

FEATURES

Another climate strategy is possible

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Did world leaders at the 21st Conference of Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change agree to the recommended carbon emissions target of 1.5 degrees Celcius? No: citizens and activists observing the December 2015 Paris meeting simply encountered business as usual - a polite 'we'll get back to you'. This article argues that climate politics will go nowhere as long as peoples' movements remain locked into debates over arithmetic. It is time to re-set the start line for climate struggles in a place that transcends the old episteme.

In Paris, serious efforts to reduce emissions were postponed to 2020, with net-zero targets to be realised sometime after 2050. The democratic principle of common but differentiated responsibilities for rich and poor nations was replaced by ad hoc, voluntary INDCs (Intended Nationally Determined Contributions). The urgent need to control emissions from mining, animal agriculture, deforestation, aviation and shipping was sidelined. Renewables were advocated, but on par with ineffectual market solutions like offsets and carbon trading, and risky solutions like fracking, nuclear power, and geoengineering. Financial support for community adaptation and economic transitioning amounted to a mere 1000 billion US\$ per annum - compare with the 5000 billion annually for fossil fuel subsidies.

The profiteering commodity based lifestyle advanced by international elites North and South, means that 10% of the global population puts out 60% of greenhouse gases. Yet a United Nations, beholden to the corporate sector since the early 1990s, is incapable of making affluent industrial nations accept historical responsibility for the crisis. A polluter pays principle covering liability for reparations where livelihoods and jobs are lost through climate impacts seems reasonable. But legally binding references to human and indigenous rights, intergenerational equity, and food sovereignty were weakened at COP21 by being moved from the Agreement text to preamble. In fact, environmental de-regulation was promoted by default, in the enthusiastic anticipation of free trade agreements like TTIP and TPP.

Scholar and social justice activist Patrick Bond, points out that the indifference of major powers was

already signalled in a June 2015 G7 announcement of no decarbonisation before 2100. Bond offers a powerful immanent critique of the incoherent neoliberal market responses to climate favoured by the US, EU, and sub-imperial BRICS coalition (Brazil, India, China, and South Africa). The same mainstream policy is even more open to transcendent critique, in that the epistemology and logic of commodity economics does not correspond to the logic of living processes.

The need for a deep epistemological shift in how knowledge of the environment is constructed is implicit when Marxist theorist David Harvey writes:

“... the spatio-temporality required to represent energy flows through ecological systems accurately, for example, may not be compatible with that of financial flows through global markets.

Understanding the spatio-temporal rhythms of capital accumulation requires a quite different framework to that required to understand global climate change.”

Economist Herman Daly made a similar claim in reference to environmental regeneration. Earlier still, ecological feminists pointed to ready-made nature responsive epistemologies among those who labour in subsistence farming, parental care-giving, and indigenous gathering.

Climate politics, as we have known it, is tied into the conventional eurocentric dualisms that support capitalist patriarchal reasoning from religion to law to commerce and beyond. Thus,

- economy over ecology
- capital over labour
- masculine over feminine
- North over South
- land over water.

Entering into a political contestation based on these hierarchical assumptions is to invite defeat. Such anthropocentric framing is by definition antagonistic to the goal of protecting life-itself. On the other hand, an ecocentric strategy can dampen these traditional antagonisms, helping build political unity.

Protecting life on earth is not about economic exchange value, but about enhancing a metabolic value that is neither unitary nor computable, but qualitative and observable as natural cycles interact. So far, climate politics has enabled massive gains in extractivism, accumulation, and centralising control by the transnational ruling class. First, the mysteries of carbon reductionism distracted environmentalists from nuclear irradiation, species loss, gene technology, and toxic chemicals. Second, the discourse of economics by its lack of correspondence with ecology led to public confusion, stalling clear initiatives for change. Third, quantifying devices like pricing and aid

funding put activists on the back foot by having to make their case in an alien language.

Meanwhile, given the perennial crisis-fallout from free wheeling globalisation, capitalist lawyers are now at work on schemes for overarching institutional governance. Any notion of governing earth systems is not only extreme anthropocentrism, it relies on an imperialist version of science with the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) averaging out climate phenomena on a global scale. In the name of objectivity, this ideological practice leaves existing sustainable provisioning models invisible. For example, in the global South, wherever development has not destroyed livelihood resources, local economies attuned to geographic and cultural conditions show climate politics to be yet another neocolonial imposition.

A COP21 side event, the International Tribunal on Rights of Mother Nature, did address the logic of ecology. But the Paris negotiations as such, should have been declared null and void by social movements at the outset. This would constitute step one in a dual power strategy. Once the master discourse is refused, the global majority - women, indigenes, and peasants - can lead with ecological insights grounded in life affirming regenerative skills. The era of technocrat environmentalism bypassed this meta-industrial labour class. But care for new generations, for water, and for forests, is prerequisite to food, energy, and other kinds of sovereignty. Even in the global North, conspicuous consumption is now transitioning into degrowth, and joyful commoning for eco-sufficiency. This approach to climate crisis was articulated at the 2007 COP13 in Bali and in the 2010 Cochabamba Summit vision of *bien vivir* - and we the peoples must hold to it.

Yes, Another Climate Strategy is Possible by displacing the top down abstractions of international climate politics with practical action. To consider one model the new water paradigm: Slovak hydrologist and anti-dam activist Michal Kravcik argues that local water management is the key to global climate stabilisation. This is not carbon denialism but relies on an holistic science beyond the central dogma of land versus water. The repressive mission of eurocentric hydrology separated the two, then either controlled water by expelling it in concrete channels to the sea or harnessing it behind dam walls.

Based on this classic land versus water dualism, 'modernising development' - meaning deforestation for industrial scale agriculture, grazing, or mining - ultimately dries out and desertifies land. Rain on cleared earth without vegetation to break its fall or organic humus to absorb it, denudes slopes and washes fertile soil into streams. In cities, impervious surfaces result in flooded streets and damaged homes. Urban areas with no capacity for natural evapotranspiration through trees, result in dysfunctional heat silos in the air above them. The local small water cycle that brings rain is now disturbed and random atmospheric heating sets up the chaotic weather patterns known as global warming.

Kravicik's numeracy is compelling, even for those who have reservations about relying on metrics:

“... the annual loss of 50,000 square miles of forest and the additional soil sealing of 20,000 square miles per year have reduced the water that is able to circulate in small rainwater cycles. He estimates that, throughout the last century, around 8900 cubic miles of water for these climatically crucial cycles was lost. This equals three times the water volume of Lake Superior. If you calculate the effect this has on the oceans, you end up with a sea level rise of around four inches ... Rainwater and humidity are vital parts in the cooling system of the atmosphere. During evaporation, a gallon of water spends 2.5-kilowatt hours of solar energy. The loss of significant amounts of water and the desiccation of soil and of air therefore produce potential heat, which amounts to, as Kravicik calculated, the gigantic figure of 25 million-terawatt hours. This is 1600 times more heat produced annually than all of the planets' powerhouses combined.”

The secret of the new water paradigm is working closely with biodiversity and soils to rehydrate land and subterranean aquifers. The model is inexpensive, with hands-on water restoration technologies using local stone, wood, and plants, designed and carried out by neighbourhoods and communities. Its methodology is synergistic: that is to say, it simultaneously restores livelihood, provides jobs and education; it grows solidarity, cultural autonomy, empowerment, and spiritual renewal.

This analysis not only provides an integrative reading of climate change, but reclaims it as an ecological not economic problem. The new water paradigm indicates that climate solutions through repair of the small water cycle are readily available to people whether they live in rural or urban spaces. Autonomous versions of this paradigm are corroborated in Australia, China, India, Canada, the US and Europe. Leading water activist Maude Barlow commends it and it validates Via Campesina's claim that small scale provisioning is 'cooling down the earth'. Rather than pricing hypothetical units of carbon and relying on neocolonial elites to give their money away, activists can revive environmentalism with an integrative water-soil-biodiversity coalition for climate. It's time for a globally democratic political strategy that brings climate politics down to earth by celebrating people's sovereign intelligence.

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