

Climate Change Revolution

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Time for a revolution

There can be no state solutions to climate change: governments won't give up the powers that lead to environmental ruin

There was a joke going round the Climate Camp in the last days. As well as the “wellbeing tent”, which dealt with mildly traumatised activists on the receiving end of 5am police batons, someone proposed a “wellmeaning” tent. It would accommodate those who’d like to include state and capitalism-based solutions in the movement to reverse climate change. The camp’s outer fence would curve into the wellmeaning tent to create a round-table for stakeholders including the police (successfully kept out of the site after days of stand-offs), E.ON UK and other energy industry representatives — tea and hand-wringing optional.

The joke was prompted by a controversial presentation by George Monbiot, in which he endorsed the use of the state as a partner in resolving the climate crisis. Monbiot held the audience rapt as he explained the fundamental incompatibility of economic growth with the emission cuts needed to avert catastrophic climate change. Yet he confessed not knowing where to turn next to solve the issues of how to generate the changes necessary to shift our sources of energy, production and consumption, and where the state and capitalism fit in. He ended by endorsing the use of the state: “By God, let’s use it”. Amid the applause, some were appalled. Let me explain why.

Many of the organisers of the climate camps honed their skills in the anti-roads movement of the mid-1990s. Some came from the traveller, squatter and free party communities, an alliance of resistance built up to counter the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994¹, which criminalised travellers and activists reclaiming land and buildings for social, cooperative use. These activists came from a culture of anti-authoritarian anti-capitalism — rejecting the property ladder and the commodification of living space, and embracing collective enjoyment, dance and music.

The continuum of this culture of resistance, of a struggle for a commons, for control over one’s own and one’s family’s life, for non-alienated labour and social interaction, stretches back to the Diggers, Levellers² and the Luddites — English radicals struggling against the monarchy, taxes, land enclosure and austerity measures designed to empower a new industrial class, funded by a feudal and colonial land-grab and slavery.

This historical memory, and these beliefs in a global commons, in leaderless, participative organising and grassroots anti-state and anti-capitalist action run deep through the camps. They’re also informed by a culture of direct action and a refusal to accept top-down solutions and a system of parliamentary democracy that reduces participation in politics to 16 “X”s in a box in an average lifetime.

But did Scargill³ and Monbiot⁴ really “get” the camp and its cultures of resistance? The latest edition of the NUM’s newsletter criticised the camp for being too middle-class, anti-miner, and alienated from “real”, genuine working class “realities”. Are these representations fair? Many participants in the camp could be defined as the “precariat” — neoliberalism’s answer to the proletariat. No longer an urbanised worker in a regular job in for a majority of their working life, the precariat lives and works in a precarious state, at the mercy of a deregulated labour market.

¹en.wikipedia.org

²libcom.org

³www.youtube.com

⁴www.monbiot.com

Work is dominated by casualisation, flexible and migrant labour, zero-hour contracts, temping, seasonal work, home working, self-employment and unemployment. Many at the camp form a part of this working class, no more in the control of the means of production than energy industry workers here or China or Poland.

State solutions to the climate crisis were presented to us 10 years ago through the Kyoto protocol — what were they? To privatise the air we breathe and turn carbon emissions into commodities, to buy and sell atmospheric poison, to create a new market of trading in the means of ecological destruction. It's no wonder many at the camp reject state solutions to climate change.

Entertaining as the two-minutes-in-a-room-full-of-poison standoff between Monbiot and Scargill⁵ is, this gesture politics isn't getting to the heart of the fight. The question is, who and under what conditions, controls decision-making, and has climate-changing power? Who will pay the price of exile from family and common land, water and food insecurity, as land and rivers become polluted or diverted into the energy industry's use, for bauxite, uranium, coal, and iron-ore to build new infrastructure, power nuclear energy, expand the global coal market and concomitant infrastructure to perpetuate the whole process?

How do we bring about a transformation which empowers us all? Grassroots organising in cooperative, low-impact, sustainable ways, glimpsed at the Climate Camp, and practised daily by millions, is one way towards this. Another is to live at the sharpest end of climate chaos today.

So how about this for a challenge, George and Arthur? Spend two months, not two minutes, (together!) living in Matlu Camp in Jharsuguda, in Orissa province, India. One of the poorest states on earth, here in the heart of India's coal belt, are families displaced by mining, living in a polluted form of captivity. Where our very own Department for International Development has been restructuring governance, reinforcing the mining industries, and guiding land reforms allowing for the felling of pristine forest, more tribal resettlement and more environmental destruction.

Changing our sources of energy without changing our sources of economic and political power will not make a difference. Neither coal nor nuclear are the "solution", we need a revolution.

Sunday in the camp with George

Don't exclude those of us who want to see revolutionary change from the fight against global warming. We're all in this together

George Monbiot risks dismissing vital currents within the green movement when he reduces some radical climate justice politics as "anarchism".⁶

Movements advocating radical social change aren't simply "anarchist" or rooted in "identity politics": they are everywhere. Political organisation, particularly within a context of social peace, can be as much about judging boundaries and ruling out possibilities as it is about pushing the limits of debate about what is possible.

Political activism when it takes place within established structures — does tend to perpetuate those structures, and the power relationships that inhabit and reproduce them. Sometimes these structures can be positive. But it can also reproduce definitions of the "middle ground", of

⁵greenmansoccasional.blogspot.com

⁶www.guardian.co.uk

“balance”, “realism” and thereby set limits of acceptable debate. People living different and contradictory realities will inevitably reach different conclusions. Clashes and contradictions shouldn’t come as a surprise.

Many people today are living in conflict, and often paying the price of a violent life, in order to maintain our social peace. Many of them, despite living under an unbroken continuum of colonialism, engage in cooperative, participatory economies, and can reach very different conclusions about how to address climate change. They speak freely, openly and in detail about revolution and rejecting state solutions; they talk about fundamental social change as intrinsic in the fight for land, food, and cultural sovereignty, struggles that began centuries before climate change was accepted as a fact in the countries that first contributed to it, like Britain.

These political currents have inspired many grassroots campaigners in the UK to take radical action, to oppose coal-fired power stations and airport expansion by creating the conditions for a community of resistance.

The participatory politics glimpsed at the camp are already taking place all over the world, and are leading some of the most progressive initiatives — on ecological debt, on compensation for keeping fossil fuels in the ground, on creating explicitly anti-capitalist co-operative economies, and horizontal movements of farmers, peasants and the landless reclaiming land.

This current runs through and informs the climate camps. It runs through the very tents, marquees, and kitchens that became spaces for debate and discussion. This current doesn’t necessarily have spokespeople, a Guardian column or a seat at the table of Newsnight, but in the south it has nonetheless succeeded in toppling governments and booting out oil and mining companies from indigenous lands.

It is also a diverse current. Here in the UK, many of those engaged in researching and lobbying, the filing of freedom of information requests, the petitioning, the parliamentary meetings and briefings with corporate and government representatives, also hold the view that fundamental, systemic changes are required. The two forms of political engagement and vision can and do co-exist. The same people who say “I think we need revolutionary change” also write advisory papers for politicians, attend cross-party meetings in Parliament and may also be stopping coal trains in their tracks.

It is essential to keep probing the power relationships behind new technologies and green “solutions”. We need to openly explore the power of the structures and social relationships that constitute “the state”. This means questioning the uses of the state, and whether its structures, rather than having “undemocratic tendencies”, are inherently flawed.

This social justice-rooted line of enquiry and political current shouldn’t be ignored. It certainly shouldn’t be criticised as capable of “melting the movement”. On the contrary: it is vital to keeping the movement vibrant and open and in touch with the struggles of those in the majority world.

The green movement is a melting pot, a movement of movements. The “we” includes Monbiot, but also those who reject state-based solutions and capitalism and who are walking the talk in their activism and everyday lives. It includes those at the sharp end of new enclosures, taxes, desperate fossil fuel corporations, biofuel land grabs, desertification, starvation food prices, political despotism, water theft, military occupation, and industrial zone and sweat shop misery. It is a diverse and a global “we”, and we are everywhere.

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