept of "seeing like a planet" includes proposals for two agencies at the international level that respond to pressing global issues. The first, the Planetary Atmospheric Steward, which combines scientific knowledge of the IPCC and enforcement capacity, and the second, the Planetary Pandemic Agency, which has the authority to enforce what the World Health Organization (WHO) does not, are excellent examples of what planetary governance could look like with the agency of the planet, its systems, and the human and more-than-human inhabitants at its heart. This book demonstrates the importance of stretching our imagination and how important this for stretching our institutions to meet the needs of the planets and its occupants in the twenty-first century.

The influence of Dipesh Chakrabarty and his work on history and planetary imagination and governance is clear. As I was reading *Children of a Modest Star*, I was reminded of Dipesh Chakrabarty's insistence in *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* that "it is entirely possible that planetary climate change is a problem that the UN was not set up to deal with."[7] It is this questioning of current planetary governance that bring

[5] Burke and Fishel, "Politics for the Planet: Why Nature and Wildlife Need Their Own Seats at the UN," The Conversation, June 30, 2016, http://theconversation.com/politics-for-the-planet-why-nature-and-wildlife-need-their-own-seats-at-the-un-59892.

[6] James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (Yale University Press, 1998).

[7] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (University of Chicago Press, 2021), loc. 302.

us back to our dangerously mismatched politics for the planet. Dipesh advocates for a capacious idea of the political and Blake and Gilman advocate for a capacious reformative zeal to our (yet to be) planetary institutions. For both, the planet calls on us to extend politics and justice to the nonhuman, including the living and the non-living: to create multi-species organizations of governance. Humans need to nurture lived experiences of ourselves as a species among over 8 million others and to understand that one species (or at least that large, affluent and excessively consuming chunk of it) does not have the right to wreck a planet that is shared by over 8 million others.

To put it in chemical terms, humans, both with their bodies and their institutions, are returning the planet to a pre-oxygen state. Of course, in the very long run, Earth is destined to become a planet with no oxygen as it was before the Great Oxygenation event, when it will be fully returned to the microbes in 10,000 to 2.8 billion years from now.[8] Science tells us of a future earth that will be consumed by our dying red sun or perhaps destroyed by the white dwarf that the sun becomes, but today is not that day.[9] While this distant cosmic future is a challenge for human politics, and understandably so, the ongoing Sixth Extinction and humanity's blatant disregard of planetary boundaries are problems for now, and exactly what this book addresses.

One of my favorite provocations in the book is the authors' query as to what would change if human beings are revealed not as masters of the planet but part of it (4). Ultimately, there is no "reveal" necessary: this should have been clear all along. We have, as we say in critical theory, always already been planetary, or cosmological, a fact to which many non-Western and Indigenous traditions can attest. While no book can do everything, a broader engagement with these traditions will certainly help readers to imagine different institutions that can draw on the rich and diverse human communities on the planet to expand and transform mainstream understandings of international relations to one that embodies a relational ethos rather than a survivalist one.[10] This book clearly marks the beginning of both a research project and a blueprint for potential institutional reform. The stakes have never been higher. *Children of a Modest Star* presses the reader to reflect on more than modesty, but rather to respond to an extraordinary planet that is in need of wise, kind and just governance for all species.

[8] Karina Shah, "Most Life on Earth Will Be Killed by Lack of Oxygen in a Billion Years," *New Scientist*, 1 March 2021, https://www.newscientist.com/article/2269567-most-life-on-earth-will-be-killed-by-lack-of-oxygen-in-a-billion-years/.

[9] Jamie Grierson, "Study Sheds Light on the White Dwarf Star, Likely Destroyer of Our Solar System," *The Guardian*, 9 April 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/science/2024/apr/09/study-sheds-light-on-the-white-dwarf-star-likely-destroyer-of-our-solar-system.

[10] Mary Graham and Morgan Brigg, "Indigenous International Relations: Old Peoples and New Pragmatism," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 77: 6 (November 2, 2023): 590-599, https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2023.2265847.

Review by Sabine Selchow, European University Institute

I agreed to review Jonathan Blake and Nils Gilman's *Children of a Modest Star* for this H-Diplo roundtable before the book was published, i.e. before I was able to read it. I did not find writing this review easy. This is not because I did not enjoy reading the book. I did enjoy it, and found the book engaging. My trouble is that *Children of a Modest Star* does not fall into the genre of an *academic* book. This is not to say that it should be an academic book, or that the authors pretend it is. It means, however, that the review criteria provided by the editors of this roundtable simply do not work for *Children of a Modest Star*. If I had to apply them, I would run the danger of doing injustice to the book and its purpose.

Children of a Modest Star deals with a concern that has been central to the social and political science scholarship of the past 30 years, namely how to govern global collective action problems, such as climate change, and organize human life in a sustainable way. However, it does not advance a distinct identified academic debate on this issue. The book is embedded within a rich web of references to writings across various academic disciplines. Yet, these references do not form a critical conversation with the respective publications; they are used to confirm Blake and Gilman's claims. Consequently, at times, existing debates are left out or brushed over and concepts are detached from their intellectual histories, as well as epistemological premises. Echoing the comments of another reviewer,[1] it is not always made apparent in the book that Blake and Gilman's observations have been discussed in various contexts for some time. Overall, *Children of a Modest Star* provides more propositions than fully-fledged arguments. And yet, acknowledging the book's genre and purpose, none of this can be seen as a shortcoming. As the authors make clear, "[w]e hope our sketches here will be read not as proposals whose details are the essence of the matter but rather as provocations to spark imagination" (164).

Children of a Modest Star is not addressed to academics, for whom Blake and Gilman's central critical observation is not a new insight that a governance system that is grounded in nation-states is not well equipped to deal with contemporary collective action problems, such as climate change. The book is addressed to "political leaders" who the authors hope will "embrace" their ideas—even if not "immediately or comprehensively" (xii). Despite the fact that the book is meant for political leaders, however, Blake and Gilman make clear that *Children of a Modest Star* is not a "white paper or policy report" with practical solutions (xiii). The book provides the authors' *vision* of a new governance system. In confident and clear terms, *Children of a Modest Star* explains that national sovereignty is at the heart of our failure to adequately deal with climate change and other collective action problems, such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic. The book then provides the authors' idea of how to tackle the problem of national sovereignty. Their solution is to organize our collective existence on earth through a multiscalar, functionalist, and technocratic governance system that is shaped by the principle of subsidiarity and topped by institutions that guide life on all scales, and grounded in a particular kind of Western scientific knowledge.

[1] Erle C. Ellis, "'Centering Earth in Policy-Making,' Review of Jonathan S. Blake and Nils Gilman, *Children of a Modest Star: Planetary Thinking for an Age of Crises*," *Science*, 384:6693 (2024): 279-279, https://doi.org/10.1126/science.ado2345..

Although *Children of a Modest Star* is not written to address a distinct academic discourse, bits of the book material can be of interest to a range of scholars. I find *Children of a Modest Star* interesting as a contribution to contemporary efforts to reimagine the world with the help of the adjective "planetary," i.e. as a contribution to the various scholarly efforts to develop a new way of thinking about our world that is grounded in an acknowledgment of the essential enmeshments of human and non-human species, the realities of the Anthropocene, and the fundamental failure of existing institutions.[2]

Children of a Modest Star is divided into eight chapters, including an introduction and conclusion. The first two chapters deal with Blake and Gilman's main concern. The authors elaborate on the emergence of the "national state" as the "sole legitimate container of sovereignty" (37) in the twentieth century, its existence as a "hegemon" (15) in the governance of human life, the nature of the contemporary governance structure as one in which institutions and organizations are designed around this hegemon, and the inadequacy of this system and its current institutions to "effectively manage planetary issues" (12). The term "effectively" features prominently in the book. With the term "planetary issues," Blake and Gilman refer to collective action problems, such as pandemics and climate change.

In their introduction and throughout the book, the authors make clear that their assessment captures "the world as it is" (108) as the basis for their suggestion of how the world should be. The authors stress that

> [w]e do not start from abstract assumptions or presume a blank slate from which we can construct a society of transcendental beauty, one that attains perfect peace, perfect justice, perfect health and abundance for all. We work with politics and the planet as we see them—warts and all(xii).

Chapter 3 captures the "condition of planetarity," the second central aspect of how Blake and Gilman see "the world as it is." The authors outline this condition by "explor[ing] an interdisciplinary archive of Western science and philosophy to track the emergence of the concept of the Planetary" (74). Blake and Gilman acknowledge that "holistic and environmentally focused intellectual and spiritual traditions exist in most if not all cultures" (248). Yet they explicitly state that they only rely on the

> the Western lineage of this tradition of thought because of the way that this tradition has been in dialogue with both the precision-oriented Western sciences and the Western

[2] It is hard to know where to start with references but see, for instance, Frank Biermann and Agni Kalfagianni. "Planetary Justice: A Research Framework," *Earth System Governance* 6 (2020): https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esg.2020.100049; Anthony Burke, Stefanie Fishel, Audra Mitchell, Simon Dalby, and Daniel J. Levine. "Planet Politics: A Manifesto from the End of IR, " Millennium 44:3 (2016): 499-523; Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Planetary Crises and the Difficulty of Being Modern," *Millennium*, 46:3 (2018), 259-282. https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829818771277; Lorenzo Marsili, *Planetary Politics: A Manifesto* (Polity Press, 2020); Nigel Clark and Bronislaw Szerszynski. *Planetary Social Thought: The Anthropocene Challenge to the Social Sciences* (John Wiley & Sons, 2020); Frederic Hanusch, Claus Leggewie, and Erik Meyer, *Planetar Denken: Ein Einstieg* (Transcript Verlag, 2021); and many more, including many cited in Blake and Gilman.

> political traditions that underpin the predominant political and governance institutions of the present (248).

Accordingly, for Blake and Gilman the history of "the concept of the Planetarity" started in the late-nineteenth century with naturalists Charles Darwin and Ernst Haeckel and has its roots in the work of geologist Vladimir I. Vernadsky and philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin in the 1920s (76-80). The concept captures a holistic and systemic understanding of the enmeshment of lives and the planet, as it now underlies contemporary Earth-system science. In *Children of a Modest Star* the "concept of the Planetarity" is one of three aspects of the "condition of planetarity." Blake and Gilman describe the "condition of planetarity" as follows:

> From the late nineteenth century, a series of concepts were developed—ecology, ecosystem, biosphere, Gaia, and the Anthropocene, among others—that built on each other in a register of holistic systems thinking, eventually culminating in the category of the Planetary as a postanthropocentric understanding of the Earth. This intellectual genealogy unfolded in parallel to two additional, crucial developments: first, the material intensification of anthropogenic effects on the planet through the simultaneous growth of the number of humans and our resource usage; and second, the growth of planetary instrumentation, that is, technologies of perception—sensors, satellites, cameras, computers, and more—that have helped reveal and make sense of the effects that this intensification is having on the planet as a whole. The emergence of these three phenomena—the intellectual development of the concept of the Planetary, the intensification of anthropogenic effects on the planet, and the development of a technosphere capable of sensing those effect—reveals our condition of planetarity, representing at once an ontological transformation and an epistemic break with previous understandings of humans' position on the planet (75).

In other words, the "condition of planetarity" poses a profound threat to human existence on the planet (through "planetary issues," such as pandemics and climate change), while simultaneously holding the key to dealing with this threat through an understanding of its complex, anthropogenic, as well as planet-wide nature and the scientific and technological tools to measure it as the basis for its management. The scientific and technological knowledge that, in Blake and Gilman's view, is able to grasp "planetary issues" is called "planetary sapience" (93; the concept is borrowed from Benjamin Bratton.)[3] "Planetary sapience" is critical to achieving the central mission of today, which is to "keep the planet habitable for ourselves, our descendants, and all the other living beings that call this rocky sphere home" (7). For Blake and Gilman, the flourishing of non-human life is not a goal in itself but a means to sustain human life. The authors see the planet is a "vessel" of *human* life (96).

[3] Benjamin Bratton, "Planetary Sapience," *Noema Magazine*, 17 June 2021, https://www.noemamag.com/planetary-sapience/.

In the remaining three chapters Blake and Gilman provide their vision of a governance system that the authors believe will be able to achieve the goal of "effectively" managing planetary issues and securing human existence on a habitable planet. The authors present their vision as a desirable alternative to three scenarios they see might otherwise become an undesirable reality:

> (1) National states continue to hoard their sovereignty, planetary problems go unaddressed, and business as usual hums along: climate catastrophe, biodiversity collapse, recurrent pandemics with infectiousness and lethality that make us wistful for COVID-19. (2) An authoritarian planetary hegemon (likely based in Beijing) emerges to bring order to the chaos. (3) The status quo institutional matrix undertakes modest reforms— enhanced multilateral cooperation, for example—that prove to be sufficient (211).

Their solution is "a single worldwide governance architecture" that is "deliberate" and "multiscalar," without a "single centre of power" and "based on the need to govern specific functional issues" (109). The work of David Mitrany[4] features prominently as a theoretical anchor for Blake and Gilman. The proposed governance system is shaped by the principle of subsidiarity and designed around already existing institutions, including the nation-state. Yet, at its top, this new governance system has a new type of institution: "planetary institutions" which deal with "planetary issues" and are populated by scientists of "planetary sapience." Given Blake and Gilman see in "planetary sapience" the ability to precisely measure "planetary issues," "planetary institutions," driven by "planetary sapience," are authorized to set limits to individual and collective behavior across the globe and on lower scales. In the authors' imagination it is thanks to the precision of "planetary sapience" that these limits will be precisely what is needed to keep the planet a "habitable" place for humans. The authors' proposal is functionalist and, as they call it, an "unapologetic call for empowering technocracy" (189).

Blake and Gilman's governance architecture is a general sketch. Throughout the book, but especially in the concluding chapter, the authors pose a catalogue of "unanswered questions" (209-210) around their proposal. These questions range from "How will planetary institutions get their way if other institutions are unwilling to carry out planetary imperatives?" and "[W]hat's the role of coercion in planetary subsidiarity? As one friend of ours has pressed repeatedly: Where are the guns?" to "How will planetary institutions […] be funded?" (209) and who should be appointed to "planetary institutions" as holders of "planetary sapience," by whom, and how (210)?

Blake and Gilman's idea of a global governance system, topped by "planetary institutions" as limit-setting authorities, has not enthused me to the extent that I feel I want to follow this thread. I will wait until the authors or others have advanced answers to the list of "unanswered questions" before I might return to it. For now, I see value in following other threads on the complex question of how to organize and shape collective and individual behavior across the globe in the face of planetary boundaries and with the aim of dealing with the unintended and undesirable consequences of modern human life. One such thread is

[4] For example, David Mitrany, *A Working Peace System: An Argument for the Functional Development of International Organization* (Royal Institute for International Affairs, 1943).

outlined by Brand et al. in ideas such as "societal boundaries," and "collective autonomy and the politics of self-limitation."[5]

Throughout *Children of a Modest Star*, Blake and Gilman invite their readers to critically engage with their vision of how to govern the world and ask them to come up with "alternative institutional schemes" (xiii). Yet, for me, *Children of a Modest Star* is not so much an invitation to think about an alternative design of governance institutions. Rather, it invites me to complicate the *premises* on which Blake and Gilman start, i.e. their understanding of "the world as it is."

Blake and Gilman have read the work of scholars such as Donna Haraway, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Bruno Latour (90-91). For the authors, Haraway, Spivak, and Latour "have largely developed and deployed the idea of planetarity as a way to critique contemporary scientific practice" (91). Blake and Gilman position themselves in contrast to this and stress "we want to take the idea of planetarity seriously as a scientific concept. Specifically, we want to take the concept of the planet, and planetarity, as a spur to think differently about how we are to *govern* the issues associated with the Planetary" (91). Here is where I would like to complicate Blake and Gilman's story and their solution to our collective action problems. I would like to suggest that the authors overlook the fact that the diverse scholarship around Spivak, Haraway, Latour as well as Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing and Dipesh Chakrabarty, who also feature in *Children of a Modest Star*, is about more than questioning "contemporary scientific practice." It is about more than the tools to deal with the issues Blake and Gilman call "planetary issues." These scholars in their individual ways come up with fundamentally different ontologies. They each live in conceptual worlds that are different from that of Blake and Gilman; just consider Latour's distinction between Gaians and humans.[6]

In these worlds, then, the issues that humans (or Gaians) are confronted with are of a different nature. They are not issues of a different scale, as it is implied in Blake and Gilman's idea of "planetary issues," but issues of a different kind. For Blake and Gilman, the challenges posed by the "planetary condition" are first and foremost issues of a new *scale*. "Planetary issues," as they are imagined by Blake and Gilman, do not challenge the premises and concepts with which we understand the world, including the understanding of what is knowable to begin with. They are issues that can be managed through an adjusted system of modern institutions and through the application of *better* Western scientific knowledge with its "commitment to precision and falsifiability" (12). Starting from any of the different premises provided by the diverse scholarship around Latour and many others, however, the task is not simply to find a better version of the

[5] Ulrich Brand et. al., "From Planetary to Societal Boundaries: An Argument for Collectively Defined Self-Limitation," *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy*, 17:1 (2021): 264-291, DOI:10.1080/15487733.2021.1940754. For critical assessments see Blake Alcott, "Comment on Ulrich Brand et al., 'From Planetary to Societal Boundaries,'" *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy* 18:1 (2022): 443-450 https://doi.org/10.1080/15487733.2022.2082124; Ingolfur Blühdorn, "Planetary Boundaries, Societal Boundaries, and Collective Self-Limitation: Moving beyond the Post-Marxist Comfort Zone," *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy* 18:1 (2022): 576-589, https://doi.org/10.1080/15487733.2022.2099124 .

[6] Sabine Selchow, "Die Apokalypse Duldet Keinen Sachzwang: Ein Gespräch Mit Ulrich Beck Und Bruno Latour," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 15 May 2014, https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/ulrich-beck-und-bruno-latour-zur-klimakatastrophe-12939499.html.

same kind of knowledge or to adjust and extend existing kinds of governance institutions. The task is to rethink the nature of existing institutions to begin with.

For example, starting from the premises provided by the literature on reflexive modernization, which is a literature I am familiar with, the problem to be overcome is not simply the "hegemonic" nature of the nation-state (15), and/or the principle of national sovereignty, and/or the problem that "national leaders" might not want to "give up power" (134). The problem sits deeper and is more profound. It is the modern, "national outlook" and methodological nationalism with their conceptual language and grammar, including the inside/outside and either/or dichotomies and the technology of risk, that need to be rethought and, one could say, overcome.[7] Following this particular literature, the 'national outlook' and methodological nationalism with their conceptual language and grammar have brought out some of the collective action problems that Blake and Gilman capture with the term "planetary issues," most prominently human-induced climate change, as a *success* of modernization. In other words, they are the result of past "industrial, that is, techno-economic decisions and considerations of utility,"[8] grounded in the 'national outlook' and the modern technology of risk.

This means that the realities of problems like climate change are the product of the reflexive backfiring of modernization. The problem is then that in this process the very success of modernization undermines its own institutions and premises. As a result, its undesired consequences, such as climate change, cannot be tackled grounded in the same institutions that have brought them out as their "success." This turns these existing institutions into zombie institutions.[9] Stated in a pointed manner, one could say that the problem to tackle is the reality that these institutions reproduce the world with which we are struggling. But that is not all. Taking a step further, the "national outlook" and methodological nationalism, with their conceptual language and grammar, do not actually grasp "the world as it is" because lived realities are not "national" to begin with. Rather, lived realities are shaped by the enmeshments that Blake and Gilman capture, including profound human enmeshments beyond national borders as unintended side effects of all sorts of actions.

[7] See, e.g. Ulrich Beck, *The Cosmopolitan Vision* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006); Beck, "The Cosmopolitan Condition: Why Methodological Nationalism Fails, " *Theory, Culture & Society* 24:7-8 (2007): 286-290; Beck and Natan Sznaider, "Unpacking Cosmopolitanism for the Social Sciences: A Research Agenda," *The British Journal of Sociology*, 57:1 (2006): 1-23, DOI:10.1111/j.1468-4446.2006.00091.x.; Beck, *Der Kosmpolitische Blick, Oder, Krieg Ist Frieden* (Suhrkamp, 2004), 133; Anders Blok and Selchow, "Special Theme Introduction: Methodological Cosmopolitanism across the Socio-cultural Sciences, " *Global Networks* 20:3 (2020): 489-499, DOI:10.1111/glob.12292; Selchow, "Starting Somewhere Different: Methodological Cosmopolitanism and the Study of World Politics," *Global Networks*, 20:3 (2020): 544-563, DOI:10.1111/glob.12262.

[8] Beck, *Risk Society*, 98.

[9] E.g. Beck in Christiane Grefe, "Freiheit statt Kapitalismus: Was bedeuten heute noch Begriffe wie Klasse, Familie, Arbeit, Betrieb? Die Sozialwissenschaftler Ulrich Beck und Richard Sennett über die Schwierigkeiten des modernen Individuums, eine neue Orientierung zu finden," *Die Zeit*, 6 April 2000, https://www.zeit.de/2000/15/200015.beck_sennett_.xml.

I am not suggesting that the specific literature I am referring to here is the measure of all things and should necessarily be taken up by Blake and Gilman or anybody else. I am referring to it because *I* find it fruitful, and because it is easy to summarize to provide an example in the limited space available here. Different but in a way similar points are to be made if one started with Latour's or the premises of the other authors Blake and Gilman mention. The point is that in any case, from such alternative perspectives, the urgent task is not so much to come up with ever more and extended governance ideas and experiments that might *manage* "planetary issues." The point is not even only to rethink and adjust existing institutions to manage them. The urgent task is to come up with a new language and grammar that can grasp planetary realities to begin with. Even if all their "unanswered questions" are answered, Blake and Gilman's "planetary institutions" might be able to *manage* pandemics and climate change, yet, they would not be able to overcome the realities and the politics of the "sustainable non-sustainability"[10] of our lifestyles, which is at the heart of the problems we struggle to solve. Hence, their suggestions would not only not bring about the transformation that is needed to secure a habitable planet in the long run, they would also run the risk of reflexively fueling these realities.

I am keen to learn how others in this roundtable have read *Children of a Modest Star*. Overall, I find the book is as engaging contribution to the struggle over the complexity of our planetary realities. The authors are clear in what they aim to achieve and which audience they address. For me, the book triggers not just debate about how to govern our world but also about how the world that is to be governed actually looks. This is something positive because it is a debate that sits at the heart of our struggle to rethink how we should live and organize our collective existence on the planet. I wholeheartedly agree with Blake and Gilman that we need a "planetary thinking for an age of crises," as they put it in their subtitle. Yet, having read some of the same scholarly analyses as the authors did, including Tsing,[11] I cannot help feeling that such a new way of thinking needs to be at least as much about the "arts of living on a damaged planet"[12] as about how to best apply modern Western scientific insights, including those, for instance, which are gained through environmental sensing technologies,[13] the potential of which is unquestionable. Triggered by the work of Ingolf Blühdorn, I cannot help feeling that what is needed to find a way forward is a more fundamental questioning of the "text"[14] in which we are caught and from within which we keep reproducing the realities we try to overcome. This is something that is missing in *Children of a Modest Star*.

[10] Blühdorn, et al., *Nachhaltige Nicht-Nachhaltigkeit: warum die ökologische Transformation der Gesellschaft nicht stattfindet* (Transcript Verlag, 2020), DOI:10.14361/9783839445167.

[11] Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton University Press, 2017).

[12] Lowenhaupt Tsing et al., eds., *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

[13] E.g. Jennifer Gabrys, *Program Earth: Environmental Sensing Technology and the Making of a Computational Planet* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

[14] Blühdorn, "Haben wir es gewollt?," in *Nachhaltige Nicht-Nachhaltigkeit*, ed. Blühdorn, 13-27, here, 23.

Response by Jonathan S. Blake and Nils Gilman, Berggruen Institute

We want to begin by expressing our gratitude to our three reviewers, Simon Dalby, Stefanie Fishel, and Sabine Selchow, for their careful reading of our book; to Glenda Sluga for chairing this roundtable; and to Diane Labrosse for her thoughtful editorial work and managing the entire process. It is an honor to have *Children of a Modest Star* be the subject of an H-Diplo roundtable and we appreciate the opportunity to clarify and extend our arguments.

Let's begin with Fishel's point that our book "marks the beginning of both a research project and a blueprint for potential institutional reform." This is exactly right. In fact, we would expand this and argue that our book fits into a constellation of work (which prominently includes publications by all the participants in this roundtable) that we see as the beginning of a new *field*.[1] It is in this spirit of conscious field-building that we approach our response to the reviews. What makes a field of both academic study and real-world practice is a shared sense of the problem, of what concerns us and what doesn't, rather than a shared answer. As a result, our overall response to all reviews is "yes, and…." There is much more work to do!

Fishel pushes us to take "a broader engagement" with "Non-Western and Indigenous traditions," arguing that it would "expand and transform mainstream understandings of international relations" and help us "to imagine different institutions." We agree.[2] Thinking through how such traditions can contribute to debates on new models of planetary politics and governing institutions will be crucial to the evolution of the field. A particularly fruitful space for such interventions is in rethinking local governance institutions, which in our ideal governance architecture would have far more autonomy and authority than they typically do today. We want to see a proliferation of political forms that build on the specificity of local models, traditions, desires, and demands. Non-Western and Indigenous traditions are too often, in our view, wielded mainly in the mode of critique of dominant Western political ideas and institutions. It would be encouraging to see

[1] Rather than list all the work that belongs in this constellation, we want to highlight interesting publications that have come out since we finished our book. See Frederic Hanusch, *The Politics of Deep Time* (Cambridge University Press, 2023); Milja Kurki, "Planetary Justice Reconsidered: Developing Response-Abilities in Planetary Relations," *Environmental Politics* 33:7 (2024): 1185-1204; Ian Manners, "Arrival of Normative Power in Planetary Politics. "*JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 62:3 (2024): 825-844; Oli Mould, "From Globalisation to the Planetary: Towards a Critical Framework of Planetary Thinking in Geography," *Geography Compass* 17:9 (2023): e12720; Kalypso Nicolaidis, "The Third Democratic Transformation: From European to Planetary Politics," *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 62:3 (2024): 845-867; Stefan Pedersen, Dimitris Stevis, and Agni Kalfagianni, "What Is Planetary Justice?" *Environmental Politics* 33:7 (2024): 1137-1145; Johan Rockström et. al., "The Planetary Commons: A New Paradigm for Safeguarding Earth-Regulating Systems in the Anthropocene," *PNAS* 121:5 (2024): e2301531121; Enrike van Wingerden and Darshan Vigneswaran, "The Terrestrial Trap: International Relations beyond Earth," *Review of International Studies* 50:3 (2024): 600-618; Oran R. Young, "Meeting the Grand Challenges of Planetary Governance: Is it Time for a Paradigm Shift?" *Environmental Policy and Law* 54 (2024): 79-87.

[2] One contribution here is the essay by Song Bing on *gongsheng/kyōsei* in a volume our institute has recently published. Song Bing, "Co-Becoming: A Planetary View Inspired by East Asian Philosophies," in Nils Gilman, ed., *The Planetary* (Berggruen Press, 2024): 133-148.

positive answers to the questions of institutional architecture we discuss in *Children of a Modest Star* tackled from within these traditions.

For instance, the bodies established to govern Te Urewera and the Whanganui River, in New Zealand, provide exciting examples already in practice. The watershed management institution for the Whanganui River, for instance, includes the river *itself* as a member. The river's representatives—its "human face," in the words of Te Awa Tupua Act of 2017—sit on the board and participate in all discussions and decisions about watershed management, including "all its physical and metaphysical elements."[3] While these arrangements do not meet the full or original demands of the Māori communities, they represent a localized compromise that seems to work.

Dalby likewise points to a "notable silence" in *Children of a Modest Star* that we hope the emerging field will soon tackle in greater depth: security. Security is clearly a crucial subject, arguably *the* subject, for governance. The key question is who is being secured, and from what? The traditional way to consider is security is as "national security," in other words, the threats that states pose to one another, which is specifically what Dalby notes that we ignore. But there are other forms of security that have been considered objects of governance, including global security, international security, economic security, human security, health security, and environmental security. Each of these conceptions of security suggests different concerns and policy prescriptions.[4]

"Planetary security" is an emerging concept that requires more development.[5] How does it relate to national security? How does it relate to ongoing efforts, by NASA and other space agencies, at "planetary defence" from asteroids and comets? Our planetary condition also suggests that the meaning of national security must be reconsidered. The traditional sources of national security are military and economic resources, which are wielded against enemy states or nonstate actors to coerce desired actions. What use does this model have when the biggest threats are not other states but elements of the Earth's biogeochemistry? You cannot deter a virus or compel a carbon compound.

None of this is to suggest that traditional national security concerns will disappear under our proposed architecture of planetary governance. Planetary politics will not make human disagreements go away. We could spin an optimistic tale of the future when planetary politics somewhat attenuates intra-sovereign rivalries, but even under that scenario, we don't foresee that nonstate "national security" problems like terrorism will ever end.

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[3] Christine J. Winter, "A Seat at the Table: Te Awa Tupua, Te Urewera, Taranaki Maunga and Political Representation," *borderlands* 20:1 (2021): 116-139; and Mihnea Tănăsescu, *Understanding the Rights of Nature: A Critical Introduction* (transcript Verlag, 2022).

[4] On varieties of security, see David A. Baldwin, "The Concept of Security," *Review of International Studies* 23 (1997): 5-26.

[5] Dalby himself is a leader here, along with Daniel Deudney. See Simon Dalby, "Reframing Climate Security: The 'Planetary' as Policy Context," *Geoforum* 155 (2024); and Daniel Deudney, *Dark Skies: Space Expansionism, Planetary Geopolitics, and the Ends of Humanity* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

Dalby also makes important points about the roles of scale and geography in *Children of a Modest Star*. "The image of the territorial state as the sine qua non for governance seems to have snuck into Blake and Gilman's narrative," he observes. As a result of this mental image, he argues that we fall back on an "implicit geographical vocabulary." This observation is correct, and he is right that our assumptions could be "interrogated even more carefully." That said, we did make a deliberate choice to focus our governance framework on territorial institutions. While we could have said more about how virtual spaces and digital platforms fit into our governance architecture, we are somewhat skeptical about nonterritorial, decentralized governance institutions exercising effective authority. With that said, neo-cybernetic technological mechanisms of control will doubtless be a growing feature of future planetary governance schemes at every scale.[6]

In the end, however, our vision focuses on a governance system that re-grounds us in the specifics of geography, even as it allows us to also work on planet-wide scales that, at times, seem to escape place-based specificity. Questioning the place of geography and territory in our schema is important, but we also want to highlight that territorial scaling is a feature, not a bug. The fact of being situated in a specific place (which, as flesh-bound creatures, we can't avoid) is central to politics and governance in ways that non-territorial features are not. "Presence and participation in systems involving geology and biota," as we quote from Paulina Ochoa Espejo's *On Borders*, "determine the relevant political bonds."[7]

Our focus on place-based, local governance, however, runs into the persistent problems of "reactionary impulses" and "local tyrannies," Dalby argues. Without a doubt, NIMBYism is a major source of opposition to present-day planetary projects, such as denser housing and solar arrays. Subsidiarity, however, alleviates the problem. A local institution's failure to govern an issue "effectively to achieve habitability and multispecies flourishing," as we call for all institutions to do, would justify reallocating authority to a larger scale institution.[8] Of course reactionary preferences and tyrannical ambitions will continue—there is no silver bullet. But what we can do is design institutions in ways that mitigate the risk that those with such desires can gain power.

Selchow is also concerned about certain ideas gaining power: in particular, our ideas. More specifically, she questions our appropriation of the "critical" scholarship of Donna Haraway, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, Bruno Latour, and others to address practical questions of governance, politics, and power. She argues that the point of the "alternative perspectives" offered by these scholars is explicitly *not* "to come up with ever more and extended governance ideas and experiments that might *manage* 'planetary issues.'" Rather, she argues that "the urgent task" is coming up with "a new language and grammar that can grasp planetary realities."

[6] See Stephanie Sherman, "Planetary Platform Automation," in Gilman, ed., *The Planetary*, 77-96.
[7] Paulina Ochoa Espejo, *On Borders: Territories, Legitimacy, and the Rights of Place* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 19.
[8] Jonathan S. Blake and Nils Gilman, *Children of a Modest Star: Planetary Thinking for an Age of Crises* (Stanford University Press, 2024), 125.

This is not an uncommon reading of this scholarly literature.[9] What could be called a "refusal of the instrumental" might even be the named scholars' own understanding of their projects.[10] But it is not our project. We see in the work of Haraway, Tsing, Latour, and others a series of powerful conceptual toolkits that we want to deploy toward practical ends. They might be satisfied with merely interpreting the world.[11] But in this respect at least, we agree with Marx: the point is to *change* it.

This methodological disagreement helps explains decisions we made in writing the book that Selchow finds odd or problematic. She begins, for instance, by stating that ours is not "an *academic* book," meaning "it does not advance a distinct identified academic debate." We have three responses. First, guilty as charged! We wrote the book for a wide audience of educated readers, including policymakers. Second, since we are trying to foment a new field across existing disciplinary boundaries, we are less concerned with contributing to currently fashionable debates in any given discipline. Third, *Children of a Modest Star* reverses the typical academic way of working. Our starting point isn't a lacuna in a scholarly literature, but rather a problem in the world. We do not move from theory to practice, but rather from practice to theory. As a result, we don't "form a critical conversation" with existing scholarship (at least not explicitly) and several "existing debates are left out or brushed over." As Selchow acknowledges, these omissions can't be a "shortcoming" since they aren't part of our goal.

Selchow argues that for "Latour and many others… the task is to rethink the nature of existing institutions." That is of course part of what we tried to do. What Selchow flags is the fact that we also propose concrete actions, and take these critical frameworks out of the seminar room and deploy them toward constructive, policy-oriented ends. But this is precisely our goal. This exercise inevitably involves translation, interpellation, and some might even say bastardization, in the sense of adding new elements. Practicality rather than purity is our ambition.

Throughout the book, we tried to be clear that our arguments (especially our normative arguments in the book's the second half) are meant to open a conversation, not end it. Those who do not agree with our proposed governance architecture are encouraged to suggest their own ideas for governance that takes seriously planetary entanglements. Selchow's review, however, remains on the terrain of criticism, and discards our invitation to "readers to critically engage with [our] vision of how to govern the world" and "to come up with 'alternative institutional schemes.'" Rather than think about "alternative design of governance institutions," her review aims "to complicate the *premises* on which Blake and Gilman start, i.e. their understanding of 'the world as it is.'" That's all welcome. Questioning our "conceptual world" is of

[9] For example, Bernd Reiter, *Decolonizing the Social Sciences and the Humanities: An Anti-Elitism Manifesto* (Routledge, 2021); Michael Richardson and Anna Munster, "Pluralising the Planetary: The Radical Incompleteness of Machinic Envisioning," *Media+Environment* 5:1 (2023): 1-20; and Adrian Schlegel, "Instrumental Reason and Environmental Justice: On Epistemological Injustice and the Entangled Domination of Humans and Nature," *Transience* 13:2 (2022): 112-139.

[10] A phrase we draw from Andrew Benjamin, "Introduction," *Australasian Philosophical Review* 6:3 (2022): 219.

[11] Yet already two decades ago Latour himself acknowledged that a posture of pure critique had revealed itself as an analytic as well as political dead end. Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30:2 (2004): 225-248.

course the reviewer's prerogative and it is always important to have one's assumptions tested. But in our view, in a world aflame interpretation and critique are insufficient. Critique on critique on critique (i.e., the central project of too much of the contemporary academic humanities and critical social sciences) has not moved the needle. Neither Latour's proposed "Parliament of Things" nor Haraway's vision of living well with her dog have reduced greenhouse gas emissions or biodiversity loss.[12]

At the same time, we believe that the critical scholarship *can* do things in the world. Unlike many politicians and university administrators, we haven't given up on these lines of inquiry as useless wastes of time and resources. But our view is that for them to be useful they must be used. The alternative is a retreat to quietism, if not irrelevance.

One form that such secular monasticism could take, as Selchow, referencing Tsing, recommends, is the cloistered practice of the "arts of living on a damaged planet." We have no gripe with this goal as a matter of private practice; we all must find way to cope psychologically with the present and prospective polycrisis. But we also insist that such practice should be a work of *public* art. It is our belief that building new governance institutions fit to address the condition of planetarity can enable and incentivize just such art. Planetarity rightly understood entails politics, not psychotherapy.

To conclude and repeat, we stand with our reviewers at the cusp of an emerging field. As this roundtable has revealed, there is much left to do, with many concepts to clarify, many questions to answer, many debates to be had. We are excited to keep this moving.

[12] Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Harvard University Press, 1993), 142-145; and Donna J. Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003).