Carbon Policy is not Climate Policy

Toward a Different Agenda for Climate Activism?

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A difficult reorientation?

A suggestion: movements need to move further away from thinking about climate change in terms of carbon. It is more effective to think about it in terms of work.

This is hard because the idea that climate is about carbon is embedded in climate thinking on both the right and the left.
Carbon policies

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- 2015 Paris Agreement
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- Other carbon market schemes
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- “Energy transition” plans
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- Green New Deals
We’re used to making fine distinctions among all these policies.

But they all have one thing in common.

They all start from the CO$_2$ molecule.
They **explain** climate change with the CO$_2$ molecule.

And their way of **addressing** climate change is to get **managers to predict and control** movements of CO$_2$ molecules and their effects.
For example:

Carbon *market* schemes such as the Kyoto Protocol and Paris Agreement put their faith in the power of the state to limit and put a “correct *price*” on the movements of CO$_2$ molecules.
Carbon tax schemes also seek to address climate change by getting the state to put a price on CO$_2$ molecule movements.
“Energy transition” plans accept capitalism’s energy regime but assume that the amount of carbon that it moves to the atmosphere can be reduced by the state or the market.
Geoengineering also leaves capital’s energy regime alone and puts its faith in state prediction and control of the movements of CO$_2$ molecules – or the effects of those movements.
Green New Deals meanwhile accept the idea of a decarbonized capitalistic energy system, but suggest that the state push things along and add a few extras to try to cut the damage to the working classes.
(Or rather, some parts of the working classes. Nick Estes, an Indigenous historian, “cringes a bit” about the Green New Deal:

“Whenever there’s a crisis of legitimacy for the capitalist system, it’s oftentimes Indigenous lands that are sacrificed ... With these transition plans the Navajo nation is going to be producing solar power to fuel the entire Southwest [US]. OK, so has it really changed from a resource colony? ... We have to address the primary contradiction, which is settler colonialism, if we’re going to honestly and justly transition out of the current carbon economy.”)
So far, I’ve been talking about the image of the state expert predicting and controlling molecule movements …
... through *price* or other means.
But of course the image of the CO$_2$ molecule is not an *isolated* image.
It comes complete with an image of universal, Cartesian space ...
... of dead physical things that can be bracketed, predicted and controlled ...
... and ultimately of the purely physical climate system described in General Circulation Models (GCMs).
This picture of climate change as a matter of molecular movements in a physical system was built up bit by bit, unintentionally.

Over the years, it became more and more institutionalized via, for example …
... post-World War II development of systems analysis, cybernetics and ecosystems theory.
... and the military-centred postwar development of digital computing.
More and more apparatuses for prediction and control of an “external” entity modeled inside computers …

… less and less capacity to interact with a living climate, anticipate, analyze history and make rational decisions.
Climate change became seen as an “outside ‘forcing’ to an otherwise coherent model of atmospheric dynamics.”

And climate action became seen as a reverse “forcing” (or “mitigation”) of changes in this physical climate system by an unanalyzed (but implicitly capitalist) “social” regime “outside” it.
Two separate systems became “locked into an endless dance of adaptation” mediated by states, business and professional managers.
This picture fits beautifully with capitalist and neoliberal ideology ...

*Mitigate!*

*Adapt!*
... even if it contrasts sharply with the global majority’s understanding of climate change.
This is not at all to disparage climatology, which has shown us so much, but only to notice what kind of relationships it tends to reinforce.

An analogy might be Google Translate.
Everybody loves Google Translate. But Google Translate doesn’t interact the way living human translators interact. Instead, it uses algorithms, fast processors, and large amounts of energy to **predict** what a good human translator would do, based on masses of digitized evidence from the **past**.
GCMs treat climate the same way: as a physical entity whose behaviour is to be more or less statistically predicted on the basis of past evidence, not as a living, creative being oriented toward an emerging future … and whose actions are constituted partly by surplus accumulation involving the fatigue or “maxing out” of various kinds of living “work of nature,” including that of prehistoric Carboniferous organisms.
For example, none of these things are a part of climate change, on a climatological view.
Without disrespecting the achievements of climatology and climate policy, we can see two irrational outcomes of this stance:

Molecule fetishism.

No analysis of the role of fossil-fuelled machines in the exploitation of living capitalist labour, and thus an inability to anticipate (as opposed to predict) the course of climate change.
When we talk about *molecule fetishism*, we are talking about the way *fantasy* structures reality inside climate science and policy.
Let’s return to that picture of an organic, ideally predictable climate modeled inside computer programmes …
… and, looking at this picture, try to remember Zizek’s point that “society as a corporate Body” – an organically-functioning whole, with all the different classes, genders, etc. contributing to the whole according to their function – is always “the fundamental ideological fantasy.”

Slavoj Zizek
_The Sublime Object of Ideology_, p. 142.
E.g., the Nazi fantasy of an organic, harmonious Aryan society couldn’t have worked without the fantasy figure of …
... the alien Jew spoiling everything from “outside.”
Similarly, the 20th-century fantasy of a unique, exceptional, harmonious, non-racist “Thai society” …
... paradoxically needed the racist fantasy of the disharmonious “non-Thai” inside or outside the country’s borders.
And today’s Trumpian fantasy of “Great America” ...
... is incomplete without the fantasy of the dangerous immigrant (human or non-human).
So too the fantasy of a computer-modellable “climate system” ...
… is incomplete without, e.g., the fantasy that what “forces” a normal atmospheric system is CO₂ molecules coming in from “outside” it.
The fantasy logic is always to organize reality so that the “solution” to contradictions and conflicts becomes the *exclusion of the disruptive Other*. This Other can be human …
... or other-than-human.
In order to be powerful enough to explain away deep ecological and political contradictions and conflicts, these Others must always be endowed with a special magic, a mystical aura, a superhuman charge, a je ne sais quoi, an indescribable oomph, an excess zip or surplus, a sinister “Victoria’s Secret.”
… which is why we have to have *equally* magic or mystical “beautiful walls” to keep them out. (These fantasies may be made from concrete and steel – but they are still fantasies.)
… or beautiful, magic **climate laws** to exclude excess alien carbon from the atmosphere, without changing anything else. (These fantasies may be made from real institutions and human actions – but they are still fantasies.)
Thus the Paris Agreement (or your typical “energy transition plan”) has no problem with carbon extraction as such. It’s only when the carbon assumes “immigrant” form as CO$_2$ and crosses the border into the atmosphere that it must be controlled or detained.
Maybe you arrest the carbon and “sequester” it in trees.
Maybe you bury it underground.
Or maybe you “rehabilitate” it by showing that it’s not as bad as the immigrants that might have arrived if you hadn’t rehabilitated it.

(Carbon offsets.)
Similarly, you can declare beautiful wars on various aliens to make everything all right again.
Of course, the fact that such wars are fantasies doesn’t mean that they don’t kill people …

… whether they are the wars on Covid-19 that are now being questioned by the Zapatistas …
... or wars on immigrant CO$_2$ molecules that are also taking people’s lives and livelihoods.
We European types often have a hard time accepting that contemporary mainstream science and policy are loaded with fetishes and fantasy in this way.

We can easily see the racism, fantasies and anti-science blustering in, for example, a Donald Trump or Jair Bolsonaro.

But we rather carelessly assume that the antidote to their racist, anti-science postures must be more peer-reviewed science and policy advice, without realizing the structural similarities of the fetishes that permeate and partly constitute both.
Let me give an example by moving from Trump to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the official group of scientists advising the UN climate apparatus.
In 2014, Sir John Houghton, founding member of the IPCC, gave an interview explaining why IPCC scientists could not mention the carbon in fossil fuels in their analysis of climate change, but only carbon that had become more mobile in the form of CO$_2$. 
To follow what happens when carbon atoms move over the border into the atmosphere is “science,” Houghton said. But to analyze what happens to make so many carbon atoms migrate in this way “is not a science question.”

In other words, fossil fuel extractivism can have nothing to do with the “climate object” defined by climatology.
It is not just that IPCC scientists fear capitalist reaction, then. It is also that the *structure and institutions of their science itself* are defined by the same fantasies about, e.g., disruptive immigrants that can be found in the racism of a Trump or a Bolsonaro.
For activists, the political problem of such fantasies is that they persist whether or not they “work.”
For example, everybody “knows” that $\text{CO}_2$ molecule immigration law has only increased $\text{CO}_2$ immigration and has negatively affected efforts to curb climate change.
But “knowing” that the underlying contradictions are ignored in carbon policy has made little difference to mainstream climate politics for over 25 years.
You can’t undo the **magic powers** of any of these fantasy figures via rational argument …
... any more than you can undo the magic powers of *any* ordinary, everyday fetish by refusing to “believe” in it, or by explaining the way things “really are.”
In this connection, it’s interesting to note reactions to the familiar phenomenon of pollution reductions during crises. E.g., the NO$_2$ reductions in China and Europe during the Covid-19 crisis, which are typically much greater than reductions due to climate policy …
... are due mainly to the **idling of machines** used to exploit and discipline labour (whether production, circulation or consumption labour) ...
... a phenomenon also seen during previous capitalist crises.
Instinctively, people seem to sense two things from these pictures:

First, that the pollution reductions are only temporary and indeed will probably be followed by increases in energy intensity and carbon intensity.

Yet second, that because these reductions, though temporary, are typically greater than those achieved by any carbon policy, they might offer indirect hints about what real climate policy would look like.
Which is another factor that might encourage us to have more subject-changing conversations that help “traverse the fantasies” inside climatology and carbon policy and move closer toward a real climate politics instead …
... for example, conversations with movements already engaging settler colonialism, mining, living labour, and the history of machines and empires.