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Strategic Adaptation for Emergency Resilience

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Abstract

International efforts on climate breakdown have focused on reducing climate-damaging emissions. They have basically failed: that can now be seen, as the Conference of Parties (CoP) system declines into near farce, and politics bites back against climate action, while temperatures and impacts accelerate. As we face an increasingly chaotic world, *climate adaptation* provides an essential pathway to resilience and disaster-readiness. It's not only about reducing our exposure to damage but also about transforming our ways of life to live with, and in what ways are possible even make the most of, the new, hotter, more difficult reality. There's no longer any doubt that some level of climate breakdown is inevitable, and, rather than denying this, we must focus on how to adapt to it, in a manner that can bring people together to face the coming storms, and so ultimately perhaps bring them (us) together to stop the storms getting worse.

Introduction: Facing a World *in extremis*

The year 2024 proved to be a turning point in our climate crisis, and not in a good way. You will remember the devastating flooding across Europe that hit Spain particularly badly, or Florida experiencing two Category 5 hurricanes in less than two weeks. Early 2025 saw intense unprecedentedly wildfires across California (in the middle of winter!), and we had the confirmation that 2024 was the first calendar year in which temperatures were above 1.5°C over pre-industrial temperatures: that is, they exceeded the 'safe' limit that scientists themselves had set out, and that is built into the Paris Agreement on climate.

It is no longer tenable (if it ever was) to imagine that man-made climate change will only badly affect the Global South or small island nations; climate breakdown is here and it will affect Europe badly too. And what starts in Valencia won't stay in Valencia. The kind of off-the-charts awful flooding that affected Spain worst of all will come to Britain, too. As will heatwaves, wildfires and droughts, for all of which we are basically unprepared.

Despite climate breakdown being more evident than ever before, the political landscape seems, at the worst possible moment, to be retreating from meaningful action. In the UK, 2024 saw an extremely impressive surge in Green Party representation, though this victory for a climate-focused party was the exception, not the rule, if one looks across Europe, or indeed the world. The Labour government, outside the electrification sector, is rapidly backing

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out of most of its other commitments to acting on climate, in its headlong rush for growth at any cost: the latest examples being allowing companies to drill horizontally below the North Sea to tap oil they weren't supposed to be allowed to tap, and going back on its promise not to expand Heathrow. The UK also saw the rise of the Reform Party in 2024–5; they want the country to reverse what little climate progress we've made. In much of the world in fact, particularly strikingly in the United States, the far-right, climate-denying parties gained ground, while Green support dwindled.

This juxtaposition of deteriorating ecological realities on the one hand and political inertia or worse on the other is awful beyond words. It presents a stark paradox. The rising tide of climate disasters should be a clear call to action, but instead, we see many prefer to delay or even, still, deny the need for change.

This article seeks to address this contradiction by arguing for *a new approach* to our increasingly climate-challenged world, one that can break through the deadlock by conceptualizing climate fundamentally in a new frame; of *resilience-building adaptation*. We begin by exploring the philosophical foundation of adaptation. Next, we point to some key advantages of a strategy beginning in adaptation over current approaches to climate breakdown, before outlining the conditions necessary for adaptation to be successful. We then show how, counterintuitively, a focus on local resilience-building can potentially inspire both a global movement and greater support for decarbonization efforts across the globe. Finally, we warn that adaptation is at risk of being coerced by the exclusionary forces we gestured at above, and that we must claim the term as quickly and determinedly as possible to make adaptation maximally transformative, just and inclusive for all.

The Philosophy of Adaptation: Birthing the New

Gramsci famously wrote that 'the crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear'.

Within the climate action 'ecosystem', we should locate 'the old' in climate thinking and action fixated on decarbonization, with an implicit belief that existing systems can be

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'saved'. 'The new' will combine awareness of our predicament, including the possibility of collapse at a variety of scales and timeframes, with a focus on adaptation – at the very least as an equal partner with decarbonization. Our current 'morbid symptoms', however, include hopeless attachment to dead targets, associated loss of momentum, morale and credibility, and a (crumbling) regime of out-of-touch 'compulsory' optimism.

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The questions that we ask matter. Until recently, climate discourse has been led by 'old' questions like 'How do we limit warming to 1.5°C?', 'How do we achieve 'green transition' smoothly?', 'How can we rally the public behind net zero objectives?' We're beginning to see that these are no longer the right questions (if they ever were). 'New' questions appropriate to our current reality include: 'Can our stark failure to achieve greenhouse gas reductions or temperature stability become a learning moment at the scale of civilization?', 'How do we avoid getting derailed by escalating climate impacts, and instead enable those impacts to unlock serious climate action?', and crucially, 'How could getting serious about adaptation help mobilize democratic action on ecological breakdown?'

A Shift towards Adaptation

'The new' approach of adaptation has certain strengths that 'the old' decarbonization approaches cannot encompass. Namely, adaptation can give tangible, short- and medium-term benefits whilst decarbonization is a long-term approach; adaptation has benefits that are visible locally, unlike decarbonization; and adaptation is, we will suggest, more capable of dealing with the multi-faceted nature of the polycrisis rather than decarbonization. Let us explain these points.

Dangerous climate change, often described as a 'hyper-object', or a 'diffuse object', *is* a complex and diffuse issue that presents unique challenges. It is invisible, gradual and often feels abstract, which makes it difficult for many to truly grasp *in their lives* (as opposed to in the abstract) the urgency of the situation. Decarbonization, while obviously vital, is a long-term, upstream 'solution' that has been mired in the mother of all free-rider problems: people and countries benefiting from others' actions without contributing themselves.

Plain speaking about this last point is essential. We want to be quite clear about the gravity of this collective action problem. It is so 'wicked' that to call it merely a 'problem' at all is itself so gross a failure of rhetoric, so drastic an understatement, that it seriously hampers understanding of our predicament.

It was broadly predictable that humanity would grossly fail to rise to the challenge of decarbonization, as to that of broadly similar collective action tragedies, including all the other major and now endemic pollution crises (plastics, 'forever' chemicals, etc.). The structure of such tragedies is that the incentives to pollute are strong and short-term and the benefits go largely to the polluter, whereas the incentives to clean up or stop pollution are weak, diffuse (over both time and space) and very difficult to enforce. It was broadly predictable (and in fact predicted) that humans would find it incredibly difficult to rein in the direct causes of dangerous climate change (though it was somewhat less predictable that political forces would arise and become powerful that would flourish in

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or revel in the damage). We should have anticipated better that climate policy based in an ethical imperative to decarbonize would, essentially, fail. As it has done. With terrifying emerging consequences.

We can anticipate that this trend will continue. In order to have any chance of stopping climate breakdown or even slowing it down (which has not happened yet; to the contrary), an alternative route is required. A central burden of this article is to essay what we consider without question to be the most encouraging possible alternative route, a route that should have been tried more already, but better late than never.

That as yet untried route is, as already flagged, to turn instead to a strategy based in the adaptation-imperative.

For adaptation – the process of responding to and preparing for climate impacts – offers a more concrete and immediate way forward. One that is based in quotidian life and work together. As we've noted, and this is crucial, while decarbonization requires global cooperation and long-term commitment, adaptation can meaningfully begin locally and offer tangible benefits in the short- to medium-term. For example, protecting and restoring natural ecosystems like peatlands, wetlands and woodlands can mitigate flooding, reduce heat island effects and support local agriculture. These are solutions that communities can begin to implement today, in response to their own specific vulnerabilities. (Adaptation is relatively 'retail', unlike the somewhat more 'wholesale' nature of decarbonization (which is mainly about reducing a global number); this 'retail' nature can be immensely appealing to the pride and local knowledge of specific communities and of 'citizen-scientists'.)

Furthermore, decarbonization focuses on just one part (albeit a literally-vital part!) of the wider polycrisis, and risks ignoring other entangled environmental and social concerns such as biodiversity loss, water pollution and good food production. Adaptation values that which is valuable to the community and to its survival and flourishing, and actions of adaptation respond to the climate crisis in a more-than-emissions way. As such, (transformative) adaptation efforts often systematically boost local biodiversity, improve the quality of local waterways, and allow for more localized food production. And that's just for starters.

Adaptation is an easier concept to grasp than decarbonization. It speaks directly to people's lived experiences. It is local and tangible, addressing immediate threats and vulnerabilities. The benefits are clear: safer homes, protected livelihoods and stronger communities. When communities invest in their own resilience, they are immediately benefiting from it.

This invests them in climate action.

The Revolutionary Potential of Adaptation beyond the Climate Crisis

Once we start taking adaptation seriously, it has the potential to transform both our collective approach to dangerous anthropogenic climate change and our political and solidaristic engagement at large. It offers a way for people to act in the here and now, which could have knock-on effects on our political (and ecological) consciousness.

Firstly, focusing on adaptation can provide a route to engage disenfranchised communities, particularly those from working-class and marginalized backgrounds, who often feel excluded from the broader climate movement. Instead of framing the climate conversation as one of sacrifice – asking people to reduce their footprint, which is a pretty ludicrous, pointless and insulting thing to do when the people one is asking already have a low footprint and difficult lives – adaptation presents a more compelling message: we want to help you stay safe together in the face of increasingly frequent and severe climate impacts.

Secondly, this shift in focus could also counter the appeal of 'populist' movements that exploit climate inaction for political gain. Adaptation, as we have set out, offers a way forward that is pragmatic and grounded in the realities of people's lives. It could also help bridge the growing divide between the affluent and the vulnerable, highlighting that everyone has a stake in building resilience. For instance, consider vulnerable seaside towns which quite often contain

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a mix of very expensive beachfront real estate and left-behind communities; both are at risk in what is to come, and adaptation may be able to cross this challenging divide.

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Overall, adaptation offers an antidote for polarization and division by encouraging unity, cooperation and collaboration in the face of a collective challenge. When people muck in together in the face of a common threat, then they *are* overcoming the polarization that has come to mar climate endeavour (and society at large) to our cost!

The Dual Conditions for Adaptation

Local Community-Building

As the frequency and intensity of severe climate events continue to escalate, our reliance on abstract, global solutions like decarbonization-alone becomes less practical. Events like the devastating scenes in Valencia and Florida and LA are set to become more frequent, and soon it will in all likelihood be difficult to rely on distant, impersonal systems for our survival. In the future, the ability to access food, water, warmth, electricity, and disaster alerts will increasingly depend on local, real-world communities.

To put it bluntly: your life may depend on your relationships with your neighbours, and on how presilient (pre-resilient) you have been individually *and collectively* before the onset of a crisis-event.

In this sense, the climate crisis presents an opportunity to *reimagine how we live together*, turning away from atomization and embracing a more interconnected, communal approach to resilience and to life at large. In times of crisis, local solidarity will often quite literally be the key to both survival and flourishing. If and when insurance companies withdraw and governments struggle to keep pace with the growing challenges, our relationships with those around us will become more important than ever.

Being an isolated individual is not the norm; it's bastardization of the human spirit. The norm, as one of us (Read) set out recently in detail in the book *Wittgenstein's Liberatory Philosophy*, is that we think and exist deeply only with others. Throughout history, societies have improved when they have worked together on a particular, pressing goal; it is only in the past few decades that the ideology of individualism has grown particularly rampant. But, in our time of rising water levels, no man or woman can afford to be an island …

Facing Up to Our Reality

Due to 2024 being above 1.5°C relative to global pre-industrial levels temperature, it can and must be plainly said now that we have resolutely and gut-wrenchingly failed to achieve climate targets set by the world's governments for emissions reductions. We have thus failed ourselves, and (more drastically) our children. It cannot be credibly argued otherwise. The focus on decarbonization did not, tragically, spark the necessary urgency, and its abstract, long-term nature has in practice alienated many who feel it is not directly relevant to their immediate concerns. Not everyone thinks like a theorist, like a philosopher …

The primary obstacle to prioritizing adaptation has been the reluctance to face the full scale of the crisis. Decarbonization has been the dominant narrative because it allows people to imagine a future where things could still be 'normal'. Adaptation, however, particularly once it becomes transformative and strategic, forces us to confront the reality that things will not be 'normal' again. It requires accepting that the climate crisis is here, and that we must learn to live with it. This is why it is so essential – *and* why it has been resisted.

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For it is a painful thing to acknowledge just how much trouble we are in, and to realize that our governments are not capable (or willing) to take our situation seriously. But, *through* this pain comes the motivation and autonomy to do what we can in our immediate area to improve our situation. Through acknowledging the failure of decarbonization comes the necessity of adaptation and resilience-building. Thus, to adapt Hölderlin, where the trouble is, exactly there lies the closest we may now have to a saving power. Let us turn to explaining exactly how.

The Wonderful Irony of Adaptation's Impact on Decarbonization; and Inspiring a Global Movement

Above, we have shown that a strategy leading with climate adaptation has key benefits that are not present in decarbonization-fixated approaches, which unfortunately have dominated climate discourse and action (both in terms of activism and policy) to date. Nevertheless, despite adaptation and decarbonization often being seen as separate efforts, they are actually deeply interconnected. This is not only because when we adapt transformatively, looking 'upstream' to reduce carbon emissions, we start to achieve win-wins for decarbonization, but also because, by focusing on building resilience, we create the conditions for deeper engagement with decarbonization.

Greening cities through urban forests and green roofs not only helps to reduce urban heat islands, but also reduces energy demand and carbon emissions (and pollution). Restoration of natural ecosystems, such as (wetlands and) peatlands, mitigates flooding while also sequestering carbon. The more we adapt transformatively to climate decline, the more we create opportunities for decarbonization to happen organically and emergently.

Furthermore, by focusing strategically on adaptation, we also raise awareness about the need for long-term action on deadly-emissions reductions. The process of adapting to climate breakdown brings the crisis into sharp focus, underscoring the urgent need to act on root causes.

When people experience *limits* to adaptation, they realize the necessity of decarbonization too. When people see the tangible benefits of adaptation – safer, more comfortable homes, a greater sense of security and stronger communities – they may become more willing to support climate efforts at large as part of a broader strategy for climate survival. And when communities grow stronger together in the face of adversity, they are less subject to the polarization that has hampered climate action/politics.

Thus, adaptation becomes the best candidate we have now for a workable stepping stone to more ambitious decarbonization efforts.

Similarly, we have above shown that a key strength of adaptation is its focus on the local. Nevertheless, a focus on adaptation can inspire a shared and ultimately global shift towards resilience. Adaptation to climate breakdown is not just a local or national issue; it is an everywhere issue. The more we invest in resilience, the more we create a world where people are equipped to cope with the changes to come, and the less people get desperate enough to have to migrate in large numbers. Building a global 'community' of resilience will require concerted action and collaboration across borders, but it will also provide the opportunity for nations to learn from one another's successes and failures.

Local action on adaptation can create ripple effects, inspiring more action and snowballing into a larger movement. What begins at your village or town level can expand to a district, then a county, then a region, and before you know it a whole country could be taking adaptation and resilience seriously. As collective awareness spreads that it isn't just us who are taking adaptation seriously, but it's also the village next door and the town up the road, a positive sense of meaningful agency and possibility will ratchet up.

The UK, for example, could become a leader in this effort by adopting a national strategy for transformative and strategic adaptation. Such a strategy would prioritize community-led action, ecological restoration and sustainable urban

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planning. It would also recognize the interconnectedness of climate impacts and potential-cascades, from flooding and heatwaves to food insecurity and migration. A nation that leads on adaptation would surely inspire other nations to follow.

Herein lies the happy irony of adaptation: what begins at a local level rarely stays there, especially if it is successful, timely and inspirational. In this way, focusing on adaptation could become the catalyst for a global movement of resilience, one that unites people across political and cultural divides in the face of a common threat.

The Struggle to Define Adaptation

One of the greatest challenges facing the climate movement today, though people are only just realizing this, is the struggle to define what adaptation means in practice. In the UK, policymakers are starting to focus on climate preparedness, though much of this work is happening behind the scenes, without the public's attention. Nevertheless, we can be fully confident that as the climate crisis intensifies, the demand for adaptation and preparedness will only grow, as disasters, tragically, mount.

The key challenge will be to resist shallow, short-term pseudo-'solutions', like only building higher flood barriers, and to encourage deeper, more transformative forms of adaptation, like recreating peatlands, changing upland land management, or creating forms of housing that can literally rise above floodwaters. True adaptation requires long-term planning, including ecological restoration, big changes to land management, and urban redesign. It also involves reducing vulnerability and building resilience in communities that are most at risk. It includes social/psychological work, inner work.

The battle to define adaptation is particularly important in the context of the boost recently received by hard-right-wing politics. As climate denial becomes harder to sustain, some on the far-right (e.g. in France) are beginning to pivot towards a kind of fortress adaptation. Such an approach entails constructing an 'us' who are deemed worthy of receiving protection (through nationality, class or some other identity), and a 'them' who are left to feel the worst aspects of climate breakdown.

If we allow the far-right to define adaptation, we risk the rise of dangerous, exclusionary policies that will harm vulnerable communities. We have a historic opportunity, and a moral duty, to take leadership on adaptation and define it as a collective, inclusive effort that prioritizes equity and justice. Crucially, we must take the vision of adaptation beyond a narrow reactive focus on hard engineering 'solutions', within which one tries to maintain the system, to a much wider focus on system change. The future will be far more local. It will in many ways look little like what we have. The call to adapt should be heard as having a Darwinian and Kropotkinian flavour. We need to evolve, in order to survive, let alone flourish.

Conclusion: Embracing a New Era of Adaptation

It is critical that – at this desperate moment, with climate policy flying into reverse partly under the influence of the election of Trump, at the very moment when world temperatures leap upwards more and more unexplainably than they ever have before – we do not make the catastrophic mistake of doubling down on failed policy and activism approaches: of just 'telling a positive story', of pretending that the 1.5 degrees C limit is salvageable, of in effect denying the awful truths that characterize our predicament. Such denial would make us little better than climate deniers. The climate crisis is already very much *here*, it is grindingly devastating, and we actually have no choice but to adapt wisely to the changing world.

In doing so, we can build resilience and readiness, empower communities *and* spark deeper action on decarbonization. A strategy beginning in adaptation, adequately defined as per above, offers the best opportunity and means for us to respond to the crises unfolding around us. It brings hope in the dark. For it brings the issue of climate breakdown out of the realm of abstract science/policy and into the realm of granular lived experience. By embracing a

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collective, strategic approach to adaptation, we really can create a new path forward – one that ensures our survival and, even in the teeth of the coming storms, provides a foundation for what might yet be a more just and sustainable future.

Strategic adaptation is thus nothing less than the greatest imperative of our age. It is an immense task, a great work for us all to join.

We first announced the programme of Strategic Adaptation in an article right here in THINK two years ago. Since then, we have had the good fortune to start to develop it as a practical philosophy. You can find out more at www.ClimateMajorityProject.com/Safer.

For in these unprecedented, frankly deeply dangerous times, philosophers cannot afford only to interpret the world. We have to muck in as organic intellectuals and proactively seek to change it – and, crucially, to change ourselves as part of the process.

Through strategic adaptation, we can rebuild communities, protect the most vulnerable and spark the necessary changes that could make decarbonization a feasible reality at last. The time to think and act is now.

Let us begin the work of adapting to a hotter and rougher world, building a future that can see us through.

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