



NEGOTIATING CLIMATE CHANGE IN CRISIS

EDITED BY STEFFEN BÖHM
AND SIAN SULLIVAN



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23. Climate Politics between Conflict and Complexity

Matthew Paterson

Climate politics needs both moments of sharp, highly politicising, even over-simplifying moves, to keep pressure up, but at the same time a sort of patient, careful attention to the complexity of socio-technical systems to work out how to generate radical shifts in infrastructure and practice. But these logics stand in quite a lot of tension—the post-political/agonistic logic can reduce to slogans and abstract from the details of how you actually decarbonise, while the complexity approaches can culminate in even more complex technocratic projects. This chapter navigates questions of how to keep both of these logics alive in climate politics.

On Climate Movement Rhetoric

An important undercurrent of recent climate movement rhetoric, echoed in sympathetic media, focuses on a specific number of global companies that are responsible for a particular percentage of global emissions. “Just 90 companies caused two-thirds of man-made global warming emissions”, was the headline to one of the earliest media renditions of this argument (Goldenberg 2013). More recently, just to continue with material from *The Guardian* (where these claims are most prominently produced), we have had “[j]ust 100 companies responsible for 71% of global emissions, study says” (Riley 2017) and “[r]evealed: the 20 firms behind a third of all carbon emissions” (Taylor and Watts 2019). These claims have then circulated more broadly because of Extinction Rebellion (XR) strategies and particularly their use by philosopher Rupert Read

within an XR context (as reported for example in Newsweek, see Mahmood 2020).

These claims are underpinned by pioneering research by Richard Heede, in particular in an article in *Climatic Change* (Heede 2013), and then maintained via the Carbon Majors Project of the Climate Accountability Initiative,¹ an organisation established by Heede, along with prominent analyst of climate denial, Naomi Oreskes (Oreskes and Conway 2011) and Greg Erwin.

Other similar narratives have been deployed. American anarchist, Utah Phillips, is often invoked: “[t]he earth is not dying, it is being killed, and those who are killing it have names and addresses” (see e.g. *Climate and Capitalism* 2009). Personalising the issue beyond the corporations to their chief executives, a world map has circulated widely with the “names and locations of the top 100 people killing the planet” on it, superimposed on a map with the country size representing cumulative emissions of that country from 1850 onwards.²

This sort of narrative represents a particular way that activists, and allied researchers, have sought to ‘repoliticise’ climate change in a specific way—to identify it as an existential struggle where specific organisations, even individuals, are the causal powers of climate collapse that need to be resisted and opposed. As Malm (2020: 15) succinctly and precisely puts it, “the enemy is fossil capital”. This sort of repoliticisation, often entailing the identification of such a clear enemy, can be seen plainly in the school strikes for climate, XR, the Sunrise Movement, oil pipeline activism, and fossil fuel divestment activism (also see North, this volume). Analysis of divestment discourse shows that the dominant narrative is a war/enemy narrative, where fossil fuel producers are pitted against the rest of humanity (and occasionally beyond) in an existential struggle (Mangat et al. 2018; also Wright and Nyberg, this volume).

In academic debates about climate change politics, this is reflected in various literatures that have recently highlighted the conflictual qualities

1 See Climate Accountability Institute website (Climate Accountability Institute, no date), <https://climateaccountability.org/carbonmajors.html>.

2 See e.g. Decolonial Atlas, ‘Names and Addresses of the Top 100 People Killing the Planet’ (decolonialatlas.wordpress.com, 2019), <https://decolonialatlas.wordpress.com/2019/04/27/names-and-locations-of-the-top-100-people-killing-the-planet/>.

of climate politics, and specifically the conflicts between corporate/fossil interests and the pursuit of climate policy. This is not entirely new—some analysts have made the power of fossil corporations central to their analyses of climate politics for a long time (Paterson 1996; Egan and Levy 1998; Newell and Paterson 1998, 2010; Newell 2000; Levy and Newell 2005). But there is a noticeable spread of this sort of focus in how academic analyses of climate change are conducted. This literature is various, encompassing: detailed empirical analyses of how corporations have blocked policy development in various countries, for example in the US (Stokes 2020; Mildenberger 2020), but also in Brazil and South Africa (Hochstetler 2020), as well as the large literature on corporate roles in climate denial, often with the frame of ‘Exxon knew’ (e.g. Supran and Oreskes 2017); broad attempts to theorise these empirical dynamics in general (Scoones et al. 2015; Breetz et al. 2018; Colgan et al. 2020); an argument derived theoretically from Chantal Mouffe’s well-known arguments about democratic politics as intrinsically “agonistic” (Mouffe 2005; Machin 2013); and arguments that dominant forms of climate change response are ‘post-political’, that is, that they seek to take climate change decision-making out of the realm of democratic, public, decision-making and govern climate technocratically, while at the same time presenting climate change as a consensual issue in the interests of all humanity (see most notably Swyngedouw 2010; Kenis and Mathijs 2014; Macgregor 2014). In slightly less stark terms than the last of these claims, the argument that climate change is often depoliticised—actors seek to present responses as consensual, technocratic, in the interests of all—is widespread (e.g. Pepermans and Maesele 2016; Mann and Wainwright 2018; Willis 2020).

Limits of the ‘100 Companies’ Story

This return to an emphasis on the conflicts inherent in addressing climate change is welcome and has helped to mobilise climate activists in important ways—by articulating a sense of ‘an enemy’, enabling motivation for activists and highlighting key targets and goals. Even within the trajectory of movements, it has helped to direct action in more focused ways, as in the shifts in focus of XR actions towards corporate targets—banks, oil companies, for example—over time. So there is a

good case for saying that this sort of repoliticisation of climate change is a crucial component in the search for more ambitious and adequate responses to climate change.

But at the same time, there is an important piece missing from the underlying narrative. We need to return to the '100 companies' story. A key component in the underlying analysis that has generated this frame is how emissions have been associated with these companies (and then, in the individualising version, to their CEOs). Specifically, what the analysis does is trace not only all emissions associated with the production activities of these companies, but also the consumption of all of their products over time, by individuals, other companies, governments and so on. This is what is called 'Scope 3' emissions in carbon accounting terms, 'Scope 1' being direct emissions by an entity, and 'Scope 2' being directly bought-in emissions as, most obviously, in electricity consumption. The '100 companies and their CEOs' analysis is an extreme version of a Scope 3 accounting procedure, which would normally include things like the commuting emissions of a company's workers, or travel emissions for work-related travel (in lots of organisations like universities, these latter emissions completely dominate overall organisational emissions). Inevitably there is all sorts of double-counting going on—the emissions of someone commuting by car are Scope 3 emissions for their employer, but Scope 1 emissions for themselves. But it is rare to associate downstream emissions from consumption with the producing organisation. The double-counting becomes even more complicated if we are also now saying that the commuter's emissions are Scope 3 emissions both for their employer and the oil company that sold them the fuel.

While we can clearly 'trace' those emissions from a car tailpipe back to Exxon, Shell, or whoever, as Heede and the Carbon Majors Project have done very effectively, it does not follow that there is a neat causal chain from Exxon to those emissions. There is a clearly overly simplistic causal narrative going on here to make this claim. Is Exxon really 'responsible' for the emissions by all the car drivers (individual and corporate) who buy their petrol? While it has been rhetorically really important for mobilising activists, and the basic claim about corporate power remains a powerful one, it is insufficient for thinking fully about what the politics of actually decarbonising the global economy entails (as also considered in Sullivan Chapter 11, this volume).

While activism focused on identifying key actors blocking policy change and undermining their political power is important, it needs to be supplemented with political action focused on the complexities of the large-scale socio-technical systems which constitute high carbon worlds, where the causal processes generated by emissions are not so neatly identifiable with specific agents, but are emergent properties arising out of the complex interactions between corporate strategy and power, ideology, technical change, social practices, and governance systems, irreducible to any one of those elements. These systems are also themselves quite heterogeneous—including food, transport, electricity, construction, raw materials extraction, and so on (also see Halme et al., this volume). These are all complex systems with their own specific sets of corporate structures and strategies, technical qualities, and daily practices that interact in specific ways. Interventions to shift them to get rid of fossil fuels and carbon will need to be differentiated accordingly. They may all be *capitalist* in important ways, but this does not therefore capture the specificities of their dynamics adequately. As a consequence, while agonistic activism and its associated rhetoric may shift one or two of these elements, it is implausible that it can shift the system as a whole, on its own. It may sometimes even get in the way of identifying ways forward by, in effect, mis-specifying the challenge.

Limits of Avoiding Conflict

On the other hand, there is plenty of reason to believe that the existing approaches that do take this socio-technical complexity seriously—most commonly going under the rubric of ‘low carbon transitions’—fail to adequately incorporate the question of conflict and power relations. In Harriet Bulkeley’s *Accomplishing Climate Governance* (2016), for example, the shift in focus to climate governance has a tendency (despite, I think, her intention) to present responses to climate change in depoliticised ways—with politics understood in terms of the interplay between agonistic conflict, power relations, and public democratic decision-making.³ Bulkeley’s account, arising out of a largely Foucauldian approach, is to think of climate politics in terms of the operations and

3 I develop this specific point, as well as some of the other arguments in this short piece, in more detail, in Paterson (2021).

effects of power—how it is exerted in climate governance, or how, in her terms, climate governance is “accomplished”, at the expense of (if not total exclusion of) other dimensions of politics, notably public deliberation and conflict. She argues that climate politics “is not the politics of vested interests and decision points, but a slow burning, unfolding, enveloping and ongoing form of the working of power” (Bulkeley 2019: 14). But there does not need to be the choice that she presents here—rather, it is *both* the “politics of vested interests” (and therefore the contestation of those interests) *and* the “slow burning, unfolding” that helps us understand the dynamics of climate politics.

Bulkeley’s is the most sophisticated of this sort of approach. Others collapse much more readily into a depoliticised, technocratic account of low-carbon transitions. There has been an undercurrent of critique of the transitions approach for underplaying questions of politics (Meadowcroft 2009), and clear attempts by leading transition scholars to respond to this critique and incorporate questions of politics (Geels 2014; Roberts et al. 2018). This has been mostly limited to thinking about the ability of incumbent actors to undermine transformational processes—“regime resistance” in Geels’ (2014) terms (for a detailed analysis of this literature focused on how it thinks about incumbency, see Stirling 2019). But much of this literature is nevertheless dominated by a desire to elaborate models of complex systems, where the methodological devices of these modelling exercises obscure the ability to think fully about the political dynamics of such transitions. We are thus left with depoliticised accounts of path dependencies, lock-in processes, tipping points, niches and innovation, and so on.

Combining Conflict and Complexity

The challenge then seems to me, on the analytical or academic side, to work out how these two elements in climate politics—the detailed, focused, attention on governing and transforming large-scale, heterogeneous high-carbon systems, and the deeply contested questions of power, inequality and justice—interact. And on the practical politics side, to work out how the energy mobilised by the sharpened focus on ‘fossil capital as the enemy’ can enable not only continued pressure

on politicians, corporations, and the like, but feed through into more concrete action to transform those high carbon systems (as discussed in the chapters by Halme et al., Sandover and Whitmarsh, this volume).

On the academic side, the implications of this argument are to generate a number of questions we might usefully focus our attention on. For example, we could focus more research attention on the conditions under which depoliticised governance ‘works’, and when it gets stuck because of incumbent resistance. Are there general lessons we can learn from these patterns? Do some aspects of the climate challenge lend themselves more readily to this sort of depoliticised governance than others? We could also ask, conversely, what types of repoliticisation actually shift the practices of governments and corporations? Or what types also generate novel initiatives that shift power relations in important ways and enable us to pursue more radical and rapid decarbonisation? For example, do community renewable energy or agro-ecology initiatives generate new sorts of social relations that undermine the power of fossil fuel corporations? What are the key moments in climate policy trajectories where activist pressure might have the most impacts? Finally, we could ask questions about whether, and how, novel institutional arrangements like citizens’ climate assemblies, enable this sort of conflictual politics to be ‘embedded’ in formal climate policy and governance arrangements, and thus reshape the political landscape, more broadly favouring rapid change to accelerate decarbonisation?

I am not best placed to advise social movements on strategy, but it seems to me that the implications of this sort of argument are that we should work on activities that seek not only to put immediate pressure on governments and corporations, through the variety of well-known strategies we see in for example XR, divestment, or school strikes (and their analogies in earlier periods of climate activism), but also to generate initiatives that act more directly to shift power away from corporate and government actors—community energy or land ownership, community forestry or agriculture, and so on, that might both keep climate political in important ways but also start to build more long-term sustainable solutions. Many of these initiatives of course already exist, but perhaps need to be understood more deeply as political interventions in ways that they are often not.

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