

Carbon Confusion

Coming to Terms with Climate Change on the North Atlantic Left

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These days, many on the left in the global North understand that, to quote the words of the Democratic Socialists of America, the [“fight for climate is a struggle against capitalism itself”](#). They are often united in holding that “there is no such thing as green capitalism”, that “socialism is the only path to human survival”, and that “we need system change, not climate change”.

This consensus is welcome. Yet these slogans can be interpreted in different ways. Acting on different interpretations of them will have different consequences. Political movements need to choose which interpretation they want to support.

Interpretation #1 goes as follows. Climate action is about reducing net carbon emissions to zero. Capital cannot do this. Therefore climate movements need to be anticapitalist.

Interpretation #2 takes a different line. Climate is not about carbon. The different things that different communities call climate change are manifestations of a broader capitalist frontier involving the progressive “wearing out” of human and nonhuman beings in the service of accumulating capitalist value. Therefore climate action cannot be set apart from dialogue about the whole range of already-existing resistance to capitalism on all fronts.

Hierarchy

The hierarchy in Interpretation #1 is clear. Climate stability is on a separate, higher plane than politics. Politics should serve it. In theory, that politics could be capitalist or anticapitalist. It just so happens that capitalist politics doesn’t work in achieving that higher goal. So anticapitalism must be enlisted as a useful instrument for reaching that end.

This hierarchy often carries over into the way meetings about climate are conducted. Adherents of the first interpretation tend to begin discussions by explaining “what climate change is” in terms of carbon, and what the main solution must be, namely managing the carbon in the atmosphere.

Of course, there is usually space to listen “respectfully” to how different people experience climate change and what they might say about the causes. But the assumption is that, when all is said and done, it is climatologists who decide what climate change “really” is, and other people must organize their participation, if any, around that. Direct action against the Keystone pipeline in the US or the Water Towers Protection and [Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation Programme in Kenya](#) is fine, and is to be encouraged, but its overriding

purpose is not the liberation of the earth and its peoples. Its bigger purpose is achieving 350 or 450 parts per million of CO₂ equivalent in the atmosphere, or limiting global warming to 1.5 or 2.5 C degrees.

With minor modifications, this is essentially a replication of the unwritten rules of conduct at conferences of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Under these rules, scientists at the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) inform policymakers that climate change is not about labour, capitalist mechanization or fossil fuels, but about CO₂ molecules being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Policymakers then agree to disagree about how to ride herd on all those rogue molecules, carefully avoiding issues of capitalism, work or oil companies.

In both cases, climate action becomes organized around the alienated object of the wayward CO₂ molecule in the same way that far-right politics is organized around the fetishized figure of the immigrant. Inquiry into all the different ways that capital accumulation is internally related to climate change, while not explicitly forbidden, is implicitly discouraged. Instead the focus is on “carbon budgets”, just as a focus of right-wing governments is on “immigration budgets”.

Thus “climate mitigation” becomes action to modify the movements of CO₂ molecules without regard to the underlying causes of those movements. In principle, any kind of mitigation might do the trick: carbon regulation, carbon taxes, geoengineering, net zero, even carbon markets, as long as they are under “socialist” control. “Energy transitions”, similarly, become transitions to industrial energy systems that release less CO₂ to the air. The question is seldom considered of whether those systems are tenable or not or should be modelled, as they currently are, on systems that have grown up together with the irreplaceably concentrated source of energy that is fossil fuel. On this view, there is essentially nothing wrong with Shell Oil’s practices with regard to the earth. It is just that the company should be nationalized, its oil wells used to bury carbon dioxide rather than increase the carbon content of the atmosphere, and subsidies provided to it so that it can invest as profitably in renewables as it did in petroleum.

Movement-Building

Interpretation #1 of slogans like “system change not climate change” tends to discourage broad-based mobilization. This is not only because it encourages arrogant and alienating practices of interaction, but in many other ways as well.

A simple example: adherents of Interpretation #1 have to think hard about what stance to take toward, say, popular resistance to fuel price rises in Ecuador or France, because it seems to involve anticapitalists opposing themselves to decreasing CO₂ emissions – and therefore to climate action. Proponents of Interpretation #2 will be more likely to show immediate solidarity with this resistance, as well as to treat it as a welcome opportunity to bring into dialogue different movements that they understand to be already about the issues underlying climate change.

Another example: adherents of Interpretation #1 are more likely to look kindly on any and all schemes for reducing carbon emissions, because they seem to be confronting climate

change directly, even if those schemes reinforce climate change in the longer term. They are more likely to be comfortable with Green New Deals that seek to reduce carbon in North America or Europe, even if those Deals necessitate the expansion of “sacrifice zones” of the global South where nickel, lithium, cobalt, sand or [balsa wood](#) are extracted, with all the associated effects on water, soil, air and forests. That creates an enormous obstacle to forging political alliances with people located in those sacrifice zones, in addition to further endangering climatic stability.

Adherents of Interpretation #1 will also be more receptive to low-carbon proposals cynically put forward by enemies of popular anticapitalist movements, on the ground that they look like “steps in the right (carbon) direction” even if in fact they strengthen capital’s built-in imperatives to undermine all conditions for human survival. That puts another roadblock in the path of alliance-building.

When their attention is called to such contradictions, adherents of Interpretation #1 typically try to tack on “reforms” that only expose further the underlying poverty of their “carbon” reading of climate change. Thus intensified extractivism is supposed to be mended by “sustainable development”. Exploitation inherent in forest offsets is supposed to be relieved by adding provisions for “community safeguards” and “benefit sharing”. Injustices in Green New Deals are supposed to be remedied by adding the adjective “fair” to their description and promising plenty of underspecified “green jobs”. The regressive effects of overall carbon cuts or carbon taxes are supposed to be fixed by special exemptions; and so on. Typical socialist declarations such as [“both decarbonization and justice are crucial,”](#) by dividing the two from each other, unwittingly reveal just how thoroughly the struggle against fossil fuels has become [detached](#) from its political roots in resistance to the injustices of enclosure, dispossession, settler colonialism, the international division of labour, ramped-up labour exploitation via capitalist mechanization, and the degradation of living work.

Finally, supporters of Interpretation #1 tend to be much more vulnerable to a misconception of movement-building as negotiating agreement around a plan, with “implementation” put off to a separate, second step. Conceptualizing climate in terms of carbon leads naturally to the futile exercise of trying to organize numerical carbon targets, then delegating carbon tasks top-down to technical organizations that happen to be already fully occupied with the quite distinct business of trying to eke out a few more years of capital accumulation: tax authorities, ministerial commissions, oil companies, industry alliances, engineering groups, trade negotiators and so forth. This confusion of abstraction with political organizing leads in the end to division and weakness. By contrast, working to ensure that the concept of climate itself is open to democratic inquiry and contestation among a diversity of groups and communities facilitates more fundamental, open-ended and realistic challenges to the institutions that represent the rule of capital.

Overcoming Climatology: A Work in Progress

The divide within today’s Northern left between Interpretation #1 and Interpretation #2 is understandable, perhaps inevitable. The notion that climate change is caused by parts per million of atmospheric carbon dioxide equivalents, or that climate action is about managing molecules in order to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Centigrade, has had many years to

become entrenched on the left, as elsewhere. As noted above, climate scientists themselves overwhelmingly subscribe to this ideology. Eager to align themselves with “science” in all its manifestations and to enlist scientists as allies against climate denialism, most leftists are [unreceptive](#) to inquiries into the ways that the 20th-century history of climatology, entwined at all points of its development with capitalist and military initiatives, has led to the unthinking acceptance of irrational conceptions of climate and climate change. Indeed, once the idea that climate is about carbon becomes established institutionally, no one even needs to believe in it: the institutions [believe for you](#). Breaking free of Interpretation #1 is thus going to take some time.

Fortunately, the process seems to be well under way already. Proponents of ideas like “system change not climate change” or “the fight for climate is a struggle against capitalism itself” seldom understand these slogans solely under Interpretation #1 without any Interpretation #2 being mixed in at all.

The Democratic Socialists of America are a good example. On the one hand, DSA’s very mainstream position of dividing “climate” from “politics” appears in such statements as “we must solve the climate crisis and the inequality crisis together”. It is also seen in the first guiding principle for its “radical Green New Deal”, which is “decarbonize” something vaguely referred to as “the economy” by 2030. No mention whatsoever is made of the fact that current plans for decarbonization necessitate huge new frontiers of extraction and despoilation in the global South for the necessary cheap minerals and other raw materials that are supposed to replace fossil fuels. In addition, the DSA endorses programmes that “safely and naturally draw down and remove excess carbon from the atmosphere” without mentioning that this is to give a blank cheque to geoengineers whose brief is to extend capital’s use of fossil fuels to extract surplus for a few more decades. The DSA also advocates a blanket expansion of national parks and forests [“to enable natural carbon capture”](#), seemingly innocent of any knowledge of the history of protected areas in dispossession and degradation of the earth under the rule of capital. And its default position is to support [“left-wing and social democratic forces”](#) contending for or holding state power – a stance that does not seem to take seriously the [unsavory history](#) of supposed “pink tide” governments in Latin America and elsewhere with regard to extractivism and the repression or cooptation of ecological resistance movements.

On the other hand, the DSA is clearly a bit uneasy about some of the positions that result from its going along with Interpretation #1 of slogans like “system change not climate change”. It wants a carbon transition but also somehow wants it to be “just”. It is aware that its carbon removal plans could be used to prolong the fossil fuel regime, and so registers a token opposition to “offsets”. It would like the leftist governments it supports to “embrace the demand for the liberation of oppressed and Indigenous peoples” and rejects manoeuvres by imperialist powers to pose as “anti-imperialist”. It wants to “decommodify survival” as well as “decolonize” and promote a “future of international solidarity”. If the DSA has not yet realized that this entails decolonizing its carbon-oriented concept of climate as well, perhaps that will follow before too many more years have passed. Its ambivalence about its own Green New Deal principles should be encouraged.

What goes for the DSA goes for many other fixtures on the Northern left as well. While Naomi Klein still holds that the “environmental crisis” is somehow separate from “our most

pressing political and economic causes”, merely “supercharging each one of them with existential urgency”, she is also forthright that [“it’s not about carbon, it’s about capitalism”](#). And while John Bellamy Foster of the venerable socialist journal *Monthly Review* still foregrounds “immediate reduction in carbon emissions” as the “only way out of this epochal crisis”, no one has urged more eloquently than he the need for a [“direct confrontation with fossil capital”](#) and for keeping coal, oil and gas in the ground. With luck, all of these swerves, vacillations and inconsistencies will turn out to be merely part of the birthing pains of a more thorough and coherent left response to climate change in the transatlantic North.

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