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Critiquing the use of war to mobilise peaceful climate action: A response to Kester & Sovacool

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ABSTRACT

This paper clarifies and extends our critical exploration of the use of war mobilisation as a policy model for rapid climate mitigation through accelerated energy transition. Our study, which appeared in this journal, presented a contingency scenario that focuses on the design of innovative policy model for mobilising finance, labour, and institutions, and their relative limitations. Kester and Sovacool expand the discussion of these limits from a securitization perspective—an extension work that is most welcome but contain incorrect interpretations of our paper. Here, we respond to it point by point and also acknowledge the points that they note regarding incongruences between contemporary climate action and wartime mobilisation. Central to this is a caveat on the use of combative and militaristic language in communicating climate action.

Kester and Sovacool (2017) have published in this journal a critical analysis of our paper (Delina and Diesendorf, 2013), also published in this journal. We welcome this critique and thank Kester and Sovacool for underlining and expanding the discussion on the limitations of war mobilisation as a policy model for rapid climate mitigation that we also made in our paper. There is much that we agree with in their paper (discussed below). However, first we must respond to their misunderstandings of our paper and our subsequent published research.

Our original article highlights the strategies for mobilising the technologies, labour, finance, and governments for rapid mitigation. However, our discussion of the limitations of the lessons of wartime mobilisation was perhaps not as clear as we would have liked. As a result, while critiquing some of the arguments we made, Kester and Sovacool also critiqued others that they appear to attribute to us, although we didn't make them. In particular, they interpret our first paper (Delina and Diesendorf, 2013) incorrectly as if it argues uncritically that:

1. we must model a rapid response by governments to climate change on World War II;
2. we have ignored the social mobilisation that is essential to push governments to rapid climate action; and
3. the campaign to mobilise the public to support such a warlike response should be based on presenting climate change like the threat of a wartime enemy.

In response to Kester and Sovacool's (2017) first misunderstanding, we emphasize that Delina and Diesendorf (2013) and Delina's (2016) book are both *critical* explorations of the use of war mobilisation as a policy model. In both works, a key objective is to design innovative policy for mobilising finance, labour, and institutions for rapid climate mitigation through accelerated sustainable energy transition. Indeed, our paper describes our analysis as a 'process of developing contingency plans for a scenario in which a sudden major global impact galvanises governments to implement emergency climate mitigation targets and programs' (Delina and Diesendorf, 2013: 371). The paper's title, which is a question, hints at this stance. Delina's (2016) book approaches his analysis as a Gedankenexperiment. Its subtitle, '*War mobilisation as model for action?*', also uses a question to reveal a similar critical poise.

In response to the second misunderstanding, regarding the need for social mobilisation, Delina and Diesendorf (2013, p.378) state that:

Without community support a 'wartime' response to climate change is likely to fail. A more democratic approach also has the advantage of enlisting the ideas of the wider community. Transforming the energy system will need cooperation and creatively from as many people as possible. But this inevitably takes time. An investigation of possible means of speeding up a democratic climate mitigation scenario is needed as a complement to the present analysis.

We have published more detailed discussions of the challenge of social mobilisation for rapid climate action in our second and third papers (Delina et al., 2014; Delina and Diesendorf, 2016) and in the book by Delina (2016). The second paper (Delina et al., 2014) draws upon historical analysis of mechanisms by which social movements achieved effective social change in the past, to offer strategies for the climate action movement, while the third paper (Delina and Diesendorf, 2016) draws upon insights from a qualitative survey by Delina of 47 contemporary social action groups from 11 countries, to offer strategies for strengthening the movement. The book draws upon insights from all three of these papers and more. So it is puzzling that Kester and Sovacool (2017) cite our second paper and the book in their introduction, but overlook their content in their critique of our

research.

We next address the points of agreement, where we are happy to acknowledge that Kester and Sovacool (2017) have carried the discussion forward. Kester and Sovacool (2017: 52) note the following incongruences between situations during WWII and the contemporary climate challenge:

1. Wartime mobilisation was possible because of the tangible and imminent threat, whereas the threat of climate change is neither.
2. 'Sacrifices' during wartime mobilisation was short term, whereas climate action requires multi-generational sacrifice.
3. Incumbents in the wartime mobilisation accepted strong intervention, even promoting them, whereas incumbents in the case of climate action have to shift away from fossil fuel towards sustainable energy.
4. Governments led the way for wartime mobilisation, whereas public institutions are seen to be among the most unbending institutions for climate action.
5. WWII is characterised by a relatively simple enemy, whereas the 'enemy' for climate change is more difficult to find. Depending on who invokes it, the enemy could be: greenhouse gas, the fossil fuel industry, capitalism, government inaction, or there is no enemy at all since climate change is a challenge to be solved by us all.

We agree with all five of these points, while noting that Delina and Diesendorf (2013) is consistent with all of them. We respond point-by-point.

1. Our paper has acknowledged the differences in terms of the drivers between wartime mobilisation and our contingency scenario for rapid climate mitigation. Indeed, we mention this as the first key limitation of the model stating that an emergency, wartime-like approach to climate mitigation is unlikely 'unless a threat is properly justified and becomes imminent' (Delina and Diesendorf, 2013: 377). Our approach, however, hypothetically invokes 'sudden major global climate impact that could galvanise governments around the world to take rapid actions.'
2. Our paper acknowledges that rapid climate mitigation through sustainable energy transition will most likely take generations to complete, up to four decades as we suggested (Delina and Diesendorf, 2013: 377), in contrast to mobilisation for war, which took less than five years.
3. Our paper recognises this distinction. Indeed, it describes how the private sector 'benefited during the war production years' (Delina and Diesendorf, 2013: 375), thus maintaining, even strengthening, their incumbency. And while we suggested supporting private entities with direct private investment and government subsidies to enable them to effectively participate in energy transition activities (Delina and Diesendorf, 2013: 375), we do not necessarily mean this to refer to those in the fossil fuel industry; indeed, we are clear in Section 2.1 that rapid climate mitigation entails 'curtailing of carbon emissions from the energy sector (especially those from fossil-fired power stations and oil-based transport)' (Delina and Diesendorf, 2013: 373).
4. Our paper acknowledges that governments are indeed 'unlikely…to adopt emergency responses to climate change' (Delina and Diesendorf, 2013: 377). The whole of Section 5.2 of our paper describes this incongruence. Hence we published our subsequent papers on strengthening the climate action movement.
5. We agree with this point. Our paper does not talk of wartime mobilisation as an analogy where the presence of an enemy is a requirement for it to be fully appreciated. Indeed, our paper never used the word 'analogy' since, to our understanding, we are not presenting an analogy but an analysis of a contingency policy model. We even did not use it as a metaphorical device.

We agree that the use of martial metaphors, particularly the use of strong language in stressing the urgency and priority of an issue, is a key limitation in effectively communicating climate action. While militaristic language inspires action to some, it may have broader ramifications that may be counterproductive and even ineffective (Mio, 1997); see also Larson's (2005) critique of the martial metaphor in the field of invasive species. Too much reliance on the language of fear to depict climate change, may risk charges of exaggeration, thereby opening up doors for sceptics and deniers to dismiss climate action as a form of 'alarmism' (Hodder and Martin, 2009). Moreover, combative and militaristic language could prove ineffective because of the 'boomerang effect' or 'backfire', a situation when 'extremely intense language or images used for purposes of persuasion can have an opposite effect on the receiver' (Mio, 1997:128). Such fear-inducing messages also tend to polarise not only the 'villain' and the 'victim' but also those who oppose and those who support it (Larson, 2005). In the climate discourse, this may mean marginalising other approaches and undermining democratic norms in decision-making (Hodder and Martin, 2009). Another form of backfire that might ensue could be that martial framing would yield unsuccessful results by leading to disbelief if instantaneous evidence of dramatic climate effects is not thoroughly obvious. Such framing may also result in disempowerment, since it seems that there is little an individual can do to address an overwhelming problem (Hodder and Martin, 2009).

In concluding their article, Kester and Sovacool (2017) suggest shifting the discussion away from 'war' towards its counter-concept of 'peace.' We totally agree with this proposal too. Two of our peer-reviewed pieces (Delina et al., 2014; Delina and Diesendorf, 2016) that follow this 2013 paper focus on the role of non-violent climate action movement in driving rapid climate mitigation through accelerated sustainable energy transition. Nonetheless, we maintain that our arguments in these two papers do not in any way diminish the utility and importance of our 2013 paper, in particular its implications on possible policies on finance, labour and institutional arrangements. History and its lessons remain important lenses for envisaging contemporary and future policy—a point that Kester and Sovacool (2017): 51) also acknowledge.

To conclude, Kester and Sovacool's (2017) critical engagement of the wartime mobilisation narrative as a policy model is a welcome addition to the literature on rapid climate mitigation. As the world faces tectonic shifts in climate and energy politics, particularly in terms of the threat of federal inaction in the USA, we direly need to envisage innovative strategies to address climate change in the scale and speed required and, at the same time, to critically engage and examine strategies for climate mobilisation and its implications, intended or otherwise.

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