



Karlsruhe Institute of Technology

brought to you by research group *Philosophy of Engineering, Technology Assessment, and Science (Philetas)* at ITAS-KIT

Normative Energy Ethics

Lecture Series



January 19,
2023
14.30 CET

The Contested Meaning of Climate Leadership: An Ameliorative Analysis

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It is commonly affirmed in scholarly as well as in public debate that affluent countries (as well as wealthy individuals and businesses) have a particularly weighty responsibility to lead the transition to a low-carbon future, not only in the sense that they should do more to combat climate change but also that they should act first. The specific meaning of this leadership ideal, however, is unclear. Despite (or maybe because of) its ambiguity, claims to climate leadership has been criticised. In scholarly contributions, it is argued that such claims are hypocritical, superficial, and self-defeating. In public debate, the meaning of climate leadership is both confusing and contested: it has been interpreted as requiring everything from rapid development of renewable energy, investments in nuclear energy, to paying developing countries to implement green technologies and even to invest in relatively speaking clean fossil fuel infrastructure.

Some proposals have been called out as damaging rhetoric and other proposals have, paradoxically, been seen as attempts to evade responsibility and delay necessary changes. In this paper, we propose an ameliorative analysis of the concept of leadership in the context of an effective and just transition to a low-carbon future. We propose that the meaning of the concept must be specified through an analysis of what legitimate political functions it has. The relevant question is: „what kind of climate leadership do we need to further a just transition to a low-carbon future?“ The concept thus function as a tool for breaking the impasse that pertains to climate politics and for creating a momentum for a just transition. Being clear about this political role opens up for ideological critique of some objectionable ends to which climate leadership have been put, such as for claiming easy victories, green-washing, virtue signalling and evading responsibility.



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