

## 1. Why politics?

Einstein: politics as remaking society, carrying things forward

A criticism of the transitions literature is that it sees climate change as a problem that can be adapted to via technical innovations, developed by the private sector, rolled out into society via supportive public policy and market incentives. There is no opposition or inertia; no losers or vested interests. It is a process without politics.

## 2. Pessimism of the intellect

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 the US-China deal announced in November (2014) 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 individuals' 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)
- Presented as an all-encompassing and inescapable threat to life, inviting fatalism

## 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
- Eco-socialism: 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

These are not perfect analogies for thinking about the politics of climate change but put in mind the possibilities for change.

#### 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?

As a socialist, he also believed that capitalism itself was the root of the inequalities and instabilities in society. So, if like me, you believe that capitalism is also a driving force of climate change and unsustainability, then Gramsci offers a way into thinking at this structural level. 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)

#### 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.

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 goes for mitigation as well as adaptation; and (b) gives those who have made their fortunes through carbon-intensive business the means to lobby against change.

There are two caveats here:

1. There are different varieties of national capitalism and it is not to say that some are capable of having cleaner environments than others (typically those that have been more regulated, such as Germany and the Nordic countries). However, it is arguable 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. By orienting the economy toward societal goals rather than the pursuit of profit, there might be a better chance of addressing climate change.

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. I myself am reluctant to go that far. Fredric Jameson's famous quote that "it has become easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism" seems even more relevant in the context of climate change.

So what I propose is to try and present Gramsci's ideas in such a way that even if you don't share my thinking about capitalism, you can still appreciate their relevance to political change.

## **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.

Using Gramsci's ideas, some scholars have argued that the mid-20<sup>th</sup> 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.

We can also use the picture to think about how to begin transcending the current way of doing things. 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.

## 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 6.

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 do not drive 20 miles to a privately-owned retail park to buy stuff they don’t need, before sitting down in silence to a movie while they guzzle down Coca-Cola. They 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 non-monetary, non-consumptive lifestyles is not a sacrifice but a route to contentment.

## 10. #3 Organic intellectuals

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

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

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 who are able to speak to others in that position and beyond?

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Another note on the picture: it shows Hansen being arrested for protesting the Keystone XL tar sands pipeline, which is proposed to run for over 1,000 miles from Alberta to Nebraska.

### **11. War of Manoeuvre**

In producing counter-hegemony, Gramsci spoke about the different approaches of a War of Position and a War of Manoeuvre.

A War of Position was the attempt to gain influence through ideas, visions, culture; the kinds of things we have spoken about so far and which require control of media organs like newspapers, television, radio, Internet, etc...

A War of Manoeuvre was about physically overwhelming the coercive apparatus of the State. In this case, as in most cases of direct action, the State (embodied in Officer Green of all people) usually wins.

But whether it is Greenpeace’s Arctic Sunrise protesting against Russian oil exploration in the Barents Sea, or activists who ambushed a train delivering coal to the Drax power station in North Yorkshire, what they do show is the armoury of the military, police and courts which underpins hegemony. [Side note – Drax has since converted half its boilers to biomass, burning wood pellets imported from forests in the US].

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.

### **12. #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 19<sup>th</sup> 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.

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

Well, it could still be a political party – 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 30,000 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.

The difficulties of pushing a radical policy agenda through the traditional liberal democratic state structure, combined with the global nature of capitalism and climate change, have suggested to some 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 (environmentalism, feminism, Occupy, anti-nuclear and so on) in transnational solidarity.

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.

### **13. Socialist perspective**

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”.

Livelihood struggles could be attached to preservation of indigenous identity (Bellamy Foster particularly likes the politics of Evo Morales' in Bolivia, which is questionable I think from an environmental standpoint given the continued extraction projects) or to the traditional concerns of the working class.

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.

### **14. #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) 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.

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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.

## 15. **Burke**

Burke emphasised the dangers of mob rule, fearing that the Revolution's fervour was destroying French society. He appealed to the British virtues of continuity, tradition, rank and property and opposed the Revolution to the end of his life. Burke was not against change (or independence) per se but for change which respected what had gone before.

Translated into environmental politics by Roger Scruton, the English philosopher, who argued in *How to Think Seriously about the Planet: The Case for an Environmental Conservatism* 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.

To the extent there is a role for the State, it is in forming an international coalition of the willing on climate change that can do things like share technology. Scruton is sceptical of the time and efforts wasted in trying to convince recalcitrant countries to sign up to international agreements to reduce emissions and advances unilateral action when needed – including geo-engineering, which arguably is in tension with his counsel to move slowly and avoid top-down socio-ecological experiments.

## 16. **NIMBY-ism**

Another tension, of course, is that deferring to people's love of home opens the door to NIMBY-ism. (Not In My Back Yard).

Perhaps the trick might lie in stretching oikiophilia such that incorporates a greater expanse – e.g. England’s “green and pleasant land” as articulated by William Blake in what we now know as the song Jerusalem (taken from the same poem which also gave us the “dark Satanic Mills”).

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UK Committee on Climate Change: Extreme weather events already cause damage and disruption...

- Around two thousand people across the UK died as a result of the 2003 heat wave
- Insured losses from flooding and severe weather events have cost an average £1.5 billion per year over the past twenty years
- In 2007 widespread flooding affected 55,000 homes, killed 13 people and cost the economy £3.2 billion