



## Short communication

## Camus and the climate crisis

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article History:

Received 7 November 2021

Accepted 30 November 2021

Available online 18 February 2022

## Keywords:

Climate crisis

Albert Camus

Absurdism

rebellion

## ABSTRACT

Flooded by rising seas and resurgent nationalist politics, ours is a world in peril. How should we **comport ourselves** for the climate crisis? To answer this question, this essay reviews several works of Albert Camus, the prescient Algerian-French philosopher of the previous century. Camus's concept of the Absurd may help us understand our plight in a changing climate, whereas his ethic of rebellion advises a way of living that begets solidarity in crisis and affirms a shared humanity. Camus's ideas have urgent relevance today, and we ought to heed them as we carry on the fight for climate action.

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"We have nothing to lose except everything," remarked Albert Camus in a 1957 interview, referring to the Cold War nuclear escalation that threatened to "divest any future of its meaning." [1] Though the prescient Algerian-French moralist of the previous century wrote for a world beset by a different set of crises, his concept of the Absurd and philosophy of rebellion have urgent relevance for our current one.

We have caused a climate crisis. This is the conclusion of the most recent physical science report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), that human activities have unequivocally (and in some cases irrevocably) damaged the natural world [2]. As consequence, our civilizations today will not be tenable tomorrow, should we keep our current course. This, in turn, is the resounding appeal of a broad and growing coalition of climate activists to structures of power; our collective inaction on climate change – steering us incrementally towards irreversible ecological destruction – will render our future impossible. A growing legion of medical professionals amplifies their calls. The climate emergency is a health emergency, and all the more so given our ongoing failure to treat it in a manner commensurate with the unprecedented danger it poses to human life and livelihood [3].

As such, a little anguish is warranted. Fighting for global climate action is not a schooling in hope, an unlikely prescription after an honest accounting of the extent of the climate emergency and the realities of our political terrain. In the United States – from coast to coast – we choke on smog and smoke. COVID-19 and our fractious

efforts to contain it have further unveiled the fault lines in our society, raising doubts about our ability to mount a coordinated climate response that prioritizes the people who have been disproportionately harmed by the pandemic and generations of structural and individual racism [4]. Elsewhere, communities marvel, horrified, at the Amazon ablaze, rivers desiccated by drought and overuse, heaving seas bleached of life, and yet another "storm of the century" [5], which year after year outstrips its moniker. Meanwhile, we witness a resurgence of nationalism hostile to international cooperation. World leaders ignore their climate commitments and deregulate polluting industries at the expense of the environment that sustains us and the livelihoods of the communities, both present and future, who have no say in the matter.

And this is not for any lack of understanding of the climate emergency. The evidence summarized in the most recent IPCC physical science report is incontrovertible, damning [2]. Preceding this, the leviathan IPCC *Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5 °C* explained in unsparing detail the need to cut global emissions by nearly half by 2030, lest we accede to the erasure of small island nations, the cultures and civilizations they harbor [6]. In the two years since, a procession of additional reports taught us how human-caused climate change is causing catastrophic biodiversity loss [7], destabilization of the world's ice and seas [5], accelerated land degradation and desertification [8], and an unprecedented risk to health and the infrastructure that supports it [9]. Armed with facts and the technology to address them, the rational response would be sweeping societal change. Yet the most recent *Emissions Gap* report, a commission of the United Nations Environment Programme that measures compliance with the goals set in the Paris Agreement, concluded in no uncertain terms that we are failing [10]. Besides a transient decrement in global carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) emissions in the early phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have not adequately curtailed our

**Funding:** No funding was received to assist with the preparation of this manuscript  
**Conflict of interest/Competing interests:** The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

**Author contributions:** JF conceptualized, wrote, and edited all drafts culminating in the final submitted paper.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijoclim.2021.100103>

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emissions of the heat-trapping greenhouse gases that jeopardize our lives and the future of humankind. These sobering facts were laid bare during the 26th Conference of the Parties (COP26), billed by U.S. climate envoy John Kerry as “our last, best chance” to save humanity [11]. The stakes were high. Yet, once again, world leaders did not meet the moment. The “two-week long celebration of business-as-usual and blah blah blah,” as derided by one eminent climate activist, ended in overtime without an agreement to limit temperature rise to 1.5 °C [12].

The climate crisis, summarized above, is Camus's Absurd in its contemporary form. The Absurd condition, Camus explains, arises when our human need to understand the meaning of our lives meets the utter silence of the universe [13]. There is a similarly irrational dissonance between our demands for climate action and the inertia, cynical or otherwise, of those with the power to enact them. Moreover, the climate emergency, like the specter of atomic war that haunted Camus's generation, may hasten individual death and the demise of our species. This renders more urgent both that desire for meaning and the temptation to resign to our mortality.

As such, it is easy to despair the Absurd condition. Camus acknowledges this human tendency yet illustrates an alternative recourse throughout his art and philosophy. Rather than resign, Camus's heroes – Sisyphus and his stone [13], Meursault before the guillotine [14], and Rieux, the indefatigable physician of *The Plague* [15] – accept the terms of the Absurd. Choosing to remain conscious of the unanswerable, unanswering life they live, each defies the urge to escape or negate the absurdity of their existence and owns his plight, thereby surmounting it. From there, joy becomes possible. Camus famously concludes his essay on Sisyphus, the Greek king condemned to the endless punishment of pushing a rock up a mountain-side, with, “the struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.” [13]

Herein Camus prompts us to reflect on our contemporary absurdities, to answer how we might comport ourselves for life within them. We, too, should come to terms with our reality, manifest in the conflagrations in the American West and historic flooding in New York, patterns that are projected to worsen in the next two decades even if we stopped emitting carbon today [2]: it is *possible* that we will not avert climate catastrophe, that we will not act swiftly enough to limit global mean temperature rise to 1.5 °C, or even 2 °C. How does one live in constant tension, conscious of the possibility of a grim future yet resolved not to ignore or resign to it (the practice of “climate doomists”)? A solution emerges in Camus's novel, *The Plague*, which many have re-discovered amid a pandemic era that has been unsparing in its cruelty. If the concept of Camus's Absurd is posed to us in individual terms, his answer to it is collective: rebellion, Camus's ethic for the Absurd, has urgent relevance in the face of the climate crisis.

If rebellion is our recourse, then what is a rebel? *The Rebel*, Camus' seminal essay on rebellion, begins with this very question. He answers, one “who says no, but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation.” [16] In other words: *no*, not to negate the Absurd condition, but rather to establish within it a limit against the transgressions of an oppressor. In doing so the rebel demarcates a common dignity implicit in all of us and sets itself in solidarity with humankind. Paradoxically, then, Camus explains that the *no* is also a *yes*; a validation of life and its primary value necessarily spring from the revolt against indignity and death. “I rebel—therefore we exist.” [14] Camus' adaptation of the Cartesian *cogito* [17] captures this communal, life-affirming product of individual rebellion.

We ought to heed this ethic: to the impending ecological breakdown and to those who abet it, say *no*. Rebel, and in doing so declare that human life, current and future, has a value that must be defended against the powers that imperil it. To all human beings, Camus issues a call to action. To medical professionals and other vanguards of human health and dignity, this is an imperative [3]. We

face steep odds as we strive to avert catastrophe, but such circumstances should not diminish our resolve. Reflecting on Europe's unlikely emergence from decades of nihilism, Camus stated, “if we are to fail, it is better to have stood on the side of those who wish to preserve life than on the side of those who are destroying.” [18]

Already, the rebellion is mounting. The rebel *no* resounded in the incisive and intrepid Greta Thunberg's stirring denunciation of world leaders at a 2019 climate summit: “How dare you! You have stolen my dreams and my childhood.” [19] Thunberg's *no* incarnates in the cries of the schoolstrikers, forged in her likeness, who are guilty only of skipping Friday morning class and desiring a future worth living in. We hear the *no* from officials of conscience who heed the science and resist bad actors in industry, government, and the media that manufacture doubt about the scale and urgency of the climate crisis. It underlies our votes, our non-violent civic engagement with climate advocacy groups, and the art and dialogs we create. *No* resides in the spirit of ambitious resolutions like the Green New Deal, which aspires to realize social justice as we endeavor to avert the climate emergency [20]. Yet as we deploy words like “revolution”, we must be wary of its excesses. Camus described the tendency of historical revolutions to recreate the very modes of repression that spurred them in the first place. He distinguished that the means of rebellion is unity, not totality, for the latter negates the innate value of individuals and thereby adds to violence and injustice in the present [16]. “None of the evils that totalitarianism claims to remedy is worse than totalitarianism itself,” Camus warned [18]. Though tempting for sake of expediency, we must avoid authoritarian climate solutions whose virtues cannot be realized until a future date.

Finally, rebellion can and should manifest in individual behavior change, particularly among those of us in the U.S. Some rightly criticize that individual behavior change was encouraged, cynically, by fossil fuel companies to distract individuals from mass action [21]. Others minimize this dimension of the fight against climate change, arguing with strictly mathematical reason that the asceticism of a few will not tip the climatic scales. Yet such a stance is incompatible with the moral calculus of rebellion: we contradict our claims to solidarity when we refuse to ask of ourselves that which we ask of others. Our inability to relinquish, no less recognize, the excesses [10] that comprise our contemporary comforts ignores our individual complicity in the climate emergency and thereby weakens our warrant to correct it, obscures its severity, and propagates its fundamental injustices. Furthermore, there are real costs at the individual level, as illustrated by one study reporting that the carbon emissions of less than four average Americans will cause one excess death over the course of a lifetime [22].

For now, still at the beginning of what may be the most consequential decade in human history, children march in the streets, asking for a future; elsewhere, the leaders their parents voted for quarrel over commitments. Institutions timidly divest from fossil fuels as climbing atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations divest the coming decades of hope. Once again, humanity hangs in the balance. In the not-so-distant age of the nuclear escalation, Camus introduced a way of living that acknowledges our absurd circumstances yet elevates the dignity we all share. His-ethic for the mid-20th century has new relevance today, and we should adopt it. As we meet the mounting climate crisis and the uncertain destiny that it ushers forth, it is on each of us to face it – to say *no* – and in our rebellion assert the value of life and what we refuse to have taken from us.

“We have nothing to lose except everything,” Camus observed, “so let's go ahead.” [1]

## Declaration of interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Acknowledgments

The author is grateful to Dr. Wynne Armand and Kathryn Sullivan for their prompt and thoughtful criticism that strengthened the final paper.

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