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Climate Emergency Politics Is Dangerous

A widespread popular movement over the past year or so has been insisting that ongoing climate change warrants the formal declaration of a “climate emergency.” This movement has been most salient in North America and western Europe, with climate emergencies being voted through in recent months by parliaments in the United Kingdom, France, Ireland, and Canada.

Declarations of emergencies create “states of exception,” often justified by governments under conditions of war, insurrection, or terrorist threat. Emergencies promise the mass mobilization of a jurisdiction’s full economic, social, and technical capacities to ward off an existential threat. Yet at the same time emergencies can threaten constitutional rights and justify the suspension of normal politics. In the case of climate change, such declarations are driven by a heightened sense of urgency among an array of scientists, activists, journalists, and others about the need to arrest climate change within the next 10 years, advanced by framing the impacts of unmitigated climate change as “existential” threats. According to the British sociologist Will Davies, declarations of climate emergencies can be understood as manifestations of a democratic “green populism.”

I do not believe that the reality of climate change warrants narrowing the possibilities of the future to human extinction, nor that it is appropriate to conduct climate politics henceforth under the restrictive and dangerous conditions of states of emergency. Here I will focus on one particular consequence of political declarations of emergency, namely that the goals of public policy become worryingly focused on a heavily constricted and reductive set of indicators. In the case of climate change, the dominant indicator is progress toward securing net-zero carbon emissions by a given date. But meeting the challenge of climate change for future human well-being demands a proliferation of diverse policy goals, the very opposite of what states of exception bring into being.

People and institutions have only so much capacity for worrying about and acting on concerns about the future. Attention to one concern usually brings with it neglect of others. With climate change, claiming that “there are only *n*

more years to act” might elicit a greater focus of mind among citizens and policy-makers to engage more deeply with the issue at hand. But it also leads to the putting aside of other concerns that are not conditioned on the same claims of urgency. Given the psychological and political competition for focus, resources, and action, we should ask the question, which matters of public concern get turned into political emergencies? For example, why does the growing threat of antimicrobial resistance not warrant an emergency, a threat that for many health scientists exceeds that of climate change. Why is the scandal of deepening economic inequality in the world not subject to emergency politics? Why should an emergency be declared for the planet, but not for the poor?

As scholars have shown over the years, the issue of climate change has been increasingly successful at occupying the political and public imagination in developed nations. This squeezes out other matters of concern or else forces other issues to be reframed and subsumed within the politics of climate change. More than a decade ago, the British journalist George Monbiot declared that “curtailing climate change must become the project we put before all others. If we fail in this task, we fail in everything else.” This sentiment was echoed recently by the ecological economist Tim Jackson of the University of Surrey, in his discourse on structural reform of the economy: “it matters not a jot that you do ‘whatever it takes’ to save the banks, if you fail to do whatever it takes to save the climate.” Doing “whatever it takes” is the absolutism that has fueled the declaration of climate emergency. Climate change ends up diverting attention and resources from other international political concerns. Such concerns, as Hannah Hughes, a lecturer in international relations at the University of Cardiff, reminds us, include “global health, biodiversity, desertification, and marine fisheries. If these issue areas are to retain the international community’s interest, they must either recapture attention from climate change or align themselves with the interests of the climate field.”

Climate change has managed to secure this central position through a series of successful moves by climate scientists and campaigners to capture and simplify the complex problem

of climate change through reductive and seductive metrics such as global temperature and carbon dioxide concentration. With respect to defusing the climate emergency, the favored headline indicator becomes securing net-zero carbon emissions by a given date, for example by 2030 or 2050. Not only does this imply that we will remain in a quasi-permanent state of emergency; it also obscures much of what actually matters for human well-being and ecological integrity. Carbon metrics are only a proxy for global temperature, which is only a proxy for regional weather, which is only a proxy for human well-being, which depends on innumerable other factors for its achievement and maintenance.

How can the reductive logic of climate emergency be challenged? One way would be to declare multiple emergencies, thus deflating the political capital to be gained by any single emergency declaration. Different “emergencies” would then compete against each other for political attention and investment. Another way would be to multiply the policy goals to be pursued within the single climate emergency state. This would allow different interest coalitions to emerge around different goals and create greater degrees of political freedom to negotiate and advance specific policy measures. It is this latter option that I explore here.

Why is the scandal of deepening economic inequality not subject to emergency politics?

The problem with populist climate movements, such as Extinction Rebellion and FridaysForFuture, that have fueled the recent declarations of climate emergency is, ironically, that they are not thinking big enough. Imposing the discipline of an emergency on the politics of climate change narrows the policy gaze to the restrictive logic of equating human well-being with reduced carbon emissions, implying in essence that the world would be a better place with fewer carbon emissions. Such an outlook is equivalent to the short-term micro-histories that Jo Guldi and David Armitage criticize in their provocative 2014 book, *The History Manifesto*. Guldi, a historian at Brown University, and Armitage, a historian at Harvard University, contrast narrow, myopic micro-histories with broad, synoptic *longue durée* histories. The former extract one historical event from its wider contextual setting and thereby lose the ability to read its deeper significance. The latter focus on the slow, unfolding times of human development within the deeper and broader contexts of social, political, cultural, and technological change. For example, a micro-history might study how dangerous climate change came to be defined around the turn of the twenty-first century in terms of a single number that represents global temperature change; a long-term history, on the other hand, would be concerned with understanding the

broader historical currents that led to the rise of the political potency of such numbers, as captured in Theodore Porter’s 1995 book, *Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life*.

My point is that what is needed now is to look at the world through a much broader lens than that provided by the singular policy goal of securing net-zero carbon emissions by a certain date—what I call “hitting the carbon numbers.” The world continues to change at a dizzying pace and is facing significant challenges in the shape of endemic geopolitical conflicts, shifts in economic and political power, and resurgent political nationalisms. A fourth industrial revolution is also under way, with rapidly emerging technologies in the fields of artificial intelligence, genomics, materials science, and digital communication, all with vast potential to change how people of the future will live, work, and govern. Societies are also experiencing increasing economic inequality, fragmentation of social trust, and new forms of skepticism about scientific knowledge.

Arresting climate change, whether in 10, 50, or 100 years, will have to take all this into account. Failing to do so could make the world a worse place even if powered by zero-carbon energy. Those who advocate for the reductive politics of a climate emergency—the micro-historians cited by Guldi and Armitage—are blind to the wider perspectives on human social, cultural, and technological development, and to the richer sources of moral and political critique that historians of the *longue durée* are able to access. If the state of the world is dissected and evaluated using only the dynamics of carbon and climate, then it is not surprising that for such actors the future well-being of the world can be determined by controlling these same dynamics.

This is why it is dangerous to declare that arresting climate change is *the* central challenge of our times. If declaring a climate emergency where hitting the carbon numbers is all that matters, then all of what really *does* matter for a better world is simultaneously declared nonessential. What is needed for a healthy political agenda is a much larger lens, the ability to see the *longue durée*, to recognize the multifaceted and uncontrollable futures that lie ahead. It is the difference between seeking to control the future through the proxy of climate and letting the future emerge by controlling a variety of shorter-term partial welfare indicators. Acting under conditions of climate emergency to do “whatever it takes” risks marginalizing a wider set of justice and well-being concerns that, I believe, are much better captured by the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) than by a single metric of and proxy for well-being. The SDGs advance our awareness that improving human well-being requires the pursuit of multiple goals (there are 17) and indicators (169) that do justice to the complex biophysical, social, and political realities facing public policy development and execution in a fractious, partisan, and complex world.

Putting multiple goals such as the SDGs in the foreground of any climate emergency more easily allows both policy synergies and political trade-offs to be explored. It facilitates the expression and negotiation of different political priorities and cultural values and enables political processes to work creatively toward a wider range of multiscale, partial, and pragmatic policies. Without such plural goals and political creativity, responding to a climate emergency will lead only to an absolute technocracy; indeed, it would most logically be implemented through Chinese-style command-and-control governance more akin to statist five-year planning than through democratic decision-making. In such circumstances, responding to the emergency would then rely on all-seeing and all-knowing centralized authorities to deliver on the singular goal of net-zero carbon. Some people may indeed desire this form of governance. But centralized and technocratic interventions are less likely to be sensitive to the many ways in which policies that hit the carbon numbers can create perverse side-outcomes that worsen other social and political problems. And we know from countless examples of such efforts, many of which were beautifully portrayed in James Scott's important 1998 book, *Seeing Like a State*, that they also fail to achieve even their reductionist goals, precisely because those suffering the perverse effects always push back against the central technocratic authority.

Carol Farbotko of Australia's Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization offers one example of this danger by pointing out how fetishizing the reduction of carbon emissions without a sufficiently broad concern about social justice—for example, poverty (SDG#1), sanitation (#6), livelihoods (#8), or inequality (#10)—risks further endangering those economically poor or socially marginalized. Such people, Farbotko writes, are “already facing danger from both financial and climate risks. Their newest risk is the risk of being excluded from, or only superficially included in, the emerging risk calculus of the climate-finance meta-system.” French President Emmanuel Macron's aborted carbon tax from 2018—a policy well-designed for a climate emergency, one might think—also illustrates the danger. Ted Nordhaus of the Breakthrough Institute makes a similar point in an essay about “whole Earth equity.” It is easy, he writes, to affix “the word ‘justice’ onto an issue (food justice, climate justice, etc.) [but that] is no guarantee that what is likely to follow has much to do, really, with justice.... In the name of addressing the disparate impacts of climate change, we are directed toward emissions mitigation and over-consumption, [but] not the extension of infrastructure and economic development to those who need it.”

The benefit of putting the multiple goals represented by the SDGs into the foreground of public awareness is that they better represent the complexity of today's world and the rapidly changing—but uncontrollable and therefore unforeseeable—world of the future. Having multiple goals

in an emergency allows for the explicit articulation and negotiation of competing priorities, interests, and values, an essential requirement for politics to function. The alternative is a singular policy goal that all actors are called on to deliver, but that in practice suppresses political trade-offs and forecloses the possibility of forming coalitions of diverse political actors who may make policy enactment easier.

This is one of the criticisms voiced against both the Green New Deal, as proposed by some Democrats in the US Congress, and the ecological footprint concept, an expression of a person's or community's use of natural resources in terms of hectares of land and ocean used. Whereas the ecological footprint collapses socio-ecological complexity to a single metric, multiple ecological indicators are essential for assessing human impact on the physical world. As Linus Blomqvist and his colleagues at the Breakthrough Institute explain, possessing multiple indicators as tools of ecological management allows, when necessary, for trade-offs to be negotiated between different ecosystem services and natural resources. Suppressing the expectation and potential for trade-offs can only reduce social and political resilience in the face of an uncertain future.

In their 2018 book, *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of Our Planetary Future*, Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright outline four different future worlds that might emerge, each with very different implications for dealing with climate change. They explain that there is no one way in which climate change can easily be arrested through human agency. Managing and steering (“governing”) such multifaceted processes of change will not be helped by collapsing politics to a climate emergency with a singular goal. It is because ongoing changes in climate *will* be disruptive that the difficult politics of shaping the future are not helped by declarations of climate emergencies, not least because of the associated constitutional and democratic dangers of states of exception.

It is too soon to tell what effect the recent declarations of climate emergency by various jurisdictions will have on the politics of climate change or on the enactment of policy. But once a climate emergency is declared it is hard to see how it can be undeclared. No outcome would be sufficient to warrant the emergency's end, short of delivering the called-for carbon targets several decades into the future. Rather than collapse political choice to the single goal of delivering net-zero carbon, a better political strategy would be to position the full range of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals at the heart of emergency politics. This is likely to lead to a more functional politics through the articulation and negotiation of competing values and, in the end, more likely to lead to outcomes that benefit larger numbers of people.

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