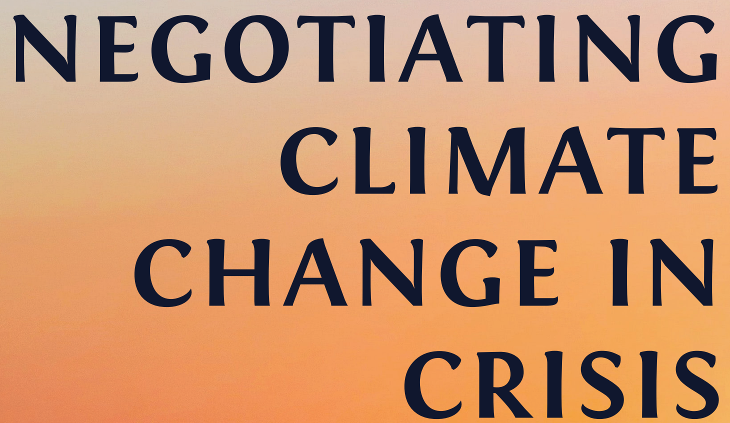

NEGOTIATING CLIMATE CHANGE IN CRISIS

EDITED BY STEFFEN BÖHM AND SIAN SULLIVAN

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22. What Is to Be Done to Save the Planet?

Peter North

This chapter uses the opportunity of the COP to take stock of the successes and failures of climate activism over the past decade. The COPs provide an opportunity for activists to meet, pressure COP delegates to take the action needed to avoid climate action, and discuss what a better world can look like. They can 'take stock' at a point in time about what they have done well, what did not work so well, and what still needs to be done. The chapter reviews mass and 'elite' communicative forms of direct action, and the longer-term programme of building community-based prefigurations of what could be. It argues that this taking stock and pressuring elites to act matters, but is not an alternative to building locally to transition to a world in which all, human and non-human, can live well.

Introduction

The "great acceleration" (McNeill and Engelke 2014) grows apace. Climate catastrophes intensify in the form of seemingly inexorable temperature and sea level rise, species extinction, ice sheet melting, and methane emission. Over the last couple of decades a wide-ranging set of social movements have emerged in a number of places globally to grapple with the politics of climate change, using a range of protest techniques, and with different conceptualisations about what to do. While to some extent put on pause as a result of COVID-19, this climate activism is a diverse space within which organisations, networks and

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activists act independently, coalesce, act together, disperse again, and emerge somewhere else later. Sometimes they organise in the streets—the classic protest march aimed at communicating a message to mass society and putting pressure on elites to act. Direct action is carried out by long-standing groups like Greenpeace or Earth First!, by anti-airport protesters such as 'Plane Stupid', by anti-coal protesters like 'Leave it in the ground' or anti-fracking groups, and more recently by Extinction Rebellion (XR). A third strategy, complementary to protesting 'against' catastrophic climate change, is that of community-based 'Transition Initiatives' that work at a grassroots level to develop fulfilling livelihoods based in more localised low-carbon economies (as also pointed towards by Sandover, this volume). They have created their own local currencies, local power and food initiatives and the like in an effort to prefigure the kind of low-carbon, localised and convivial economy they would like to see if dangerous climate change is to be avoided.

That many climate activists seem stereotypically 'middle class' means that the movement has its critics (as Gardham discusses, this volume). In contrast, I argue that globally-privileged citizens in high income, developed northern countries engaging with the geographies of their responsibility for the emissions that lead to anthropogenic climate change are to be applauded. There is nothing new about 'middle class radicalism'. What matters is how well the movement is doing, given the severity of the existential crisis humanity faces. This chapter aims to address this issue. While many of the examples below are based on what I know about activism in the UK, I hope my comments will be of wider interest to those with their eyes on the COP in Glasgow.

It Can All Come Together at the COPs

In their intensity and urgency, claims about the climate crisis echo concerns about the catastrophic nature and imminence of nuclear war in the early 1980s. Yet, while anti-nuclear, anti-war and anti-globalisation movements regularly mobilised upwards of 250,000 protesters, the numbers of protesters taking part in climate action marches, led by school and university students and XR, have not been at a level necessary to force the changes that the protesters (and I) feel are needed. The annual Conference of the Parties (COP) meetings provide a useful place and time to address that. At the COPs, a generally fissiparous 'movement' or

series of 'convergence spaces' (Routledge 2003) join together or converge to reinforce and underline the existence of the existential threat of the climate in a world of competing issues for contestation.

The COPs enable climate activists to demand "meaningful, co-ordinated and urgent policy action" commensurate with the threat (Chatterton et al. 2012), take stock, meet like-minded people, discuss alternatives, and plan action. They can point to unequal geographies of responsibility for historic and contemporary emissions and environmental destruction, expose global inequalities and capacities to act in the face of this existential threat, demand global climate justice, and express solidarity. They enable local activists to focus on an issue of particular salience for them, for instance coal in Poland at the Katowice COP in 2019. They create a space where activists can lobby states, and spaces where corporate and business elites showcase technological solutions in line with neoliberal conceptions of how to live well (or cover up their nefarious activities, depending on how anti-capitalist or paranoid you are).

More resistant conceptions of how to live well in the Anthropocene are developed in the sometimes hidden, sometimes open autonomous Alternative Climate Forums, which act as spaces in which new knowledges (Melucci 1989) or grassroots innovations (Seyfang and Smith 2007) develop. The streets can be spaces for demonstrations where change can be demanded. Some activists believe that when they are, sometimes pre-emptively, attacked by local police forces this exposes the hidden violence of the seemingly liberal, democratic state supposedly committed to solving the climate crisis through a rhetorical commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Given that the SDGs are simultaneously utopian yet insufficiently concrete, a rhetorical commitment to them is at best a cruel hoax, at worst a cover for slow violence, or even social murder, that the failure to avoid climate catastrophe represents.

Taking Stock

Activity at the COPs does not spring from nowhere—they provide a space in which this movement can emerge and converge, building on what has gone before. Social movement theorists Turner and Killian (1987) point to the emergence of new norms, timeliness and feasibility

that help us move from a feeling that something is wrong to 'yes, we can' do something about it. This helps explain why an issue emerges in the first place, and then how it can be made to stay on the agenda. The COPs provide an opportunity to mark a time to restate a problem and come to a view about what is being done about it. It might therefore be useful at such a point to review what we know about how climate change has been contested, and how it has moved up and down agendas in competition with other issues, given that we live in a less than perfect world.

While climate change as an issue has been known in scientific circles for many years, a perception of its urgency, a feeling that 'something is wrong', emerged as the scale of problems associated with climate change began to be discerned in the early part of the twenty-first century. Global long-series temperature readings rose inexorably, culminating in a series of 'hottest ever' years and observable extreme weather events from the mass deaths from heatstroke in Europe (2003), Hurricane Katrina (2005) and Cyclone Nargis (2008), forest fires in Greece and California (2009), not to mention longer-lasting droughts in Sub-Saharan Africa and Australia. Al Gore's (2006) documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* communicated the issue to a wider audience, while the contemporaneous publication of IPCC's fourth report and the Stern Review, both in 2007, showed that global warming was accepted as happening by the overwhelming majority of climate scientists, and that something should be done. Climate activists used extreme weather events to suggest that global warming represented a clear danger to life itself. Mark Lynas's book *Six Degrees* (2007) constructed activist knowledge about what abstract phenomena like increasing global temperatures or atmospheric CO_2 levels mean in concrete, and increasingly apocalyptic, terms. Hot weather and extreme weather events suggested that 'something was wrong', and marches, spaces of grassroots innovation and direct action suggested that 'something could be done' and that action was 'timely' and 'feasible'.

Just as hot weather suggested that the planet was warming, a period of cold weather hit the northern hemisphere mid-latitudes during early 2010 and the years after were cooler. Newly confident climate denialist coverage in the media suggested that the need for 'something to be done' did not seem so pressing, and the severity of the issue was less clear cut.

Denialists argued the environmentalists were hysterical anticapitalist 'watermelons' (green on the outside, red on the inside) who, with the fall of communism, had lost the global battle for ideas and were now trying to re-impose their ideas in a new guise (Dellingpole 2012). Then, the global financial crisis hit in 2008, and in the UK at least the coalition government introduced austerity, and a long-term issue like the climate struggled to get visibility compared with other issues. Austerity led into Brexit. Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party seemed to provide hope for many younger activists, promising action, including a Green New Deal. This showed that, wherever you are, other political issues and climate interact in complex ways that affect how activists can effectively mobilise against the climate crisis. In other places issues like environmental racism, struggles against right-wing populism, trade union struggles and organisations around gender are more prominent. For example, in contemporary Poland, environmentalists organise strongly against the climate crisis and against restrictions on women's reproductive rights, while the Solidarność trade union lobbies and marches in favour of coal.

On the other hand, the climate did not 'go away'. In the UK the focus moved on to airports and flying. Protests at Heathrow Airport in July 2015 and 2016 London City airport raised the issue of climate justice, pointing out that the victims of the climate catastrophe now, not in the future, are black and brown people in the majority of the world. But, on the other hand, extreme weather events seemed to be part of a 'new norm'—an unstable, changing climate that we could do little about and would have to adapt to. Methane continued to be released in the boreal high latitudes, ice melted, floods and fires continued, but not at an intensity that people believed that 'we could not go on like this', given that the world is imperfect and there are many problems to address.

Then, in the summer of 2018, one Swedish young woman with good communication skills, clarity of thought, and connected to people able and willing to get her message out, explained how angry she was at the situation. Many other young people agreed, took time out of school and university, and hit the streets in their thousands. Greta Thunberg's actions were presented in ways that mobilised others to believe again that action was 'timely', and not only 'feasible' but necessary—obligatory even. Many older people felt guilty enough to do something about it, and able to. The result was Extinction Rebellion (XR), which made a

Declaration of Rebellion and launched its protest in Parliament Square in October 2018. The 2018 IPCC reported the worsening situation in stark terms. The 2018 WWF annual Living Planet Report suggested a 60% decline of vertebrate species since 1979. This time, the driver was not urgency and optimism—if we recognise the problem we can use the creativity we used to build fossil fuel capitalism to build a more convivial alternative—but catastrophism and disaster. Young people were told they would probably not see their old age unless they rebelled (Doherty et al. 2020). They were understandably outraged about this.

XR's leaders had cut their teeth on climate and anti-austerity activism. Inspired by Chenoweth and Hayes's (2018) argument that 3.5% of the population engaged in non-violent direct action (NVDA) could force elites to change, they demanded that the government tell the 'truth' about the immediacy and potentially catastrophic nature of the climate crisis, commit to net zero carbon emissions by 2025, and create citizens' assemblies to make decisions about what should be done. They called on large numbers of people to take emergency action to compel politicians to act, including mass arrests to overwhelm the police. Many older people who felt that their complacency had led to this emergency believed that they should do something about it, recognising that retired people with time, money and no work or caring commitments can and should act for young people. For older people, guilt was a driver that fused with younger people's anger at what they believed was an awful fate.

For a time XR was successful. Mass actions in November 2018 and then in April and October 2019 saw mass NVDA and a large number of arrests in central London, with other less high-profile events around the world. Then, in November 2019, radical Islamists carried out another terrorist attack on London Bridge. And, in the spring of 2020, COVID hit, and seemingly the world was locked down. The 2020 COP planned for Glasgow in November was postponed for a year. At the time of writing (June 2021), it is not possible to know what opportunities for climate action will present themselves (although there were protests against the G7 meeting in Cornwall in June 2021), but we can take the opportunity to review what we know from this historical sketch of climate activism.

Reviewing Strategies and Tactics

Why do we go to the COPs? Coming together in convergence spaces at the COPs, particularly if this entails significant carbon emissions from long distance travel, might be seen as both unsustainable and ineffective politics, compared with locally- or community-based activism in which you work locally to prefigure the world you want to see (Taylor Aiken 2017). A focus on a 'once-in-a-lifetime deal' at key COP meetings might be ineffective if it is judged that global elites are not yet ready to make the fundamental changes in the global political order that activists claim are necessary (and they almost certainly are not). A focus on the annual merry-go-round of the COPs might distract from the hard work of grassroots activism, prefiguring the future that we want to see, building system change (see also Mannan et al., this volume). This is not to say that going to the COPs is a waste of time, but it might be that just raising the issue is not enough if nothing otherwise changes at the scale necessary to solve the issue.

Many anarchist-inspired ecoactivists have, for some time, had little faith in the capacity of demonstrations, even large ones, to make change by politely lobbying elites to change their mind (Wall 1999; Seel et al 2000). This perception was reinforced by the failure of the globally-coordinated demonstration of February 2003 to stop the war in Iraq. A wider range of activists began to feel that polite lobbies and attempts of persuasion are not enough—direct action to force change is necessary. This then suggests, 'what kind of direct action, by whom, and to what end?' Analytically, we can distinguish between openly organised or spontaneous acts of direct action involving all who wish to participate, and clandestinely-organised communicative direct action. What Barker et al. (2001: 21) call "exclusivist" direct action is planned and executed by an inner circle of activists, as distinct from the wider movement. Classic 'resource mobilisation' approaches to the organisation of social movements (McCarthy and Zald 1977) suggest that the role of an outer periphery is to support the core's decisions, providing material support and admiration. Those who undertake direct action lead by example, rather than by the interaction of persuasion. Organisations like Greenpeace have long organised stunts in which activists communicate to the wider populace through the media—for instance parachuting into

a football stadium at the Euros, unfurling a banner on top of a power station chimney, or projecting a slogan on a building. They act for the passive masses who are framed as apathetic and self-interested.

Thus, we might distinguish between a small number of 'heroic' XR activists in London locking themselves on to an old boat painted in a pastel colour and named after a prominent environmental activist that has been clandestinely placed at a strategically important road junction early in the morning; and thousands of activists collectively blocking Westminster Bridge, getting arrested, filling the jails and declaring that this is 'not in my name'. One involves thousands in activity; the other communicates 'to' the passive majority. Another example is hundreds of young people in canoes stopping coal ships from leaving Newcastle, Australia. One is bodies on the line saying 'not in my name' and forcing change, the other is communicating the need for change by using a boat to block a junction, which does not require lots of people to produce a media stunt, and instead relies on the hope that elites will agree and act. Of course, they do not.

Individuals standing up to power, perhaps in heroic circumstances, matter—Tiananmen Square's 'Tank Man' comes to mind. Activists are also right to argue that an individual can march, take direct action, and engage in prefigurative politics at different times and in different spaces. But there are tensions. 'Muscular' forms of mass direct action and a refusal to negotiate with authorities within a political opportunity structure framed by the global 'war on terror' can bring down repression from the authorities on those they (wrongly, of course) label 'ecoterrorists'. Attempts by climate activists to temporarily shut down Kingsnorth Power Station in the UK were successfully thwarted by the police, and in uncompromisingly vigorous, if not violent, ways. This showed that the authorities can successfully defend a target named in advance, and control (repress) an activist camp in open countryside. Many people who are otherwise committed to low-carbon lifestyles might be put off from participating in an action that might involve significant levels of police harassment or even violence. There are complex trade-offs and debates about the extent to which radical disruptive direct action raises new issues, inspires and mobilises supporters, and creates new ways of understanding issues by social movements as 'knowledge producers' (Eyerman and Jamison 1991), or puts off potential supporters and provokes the authorities into taking measures that limit or close off their

ability to organise and room for manoeuvre. There are consequently debates about the extent to which this is an effective tactic for social movements aiming at mass support (North 2011). Others argue that a 'radical flank' can open up spaces in which more moderate voices can make deals or advance policy goals in more pragmatic ways (Hains 2013; Mueller and Sullivan 2015).

On the other hand, media pictures of protesters being attacked can reveal the unsustainable and repressive face of the seemingly liberal state and of the slow climate violence, if not social murder, of ecocidal capitalism (White 2014): a key objective of the politics of anarchist-inspired direct action. Individual witness, saying that what is being done is 'not in my name', is important and has a long pedigree, especially in the peace movement. This is easier to achieve on Westminster Bridge than in a field far from the media. Many members of XR are older, middle-class, retired professional people from the south of the UK with the time, social capital and resources to take direct action that others—mainly younger people—lack. Negatively racialised male bodies will be treated more harshly than older, white, grandmotherly ones. But breaking the law, being arrested, charged, and prosecuted is stressful, time consuming, and expensive. The assumption that the costs of protest are undertaken by kindly older, generally white grandmothers suggests a rather liberal view that the police can be expected to act in a gentlemanly way that negatively racialised people can find problematic. The repression this form of activism can call down can also put off those less able or willing to put their bodies on the line through direct action, and in time the inconvenience caused to people trying to go about their everyday business, perhaps on minimum wages on a zero hours contract, will mean that sympathy for the aims of the protesters will wear thin, as in the case of the XR activists who stopped a Docklands train in the commuter rush hour. The media will lose interest.

The alternative to a march, which the media may cover but elites will ignore, and direct action, which lacks the capacity to force elites to change tack and which, in time, loses its efficacy is, of course, the slower work of movement building; the development of power to create the system change that we want to see rather than merely protest against the status quo. The problem here is that the prefigurative local activisms of Transition Towns and the like, Melucci's (1989) "nomads of the present", can be too small-scale, too hidden from view, and involve

too few people promoting lifestyles that are not attractive enough to millions to trigger a systemic move to a low-carbon economy and society, avoiding catastrophic climate change and resource crunches. While much of this local activism is hidden from (the analysts') view, it must be remembered that activists happily work at a number of scales and use a variety of techniques utilising new communications technologies, to get their point across. Of course, festivals like the alternative COPs provide a space to do this, and this is massively important.

Conclusion

Avoiding dangerous climate change is not an issue that can be solved easily or quickly. No one demonstration at any one COP could ever be seen to 'succeed'. Adaptation to unavoidable climate change and mitigation of its worst effects requires a fundamental transformation of the way we organise human society. The real issue is to follow the effectiveness of these experiments, and use the spaces at the COP to come together to take stock of what has been done, how effective it has been, and what is still to be done. Adding COVID-19 to the mix suggests some possibilities for the development of a new politics of hope to be developed online rather than in convergence spaces and streets, to ask what the pandemic has stopped that we are happy to see stopped, and how we 'build back better' rather than succumbing to catastrophism. I look forward to watching this process unfold in Glasgow, online, or in person.

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