

1. Introduction

For me politics is not simply about the behaviour of politicians or ‘spinning’ the truth. I see politics as the organisation of power, which can be ignorant of certain problems, yes, but can also be tremendously productive and transformative.

Controlled mitigation and adaptation (and reparation?) that is fair and effective will not happen automatically. Collective decisions need to be made, and behaviours and attitudes changed. This is why politics is necessary.

And it is not just relevant in relation to big intergovernmental decisions like those coming up at the COP, but a whole range of other activities, like the protests over sending coal to Drax. ‘One man’s eco-warrior is another man’s eco-terrorist’.

2. Pessimism of the intellect

Quote from Bush Senior at the Rio Conference in 1992...A decade later Bush Junior said that the Kyoto Protocol is unfair to the US because it exempts big countries like China and India from carbon dioxide reduction. “I will not accept a plan that will harm our economy and hurt American workers”.

Some hope with various national commitments ahead of COP 21 – from the US and China especially – but aside from the issue of the commitments to reduce GHG emissions go far enough, pessimism persists as to whether they will be implemented.

Why pessimism?

- Politicians trapped in games structured by the defence of ‘national interests’, the electoral cycle, etc.
- Vested interests in the carbon economy as a result of people’s position in the economy (e.g. you own or work for an oil company) and because political legitimacy has become reliant on emissions (e.g. China)

3. Optimism of the will

There have been many situations which people said could never change: you’ll never see a man on the moon, never see the end of economic depression, apartheid or dictatorship. In each of these cases, the limits of the possible were re-defined. These historic episodes are also relevant for climate change politics today:

- Climate equivalent of the Apollo project: new technology and its civilian deployment
- Green New Deal: state-led employment programmes in low-carbon infrastructure and energy production; green investment banks for private sector
- Archbishop Desmond Tutu: “Apartheid was the global enemy, now climate change is the human rights challenge of our times” – use the tools of the anti-apartheid struggle, like divestment, against climate change
- Some see in Cuba today, following its massive decrease in fossil-fuel consumption following the collapse of the USSR, a road map for a low-carbon economy, inspired by adoption of agro-ecology and its socialist politics

4. Gramsci

Gramsci gave us that quote on pessimism and optimism. He was an activist as well as theorist. A founding member and one time leader of the Communist Party of Italy and imprisoned by Benito Mussolini's Fascist regime in the 1920s.

Why use Gramsci? He addressed the same questions I am: There are contradictions in the current way of doing things that make change necessary. Yet this necessary change is being thwarted. Why? And how might we overcome this?

5. Capitalism

I'll offer here a brief reflection on the relationship between capitalism and climate change. Do we need to change capitalism? I would argue yes...

One of the 'hockey stick' graphs here shows global mean temperature kicking upwards from 1900 off the back of fossil-fuel powered Industrial Revolution in Britain, Western Europe and the US, Russia and Japan and so on – depicted by the dark Satanic Mills in the background.

- The accumulation drive means that capitalism must constantly expand and this has tended to require constant conversion of the planet into commodities: fuels, metals, land, food, water, and now even air in the form of carbon markets. Everything is priced and put to work making money → can growth be decoupled from resource use?

Individual capitalists may be swayed by green ideas but there is usually a competitive pressure or profit incentive to keep lowering the cost of production (which usually means using 'dirty' energy) lest they be forced out of business.

- The huge inequalities in wealth that capitalism creates: (a) makes collective action more difficult since it is hard to build coalitions around shared sacrifice – this is what Ed was talking about; and (b) pattern the effects of climate change.

In 1995 there was a heat wave in Chicago that left over 450 people dead within a week. But the deaths weren't evenly distributed. They disproportionately affected African-Americans. Why? Because African-Americans lived in areas with high rates of crime that meant health services were reluctant to enter and elderly residents without air conditioning were reluctant to leave, or even open their windows, for fear of burglary.

There are two caveats here:

1. There are different varieties of national capitalism and some have better environmental records than others (typically those that have been more regulated, such as Germany and the Nordic countries). However, some argue that these have not gone far enough, and cannot go far enough, in terms of decarbonisation.
2. Socialist societies have had terrible environmental records too, particularly the USSR. But in the same way that capitalism differs from place to place and time to time, so too can socialism.

What we change capitalism to, of course, is a different question. Gramsci wanted a revolution and to overturn the whole liberal democratic capitalist system in favour of Communism. History has condemned that version of socialism, so I'll leave this open ...

6. Hegemony

Gramsci asked the question: Given the evident contradictions of capitalism, why had there been no socialist revolution in Western Europe? His answer was that capitalism had been able to survive in part because of the cultural influence of the bourgeoisie. Political control by the ruling class rested on coercion and consent. This is hegemony.

Whereas coercion is extended through the apparatus of the state (military, police, courts), consent is manufactured in civil society (not NGOs as we tend to use the term now, but all kinds of social institutions – the church, the school, the media, etc.).

Through these institutions, the narrow interests of the bourgeoisie had been universalised, made to look like common sense values. In this way, members of the working class either came to identify with their oppressors or else accepted that there were definite limits on what they could feasibly achieve → for thinking about climate change today, we can relate this to the sense of being locked in by the current system and being unable to imagine a way out.

Using Gramsci's ideas, some scholars have argued that the mid-20th century in Western Europe and North America – in a context when socialism appeared a viable alternative – that capitalism was not overturned because a compromise was made.

Workers would get a family wage and consumer goods, while capitalists would get to keep control of their property. The classic expression of this is Fordism and the connections to intensified fossil-fuel usage not hard to see (the explosion of auto-mobility)

7. Counter-hegemony

The ruling class might manufacture consent through civil society, but the common sense is not above challenge.

For Gramsci, radical political change comes about through challenging, undermining and eventually replacing a dominant ideology. This is counter-hegemony and in today's parlance, it can be thought of as a battle for hearts and minds.

How might this happen?

8. #1 Credibility

Political projects also have an economic dimension. For ideas about change to become effective and assume the “solidity of popular beliefs” the economic system had to be credible. For socialists, obviously, there had to be confidence among the working class that they could maintain and improve their condition of life once they owned the means of production themselves – the factories, the farms.

For environmentalists, there is a similar challenge. This can range from debates about the competitiveness of renewables in the absence of subsidies, to the possibilities for a steady-state economy in which there is zero GDP growth.

There is also the task of showing how this could be done in a way that is fair and politically popular. We are used to thinking of centralised power stations but imagine instead a decentralised or distributed energy system where the station – in this case powered by solar energy – is located where there is electricity demand so that less energy is wasted in transmission and other forms of leakage. Then imagine that the station is owned by its customers (a cooperative) rather than capitalists, meaning that the energy company could focus on serving the local community rather than guaranteeing dividends.

This is the case in Germany, where the *Energiewende* (energy transition) has increased the share of renewable energy in the country to 27%. This has gone in tandem with anti-nuclear sentiment and been supported by high feed-in tariffs guaranteed for 20 years so that citizens could sell excess power and become energy producers as well as consumers. The UK, by contrast, introduced them in 2010 and has proposed slashing them already.

9. #2 Spirituality

For Gramsci, religious indoctrination was one of the most powerful ways of keeping the poor down (he described Catholic thought as an “ideological opiate”). But it did attend to something important in people’s lives, and so likewise, socialism must also meet people’s spiritual needs and feel like an expression of their own experience.

For environmentalists, it seems to me, the most powerful opiate today is not religion but consumerism. Instead of churches we have shopping malls. Instead of sermons we have advertising. And instead of salvation we have the Apple i-Phone → **Black Friday today!**

Pope Francis 2015 encyclical on the environment: “People may well have a growing ecological sensitivity but it has not succeeded in changing their harmful habits of consumption which, rather than decreasing, appear to be growing all the more...An outside looking at our world would be amazed at such behaviour, which at times appears self-destructive.”

The problem for environmentalists is that in attacking consumerism, they seemingly take away some of the enjoyment and meaning from life. Listen to this quote from Caroline Lucas, Green Party MP, when she visited the University in 2013 as Green Party MP: “The Green message has been delivered in hair shirts. As a party, we have to show what it would look like to live in a zero carbon economy”

So, consider the picture: The family borrow bicycles from a neighbour via an online share scheme and go round the local public park to look at the ducks. They’ve saved money, enjoyed each other’s company, and stayed healthy. Oh, and helped save the planet too! In other words, the shift to less materialistic lifestyles is not a sacrifice but a route to contentment.

10. #3 Organic intellectuals

Gramsci said that all people are intellectuals, in that all have intellectual and rational faculties, but not all people have the social function of intellectuals.

Organic intellectuals are thinkers attached to particular social classes but who are able to explain the world in ways that are understandable and appealing to a broad cross-section of society, and thereby change to change basic political habits and political thoughts.

Organic intellectuals are also different to ivory tower thinkers – e.g. academics, the *intelligentsia* – who attempt to stand apart from society and act autonomously.

Organic intellectuals act as ‘permanent persuaders’ in organising cultural hegemony within civil society and articulating strategies by which this could be pursued. This is why Gramsci saw the need for popular workers’ education to encourage development of intellectuals from the working class.

James Hansen was head of NASA’s Institute for Space Studies for 46 years. Hansen is a climate scientist, not an economist or politician (which makes him different to another campaigner such as Al Gore). He is shown here being arrested for protesting an expansion of the Keystone XL tar sands pipeline.

But he has waded into policy debates by heavily criticizing the cap-and-trade mechanisms that Europe and California are using to curtail their carbon emissions. Instead, Hansen says, it would be better to have a simple carbon tax on the well-head or mine-shaft (i.e. on the companies extracting rather than using fossil energy), with the revenue rebated to the public. One of his criticisms of cap and trade was that it makes millionaires on Wall Street and other trading floors at the public expense – an explicitly political argument.

Since retiring, Hansen has increased his activism. He said: “We have reached a fork in the road and the politicians have to understand we either go down this road of exploiting every fossil fuel we have — tar sands, tar shale, off-shore drilling in the Arctic — but the science tells us we can’t do that without creating a situation which our children and grandchildren will have no control over.”

- Can we locate other organic intellectuals among groups like forest dwellers, coastal residents & wildlife enthusiasts (David Attenborough) who are able to speak to others in that position and beyond?
- To gain influence through ideas, visions, culture, organic intellectuals require access to the media organs like newspapers, television, radio, Internet, etc... BBC

Note: War of Manoeuvre follows War of Position. Those with an interest in preserving the status quo won’t simply sit back and watch others attempt to mobilise the population to an altogether different political settlement. They would act to defend their privileged position. Remember, hegemony is consent and coercion.

11. #4 Prince

Machiavelli wrote during the Italian Renaissance of a Prince, an absolute sovereign to whom history assigns a decisive task: the constitution of a nation.

Following Italian unification in the 19th century and the inequalities which characterised it, Gramsci wrote of the modern Prince, the mass Communist Party, to which history had assigned the political project of proletarian revolution and the institution of socialism.

The difficulties of pushing a radical policy agenda through the traditional liberal democratic state structure, combined with the global nature of capitalism, have suggested to some neo-Gramscians that the best hope for change no longer lies with national political parties. Instead, they have proffered the postmodern Prince: a global plural group with no clear leadership structure but which seeks to combine different social movements in transnational solidarity.

Who will be the historical figures of the climate change movement?

- Prince – Evo Morales, the first President of Bolivia from the indigenous population
- Modern Prince – the Green Party, or rather parties.

They have a genuine electoral presence in Australia, France, and Sweden among other countries. In Germany, the Green Party even governed the country in coalition from 1998 to 2005. In the UK they have just one parliamentary seat and around 60,000 party members. This is not much different to UKIP and you can see the difference they have made on the political agenda around immigration and EU membership – both underrepresented by First Past the Post system.

- Postmodern Prince

This figure can be seen in the People's Climate March, which took place in September 2014 to shape debates at the UN Climate Summit in New York. It was the largest climate march in history, endorsed by many unions, schools, churches, community groups and environmental justice campaigners (a real Gramscian civil society!) and involved marches in 11 other cities – from Berlin to Bogota.

Another is planned for this Sunday in London

Note: Some scholars – like the eco-socialist John Bellamy Foster – believe that massive revolt is most likely to emerge not at the centre of the capitalist world but at its periphery. “Those most oppressed in the world, who have nothing to lose, are to be found predominantly in Third World regions”. Engels's book *The Condition of the Working Class in England* focused on how the working class was subject to toxic living conditions and the consequences they bore in terms of health. The picture shows smog in Beijing and the consequences being borne today by workers affected by the pollution emanating from road traffic and coal-powered factories. A struggle for clean air in China is simultaneously a struggle for a different mode of production.

12. #5 Passive Revolution

Gramsci argued that the bourgeoisie maintains its economic control by allowing certain demands made by trade unions and mass political parties within civil society to be met by the State. He believed that many trade unionists had settled for a gradualist approach in that they had refused to struggle on the political front in addition to the economic front (i.e. union leaders had 'sold out' by focusing on incremental improvements in pay and conditions for their members, rather than challenging the root causes of exploitation of all working people).

Thus, the bourgeoisie engages in passive revolution by allowing the forms of its hegemony to change – e.g. the political settlement today is different to that in the 1950s Fordist era but still essentially capitalist.

Some see the involvement of powerful capital today (which is finance capital like Goldman Sachs, not industrial capital like Ford) in climate change to be a vital way of changing the market incentives faced by firms.

Thus we have things like carbon trading (which uses stockbrokers), the Carbon Disclosure Project (which uses insurers), green bonds (investors) and the Carbon Tracker Initiative (which uses big shareholders like pension funds – identifying the scale of *unburnable carbon* currently listed on stock exchanges around the world in order to demonstrate the systemic risk to markets if carbon reduction targets are enforced by governments.).

Might this 'green economy' or 'climate capitalism' be another form of co-option?

Would it matter if it were a form of co-option? There might be two reasons to think that it did:

(1) such schemes fail because businesses cheat, weaken the rules or do not take the green incentives seriously enough – ultimately, schemes that try to accommodate accumulation always face the problem that short-term profitability can probably be better served by continuing to pollute

(2) even if 'climate capitalism' did help reduce carbon emissions, it would do little to address social inequality, and might even exacerbate it. This will mean that the poor in society will be hurt much more by the effects of climate change (unequal adaptation) and because of their poverty and desperation may even engage in new forms of polluting activity → massive redistribution of wealth through international aid

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On the flip-side, the notion of self-sufficiency and 'back to the land' have been criticised as forms of passive resistance. Political action is the only option.

13. Thinkers

Naomi Klein

This vein of thinking is also explored in Naomi Klein's *This Changes Everything* and within the discourse of climate justice groups speaking the language of redistribution (and accused of being watermelons: green on the outside, red on the inside).

Klein has been critical of clamp down on civil society activity in Paris during COP 21.

Roger Scruton

Burkean political philosophy translated into environmental politics by Roger Scruton. He argued that environmental problems can only be solved if people are motivated to confront them and that this motive can be found in 'oikophilia': the love and feeling for home.

So Scruton cites examples like preserving local woodland, blocking fracking or embracing transition towns as examples of conservative environmental politics – undertaken through civil associations and institutions of friendship, not antagonistic campaigns led by outside interests like NGOs or the State.

John Dryzek

Drew on Habermas' idea of communicative action, which puts faith in human rationality to allow cooperative action if the conditions of debate and deliberation are right. The task as Dryzek sees it in relation to climate change is to create institutions that give people a voice, that bring them together in mutually supportive ways, and which allow them to learn from their past efforts. These could be local, but also transnational (polycentric is the term used). Either way, positive action must be democratic not authoritarian in nature.

Wangari Maathi

The Green Belt Movement started in Kenya in 1977: it created livelihoods for women and secured soil by planting trees and then managing the woodlands. Over 50 million trees have since been planted in the country and various plans by the Kenyan government to deforest for development prevented. Her praxis connects with ecological thinking which sees human identity emerging out of non-human life.

"If the soil is denuded and the waters are polluted, the air is poisoned and the mineral riches are mined and sold beyond the continent, nothing will be left that we can call our own. Our real work is reclamation - bringing back what is essential so we can move forward. Planting trees, speaking our languages, telling our stories are all part of the same act of conservation. We need to protect our local foods, recall our mother tongues and rediscover our communal character."

All speak of politics from below, rather than Bjorn Lombjorg who talks about 'public choice' from above

14. Conclusion

Prior to conscription, military service depended on voluntary action. Lord Kitchener wants you to fight in World War I, and more than a million took him up on the offer.