

CITIZENSHIP AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

New discourses and action against climate change

Carme Melo

Climate change has been at the centre of the environmental debate for three decades. Despite international agreements, humanity has not been able to stop the global increase in temperature. The coronavirus crisis has relegated the climate emergency debate to the background, although the connections between climate change and the pandemic prove that we have many reasons to act to mitigate climate change. Public policies have favoured regulations, market instruments, and modernisation strategies that consolidate a sort of green capitalism that aggravates and depoliticises the problem. However, the fight against climate change needs an innovative approach based on citizen politics and social transformation.

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■ CLIMATE EMERGENCY AND THE PANDEMIC

Climate change has been at the centre of the environmental debate for three decades. However, the dominant discourse has changed over this time: we went from trying to prevent it to mitigating it, and, finally, to hoping we can adapt and be resilient enough to survive the Anthropocene, whose main manifestation is climate change. International negotiations and agreements have failed to stop the global increase in temperature. The United Nations (UN) Climate Change Conference COP 25 in Madrid was the latest fiasco; it closed with no serious commitment to implement the 2015 Paris Agreement (Obergassel et al., 2020).

Climate protests are connected to UN summits. The 2009 event in Copenhagen (COP15) recorded the largest demonstrations against climate change seen to date. The protests continued in 2015, during the COP21, when the Paris Agreement was signed. But we had to wait until 2018 for a significant turnaround, with the emergence of the Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion movements, the main exponents

of the «new wave» of climate activism (De Moor et al., 2020). These collectives gained enormous visibility in December 2019, during the Climate Change Conference in Madrid. They achieved a widespread social impact and media coverage thanks to the figure of Greta Thunberg (Díaz-Pérez et al., 2021). Thus, in the wake of climate protests and strikes across five continents, many countries passed climate emergency declarations (Cretney & Nissen, 2019).¹

During the first quarter of 2020, climate action took the back seat because of the emergence of the Wuhan coronavirus. Of note, the speed and firmness with which governments around the world reacted to the pandemic contrasts with the barely symbolic reach of many climate emergency declarations. While the many impacts of the pandemic are imminent and visible in terms of morbidity and mortality, the effects of climate change are vague and much slower.

¹ According to *The Climate Mobilization*, 1,975 cities across more than 30 countries have already declared a climate change emergency (<https://www.theclimatemobilization.org/climate-emergency/>).

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Thus, the willingness to act upon it is lower, as is social acceptance of the measures and investments required to stabilise our planet's climate (Heyd, 2020).

There has been much debate in recent months about the relationship between climate change and COVID-19 (Heyd, 2020; Manzanedo & Manning, 2020). Some authors have suggested that the pandemic crisis is just the tip of the iceberg of a larger crisis comprising different political, social, care, economic, and environmental problems. Indeed, the latest report by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services of the UN concluded that the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change have a common cause: unsustainable resource exploitation (IPBES, 2020).

On the other hand, experts have also researched the impact upon the climate of measures taken to contain the pandemic. Using data from March and April 2020, several studies documented a global decrease of daily greenhouse gas emissions while restrictions to movements, transport, and economic activity were in place (Le Queré, 2020). Moreover, these same studies warned that, unless policies such as traffic limitations were passed to extend these measures or to gain tighter control over industrial emissions, the situation would worsen once we returned to pre-pandemic habits. These forecasts proved to be accurate, given that the most recent global data showed levels similar to those before the pandemic started (WMO, 2020). Thus, it is important for post-COVID scenarios to recognise the climate emergency.

■ A NEW APPROACH TO CLIMATE CHANGE POLICY: TOWARDS SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

The path taken to contain this pandemic gives us an idea of the sorts of policies that could be adopted to combat climate change. Many of the measures put in place in response to COVID-19 correspond to a «top-down» approach and «command and control» regulations. However, effective they may be (as indicated by the pandemic response), this model is not desirable to tackle the climate crisis. The changes it promotes are ineffective in the long run: they can change behaviours but do little to change attitudes or values, and even less to alter the processes and structures that perpetuate unsustainable dynamics.

If we take a look at the evolution of environmental policy, we can see that in the 1970s and 1980s, regulatory instruments and fines were the main tools used to control the most polluting activities. However, at the end of the 1980s, there was a shift towards an

environmental governance model in which governments included companies, NGOs, and citizens in political processes. In parallel, another approach was consolidated which was based on new voluntary instruments aimed at creating a green market, including emission permits, labelling and certification, and tax incentives (Carter, 2018).

These policies are part of what is known as ecological modernisation, based on dematerialising the economy and decoupling economic growth and natural resources (Mol et al., 2009); they seek more efficient environmental management through technical and administrative innovations and adjustments within the capitalist system. Ecological modernisation has been criticised for reinforcing economism and faith in the market by softening neoliberal economic policies via an environmental and natural resources economy, without modifying the extractivist and consumerist foundations of industrial society (Bryant, 2015).



UN Climate Change



John England

The Copenhagen summit in Denmark recorded the largest demonstrations against climate change seen to date, which were replicated in other locations around the world. The image shows protests in Melbourne (Australia) in December 2009 during the Copenhagen summit.

«In just three decades, we went from trying to prevent climate change to mitigating it, and finally, to hoping we can adapt and be resilient enough to survive the Anthropocene»



International negotiations and agreements have failed to stop the global increase in temperature. The COP25 in Madrid (Spain) in December 2019 closed with no serious commitment to implement the 2015 Paris Agreement. The image shows a photo of political representatives during the summit.

In response to these criticisms, the most recent texts on ecological theory of the state suggest that we should move from mere environmental problem management to a socio-ecological transformation focused on the decarbonisation of society within planetary limits, thereby leaving behind ecological modernisation strategies (Hausknost & Hamond, 2020). From this perspective, democratic institutions and practices such as those centred on citizenship, are fundamental as spaces from which the social transformation required by climate change can be articulated.

Debates on climate change are often dressed up in many complicated technical terms. They are presented to public opinion as a scientific matter whose comprehension and adaptation strategies such as techno-efficiency, climate engineering, or energy transition, must be left exclusively to experts. However, climate change is a political, social, ethical, and philosophical problem that reflects the enormous inequalities underlying neoliberal globalisation (Dryzek et al., 2013; Featherstone, 2013). We lack significant measures to tackle it because of the fear of electoral failure and social rejection associated with proposals that go against the interests of big companies and the hegemonic development model. Human activity is the main cause of climate change, so its solutions cannot come from nature but rather, from our ability to change the productive model and social structure. That is why the communication of climate information and social awareness regarding the fight against climate change should not be based only on scientific knowledge and other technocratic approaches, but promote social transformation (Deisenrieder et al., 2020).

■ CITIZENSHIP AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION FOR CLIMATE

The contribution of states, communities, and individuals to climate change is uneven. As Heyd pointed out, «greenhouse gases are being generated in *particular locations* for the benefit of *particular people and corporations*, while the consequences of these emissions are *globalised* across vast geographical (as well as temporal) boundaries» (2020, p. 4). The least technologically advanced countries in the global south and the most disadvantaged groups in opulent societies are more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. To face the scarcity and deterioration

of natural resources and to prevent environmental conflicts, we must think of solutions based on climate justice which consider the equitable distribution of resources and environmental harm across territories, generations, and species.

The unequal contribution to environmental harm, including carbon dioxide emissions, and the definition of sustainable practices and behaviours in terms of justice obligations, can be expressed through the concept of ecological citizenship (Dobson, 2003). This term refers to the assumption of responsibility for the effects one's own actions have on other people and the environment. The aim of ecological citizens is to reduce the environmental impact of daily activities as a matter of justice for other humans and for future generations. In this sense, ecological citizenship is useful to illustrate the public commitment required to reduce climate change emissions and transform the structures and institutions that shape behaviours and lifestyles.

The lifestyle changes supported by ecologists since the 1970s (such as cycling, recycling, or reducing our meat consumption) are important, but will not be effective unless accompanied by collective action for structural transformation. Moreover, prioritising pro-environmental action as a mitigation strategy in the private sphere may depoliticise and decontextualise climate change. As Erik Swyngedouw (2018) argues, climate change is a good example of post-politics, a concept used by radical philosophers such as Jacques Rancière, Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, and Chantal Mouffe. According to these authors, the post-political condition refers to the consensus around economic, political, and environmental topics in western societies. This approach is based on the idea that democratic politics (understood as a space for debate, opposition, and conflict) has been replaced with technocratic management and a consensus on the inevitability of neoliberal capitalism.

Swyngedouw (2018) explains the existence of a depoliticising consensus on climate change based on several factors: the elimination of social differences through the homogenising discourse of the global threat (silencing the fact that women and poor and racialised individuals are most affected by climate change); an antagonistic view of nature as a hazard that we must urgently fight; and a concept of politics that suppresses genuine democratic debate in favour of administrative management and technocratic governance based on personal responsibility, self-discipline, and individual behavioural change within the neoliberal-capitalist order. Thus, the citizenry, the political actor par excellence, is replaced by technical, scientific, and administrative staff, and the debate regarding the structural inequalities that accentuate environmental exploitation is erased by appeals to individual responsibility.

Resisting the post-politicisation of climate change in the neoliberal age requires democratising and emancipatory politics (Swyngedouw, 2018), the promotion of a green public sphere for dissident discourses and social transformation (highlighting systemic injustices that perpetuate the unsustainability of life) and a citizenship-based approach to political life (Melo, 2013). This can be done by promoting ecological citizenship practices and creating a collective context that enables these practices and gives them meaning.

■ FRIDAYS FOR FUTURE AND CITIZEN POLITICS AGAINST CLIMATE CHANGE

In August 2018, Greta Thunberg started a strike in front of the Swedish parliament to protest the lack of government action against climate change. Her attitude encouraged weekly demonstrations every Friday for months, which led to the creation of Fridays for Future (FFF), also known as Youth for Climate in some countries. Six months later, over a million people took part in FFF's protests around the world. The emergence of FFF in the public sphere has generated new discourses and forms of action on climate change (Martiskainen et al., 2020).

The movement, which is mostly composed of members of a new generation of young people aged between 14 and 19, has marked a turning point in climate activism because of its global reach, its civil disobedience techniques with student strikes, and its enormous ability to mobilise young people and students, especially women. To this day, more than 14 million people in 7,500 cities have participated in actions under the FFF banner worldwide², making it the «first mass

² <https://fridaysforfuture.org/>



New climate change movements such as *Fridays for Future* gained enormous visibility in December 2019 during the climate change conference in Madrid. They had a wide social impact and media coverage thanks to the figure of Greta Thunberg (shown in the image).

«The pandemic crisis is just the tip of the iceberg of a larger crisis comprising different political, social, care, economic, and environmental problems»

youth mobilisation on climate change» (Wahlström et al., 2019, p. 5). In addition, FFF has been largely involved in political summits and has attracted a great deal of global media attention (Díaz-Pérez et al, 2021).

The group has proven to have an enormous capacity for the promotion of new citizenship practices among adolescents through their commitment to climate action (De Moor et al., 2020). Indeed, it has succeeded in bringing climate change to the public sphere with a discourse that goes beyond personal responsibility and appeals to global collective action. However, FFF's transformative potential and success in making climate issues more visible has been clouded by controversy surrounding its iconic leader. As happened before with Rachel Carson, Greta Thunberg has been the object of all sorts of misogynistic and stereotypical comments through which the patriarchy tries to undermine political action by women, especially younger women (Nelson & Vertigan, 2019). The accusations against her come both from denialist and conservative lobbyists and from some left-wing sectors and the environmental movement itself (Wagener, 2020). She has been held responsible for overshadowing other groups that

have protected the environment for decades, such as indigenous and grassroots movements, Global South environmentalists, and women's organisations. Her age, inexperience, soft and reformist stance (linked to green capitalism and uncritical of globalisation), and the way she appeals to fear as a catalyst for climate action have made her the target of extensive criticism.

Beyond these controversies, the fact remains that FFF exemplifies the sort of active, disobedient, and democratising citizenship that the politisation of climate change requires. By appealing to global and intergenerational justice and pointing the finger at big companies, international organisations, and governments through opposition and resistance strategies in the public sphere, FFF has shown its commitment to stop climate change. This is a form of dissident commitment to a conception of politics based on the creation of alternatives outside institutions, for instance, by participating in practices such as agroecology, food sovereignty, or energy cooperativism. The key is to create a collective context that facilitates transformative consumption and mobility patterns to combat climate change.

COVID-19 has relegated climate change to a secondary priority, behind other social concerns. However, as pointed out in this text, both climate change and the pandemic are a consequence of the path to development followed by the industrial civilisation. This path has led to the neoliberal globalisation model, which promotes extractivism, environmental conflicts, and social inequalities. Most measures adopted to address climate change separate processes such as polluting gas emissions from social and environmental injustice. The widest approach includes public policies and mitigation and adaptation strategies based on the paradigm of ecological modernisation, which promotes clean technologies, recycling, the circular economy, and climate engineering. These solutions are used by capitalism to face its own crises by drawing a greener picture of itself. However, this article has taken a critical stance towards such approach, one that resists the depoliticisation of climate change and promotes citizen politics and activism as transformative climate action. ☺

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CARME MELO. Lecturer in the Department of Geography at the University of Valencia (Spain). She holds a PhD in Political Science from Keele University (UK) and specialises in the field of green political theory and environmental policy. Her most recent work focuses on the environmental conflicts, as well as public policies and social practices, related to the agrifood system, especially in the periurban area around the city of Valencia. ✉ carme.melo@uv.es