The Changing Ethics of Climate Change

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Many in the environmental movement have argued in recent years that in order to speed up climate actions we should take the ethics out of the climate change debate. Focusing on the moral obligation to act or on the effects of climate change on the most vulnerable was often judged to render the discourse too "heavy," "negative," or "difficult."[1] Many also deemed it unnecessary. After all, renewable energies, better designed cities that allow for reduced car use, and power plant regulations that lead to cleaner local air—to take just three examples—all have real and substantial benefits unrelated to the fact that they are "the right thing to do" in the face of climate change. They create jobs, reduce health problems and costs, and make society fitter.

Interestingly, though, there has recently been a revival in arguing for climate action on an ethical basis. This has mainly been driven by the fact that the impacts of climate change are already being felt. In the wake of Hurricane Sandy and Super Typhoon Haiyan (to name just two extreme weather events) it is no longer an abstract notion that the world could really become uncontrollable. These disasters have started to give contemporary society a feel—and fear—of what may lie ahead.

Most prominently, President Barack Obama—after a first term ruefully lacking in climate action and one in which he never mentioned the word "climate"—has recently begun framing climate change in moral terms. When in June 2014 he announced new, more stringent rules for U.S. power plants, for example—expending political capital on the issue in his second term—he framed the decision as one needed to ensure that he will not leave his children (and ours) a planet that is "beyond fixing."[2]

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Obama's rhetoric builds on one of the leading ethical themes in the global climate conversation—the effects that climate change will have on future generations (what some have called "futurity"). It is a difficult argument to disagree with, especially when even mainstream institutions such as the World Bank set out very clearly what a world without effective climate action—an Earth that is 4 degrees Celsius warmer than preindustrial levels—would look like in a few decades' time. It is a world of "extreme heat-waves and life-threatening sea level rise," of dissolving coral reefs in many areas, and lower agricultural yields.[3] In short, it is a dangerous and unpleasant place to be.

However, climate change is no longer merely an issue to prepare for. Its effects are happening *now*. They are already real—and all too often deadly—today. For example, "the National Climate Assessment makes clear that extreme heat waves are striking more than before, and climate change is involved."[4] Heat waves kill people, especially the elderly and vulnerable, and thus the moral relevance of these current effects can hardly be in doubt. Their severity does, however, make a future-generations-oriented frame morally questionable. In a world where climate change is a lived reality, it seems obvious that we have a moral obligation to relieve the effects of those suffering today, even before thinking of the potential impact on (even) our own children. A "compassion now" dimension is becoming more and more important as climate impacts mount.

One other prominent frame in the international political debate about climate change focuses on the obligations of developed countries. Many observers have noted that while the global North (the industrialized nations[5]) has historically been the main source of emissions and is also the primary benefactor of industrialization, the negative effects of climate change are first, most strongly, and most frequently felt in the global South. The World Bank notes that the "adverse effects of global warming are tilted against many of the world's poorest regions."[6] Building coal plants in the industrialized world, therefore, is unacceptable both because it contributes to global warming generally and because it contributes *concretely* by undermining the livelihoods of communities living on small island states. As Micronesia has argued in a legal submission regarding a new Czech coal proposal, "any major new coal-fired projects . . . threaten the future of the nation."[7]

But more and more wealthy people reside in the South, and the South's middle class is growing rapidly. Thus, in more and more countries emissions per person are starting to become more comparable to those in the North. It is still the case that about 20 percent of the world population uses 80 percent of the world's

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resources. But the 20 percent are no longer all in the developed countries. China, for example, now has per capita emissions that are comparable to the EU average. This does *not* in any way diminish the historical responsibility of the North, of course. But it does mean that, to solve the climate crisis—which requires cutting emissions *now* and going forward—the "rich" (including the global middle class) need to change their lifestyles, wherever they reside. Further, as climate action gets more urgent, the moral case of redistribution *within* nations is growing. The ethics of climate change is therefore increasingly one of inequality and class: the rich need to take *less* of the world's resources in order to allow for more people to gain access to the resources they require for their livelihoods.[8]

The ethics of climate change, therefore, can no longer be fully grasped within the logic of a North-South divide. This is especially true because so many of the solutions are being driven by the South. Those traditionally cast in the climate narrative as "victims" are increasingly the true agents of positive change. In the Philippines—one of the countries most vulnerable to climate change—civil society has been advocating for clean energy for decades and, as a result, the country already meets close to 30 percent of its needs with renewable energy. The damage caused by Super Typhoon Haiyan in November 2013 has further accelerated the desire of local communities to deploy clean, workable solutions as quickly as possible. For example, in Tacloban, which was devastated by Haiyan, the community will soon benefit from renewably powered "jeepneys" (the local bus equivalent).[9] This is but one of many examples of the South pioneering solutions that could—and should—be applied globally. In fact, some of the biggest movements against the most climate-polluting energy source, coal, are in the South. Activists in India have likened their resistance to destroying important forest landscapes for coal mining as equivalent in moral and historical stature to the fight for India's independence.[10] Even giant state-owned corporations in China are giving in to public and civil society pressure not to expand their use of coal.[11] Strong public concern about bad air in China's cities is driving policies to reduce China's coal use,[12] which may, if these policies are implemented, and if the United States and European Union take equally ambitious actions, lead to a peak in global climate pollution before 2020.[13] Indeed, the South has a long history of producing its own answers to environmental problems, what Joan Martinez-Alier has termed the "environmentalism of the poor."[14]

The true battle in climate and energy policy is between those who want to roll out clean and safe solutions and make them available for all, and those who want to cling to the old, polluting system that is controlled by the few. The latter is

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where most of the world's influence and money lies today in *both* the North and South. Take, for instance, the role and responsibility of corporations. A small number of corporations have caused most of the problems we face today. Indeed, just ninety legal entities (most of them multinational corporations) have generated almost two-thirds of all climate pollution since the dawning of the industrial age,[15] and all but seven of them deal in oil, gas, and coal. It is these companies that should, via regulation, be made responsible for the damage they are causing. Instead, they are receiving special treatment and are buying influence with governments. For example, between 2001 and 2011 the United States handed out around $2 billion a year in subsidies to the five biggest U.S. oil firms, despite the fact that these firms had profits of approximately $1 trillion over the same period.

We see the same patterns repeated around the world. In South Africa, for example, the state-owned power utility Eskom is getting the government to support its coal and nuclear expansion while charging consumers increasing amounts for their energy. If the government were serving the public interest it would force Eskom to move to renewable energy rapidly. Instead, South Africans, especially the poor, are paying the price for Eskom's outdated business model through polluted air, water shortages, and an increasingly erratic and dangerous climate.[16]

If ethics is our guide, those profiting from the pollution in both the North and South need to pay for the damage their pollution is already causing. Thanks to new science on emission attribution, we can pinpoint the culprits more reliably. As a result, you can expect polluters to be challenged in courts more often—and more effectively—in coming years. There is even a serious legal prospect of corporate executives of major fossil fuel companies facing personal liability for opposing policies to fight climate change and funding climate change deniers.[17]

For now, however, it is climate defenders, not corporate executives, who are facing legal pressures—and worse. As reserves dwindle, ever more extreme fossil fuels—such as the tar sands in Canada or the oil in the Arctic—are being pursued, and many challenging the extraction of these commodities are increasingly under threat. In 2013, for example, thirty Greenpeace activists spent two months in Russian jails after peacefully protesting at the first oil rig to deliver oil from the icy waters of the Arctic. They were freed only after an unprecedented wave of support from senior politicians, diplomats, and Noble Prize winners.[18] But as campaign analyst Chris Rose has observed:

> The . . . furor over the "Greenpeace Arctic 30" held in Russian jails . . . is a dramatic collision of ethics and business as usual, but future conflicts may spread far wider.

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> The Arctic 30 have not literally been taken hostage by Russia . . . but they are hostages to an ethical imperative to restrain the growth in carbon pollution, and the failure of governments to do the same: carbon hostages. Many more NGOs could soon find themselves in the firing line.[19]

Indeed, research by Global Witness has shown a shocking surge in the killings of environmental activists in the last decade.[20] While these killings cannot all be linked to the fight against climate change, it is clear that the need to protect those standing up against polluters will increase as the climate problem worsens. Greenpeace is therefore currently exploring how to support better environmental human rights defenders around the world.

A world in which scarcity and environmental limits are day-to-day realities (especially for the fossil-fuel industry), however, also provides opportunities for campaigns against dangerous climate change. The fact that global oil companies see the melting Arctic as an opportunity to drill there, for example, is a strong —if chilling—metaphor for the mind-set of those who want to continue "business as usual." Drawing a line in the ice in the Arctic and saying: "Arctic oil is a step too far," as Greenpeace has done, is a deeply symbolic gesture (what the founders of Greenpeace called a "mind bomb"[21]). A campaign such as Greenpeace's "Save the Arctic" (which has attracted more than five million signatures from around the world) is more than an emotional appeal to protect a fragile and beautiful part of planet Earth: it puts into question the very sanity of any business model that ignores environmental limits and the science of climate change.[22]

At the same time, the lengths to which the fossil-fuel industry must go to find new deposits provide concrete intervention points on mainstream investment decisions. Given the remote and difficult nature of operating in the Arctic, for example, Arctic oil is unlikely to be a good investment.[23] The narratives of concrete economic risk and the fundamental need to change course for climate reasons meet in the growing movement to divest from fossil fuels. The divestment movement's proposition is simple: If the vast majority of *known* reserves of fossil fuels should not be burnt,[24] any investment in furthering our dependence on fossil fuels cannot be ethical.

At the personal as well as institutional level it therefore makes sense for "people of conscience . . . to break their ties with corporations financing the injustice of climate change," as Archbishop Desmond Tutu put it in an article comparing the use of divestment in the fight against climate change to the calls for divestment from South Africa's apartheid regime in the 1980s.[25] It is remarkable how fast this

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movement has grown and how it is already showing a real impact. Institutions as varied as the British Medical Association and the Unitarian Universalist Association have already divested from fossil fuels; and others, including Stanford University, have started by divesting from the worst climate offender: coal.[26]

Aside from being a self-consciously ethically motivated movement, the divestment movement also points to the question of *power* as key to deciding whether there will be a climate-safe future or not. Divestment is aimed not just at cleaning pension funds and banks but at breaking the political stranglehold on policy-makers. As Bill McKibben puts it: "The idea is not that we can bankrupt these [fossil fuel] companies; they're the richest enterprises in history. But we can give them a black eye, and begin to undermine their political power."[27]

Next Steps

It is indeed such a global shift of power that is necessary to thwart the effects of climate change.[28] Small changes will not be sufficient to prevent dangerous warming levels of 4 degrees Celsius—or even more. If we are to keep climate change below the catastrophic threshold, we need to phase out fossil fuels as soon as possible and head toward 100 percent renewable energy for all. In addition, we must protect natural forests and other carbon sinks and adopt climate-resilient ecological farming methods.

The good news is that we already have affordable, safe, and fast technical solutions available to combat climate change. There are plenty of clean options we can invest in, if we divest from fossil fuels. Indeed, an energy revolution based on renewable energy and energy efficiency will not only provide energy for all but at the same time generate more jobs than if we carry on with current dirty practices.[29] Greenpeace estimates that implementing such a revolution will allow governments to help businesses create 3.2 million more jobs by 2030 in the global power-supply sector alone. In South Africa, to pick just one country, 149,000 direct jobs could be created by 2030. That is 38,000 more than in the current government plan.[30] Those who have invested heavily in the existing, polluting energy system and who benefit monetarily from its continued use will no doubt fight the actions required to prevent dangerous climate change. But they are bound to lose this fight. Not because their position is unethical (though it is), but because the dynamics of change in the energy sector in particular are now unstoppable.[31]

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In conclusion, it is clear that the ethics of climate change is getting more complex as climate change intensifies. Traditional framings of climate change action being about future generations or simply another dimension of the North-South divide in global geopolitics are not irrelevant today, but they are no longer sufficient. Issues of inequality; of defending the human rights of those standing up for the climate; of how to hold the economic actors responsible for most of the carbon pollution accountable; and of how to take personal and institutional responsibility by divesting from fossil fuels—all these are rising in importance and relevance. In this context, a moral framing for the climate debate is certainly appropriate: simply put, climate change is mostly caused by the privileged, and the impacts are most strongly felt by the poor.

Taking an ethical approach to climate change today is not "too negative," but essential. Doing so, however, amounts to a fundamental challenge to our economic model and the distribution of power globally. It is a big task, but, as President Obama has put it, we owe it to our children not to leave them a planet that is "unfixable."

NOTES

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[5] In debates at UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, often equated with the Annex 1 countries of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol.

[6] See endnote 3.

[7] See Bonnie Malkin, "Micronesia Mounts Unprecedented Legal Challenge Over Czech Power Station," *Telegraph*, May 24, 2011, accessed June 3, 2014, www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/environment/climatechange/8532796/Micronesia-mounts-unprecedented-legal-challenge-over-Czech-power-station.html.

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[20] See *Deadly Environment: The Dramatic Rise in Killings of Environmental and land Defenders* (London: Global Witness Limited, 2014), accessed June 3, 2014, www.globalwitness.org/deadlyenvironment/#report.

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[28] See Kumi Naidoo and Daniel Mittler, "Transform Global Governance to Deliver Sustainability and Climate Justice," in *Civicus State of Civil Society Report 2014*, accessed June 30, 2014, civicus.org/index.php/en/socs2014/87-expert-perspectives/2017-transform-global-governance-to-deliver-sustainability-and-climate-justice.

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