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Well-meaning discourses of climate delay

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Commentary

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Non-technical summary

Lamb et al. (2020) identified 12 discourses used by a counter-movement to delay or weaken action to limit climate change. This commentary notes three discourses used by those promoting such action that can also delay meaningful action: insisting on transformational change to the exclusion of incremental change, downplaying the value of emissions targets, and focusing attention on adaptation.

Social media summary

Discourses of climate delay: reject incremental changes and emissions targets as diversions, focus on adaptation.

Lamb et al. (2020) provide a very useful catalog of 12 'discourses of climate delay' that accept the reality of anthropogenic climate change but are employed by a 'counter-movement' to justify delayed or inadequate action to mitigate it. The paper takes a great step forward in unmasking and understanding counterproductive framings of the climate change issue. I write here to identify some other discourses of delay, two of which are embedded in the paper.

One of these is the paper's claims that transformational change is needed in social, economic, and/or political systems to stabilize climate in an acceptable condition and that the push toward incremental solutions tends to crowd out possibilities for transformation. This can be a discourse of delay in that focusing only on transformational change may crowd out promising incremental efforts. Incremental changes have the relative advantage of greater feasibility, especially in the short run. And because of the long half-lives of greenhouse gases, reductions achieved quickly are more valuable than delayed ones. Whether incremental and transformational changes compete in a zero-sum fashion as the paper proposes is an empirical question. Some incremental changes may even facilitate transformation, as suggested by the transformational changes in energy systems that are starting to flow from incremental deployment of distributed solar energy systems.

Second, treating emissions target setting as a discourse of delay can itself be a discourse of delay. Verbal targets set by countries, cities, or companies are certainly insufficient on their own, but they can also provide serious steps forward, especially when stronger agreements are not yet feasible and when social movements, investors, insurers, competitors, and other change agents can provide checks against toothless commitments, thus pushing target setters to make progress they might not otherwise have made. Especially with international agreements, incremental steps may be the only possible beginnings (Keohane & Victor, 2016).

A third discourse of delay focuses on adapting to climate change. Adaptation, and especially anticipatory efforts at reducing vulnerability to foreseeable events, is critical. It is often more feasible to achieve than mitigation because the risks are typically local and readily visible. But an adaptation emphasis can delay mitigation efforts by suggesting the risks are reduced. Some of them are reduced in the short run, but delaying mitigation increases risks in the longer run and does not reduce climate-driven social stresses that can be imagined but not predicted (National Research Council, 2013). Also, as a matter of science policy, resources devoted to adaptation compete with mitigation efforts, which reduce the full range of climate risks, both expectable and unpredictable, for everyone.

In sum, advocates for combatting climate change should look in the mirror as well as out the window to spot discourses of delay.

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Conflict of interest. PCS has collaborated with three of the coauthors of the Lamb et al. article: Roberts, Capstick, and Creutzig.

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