A CONVERSATION WITH MY FRIEND ANSAR

Ansar Fayyazuddin and I met through Science for the People. Ansar is an activist, writer, and talented theoretical physicist. We spent several months exchanging ideas over email before getting together in April 2022 for the following conversation. It has been edited for length and clarity.

How will people's climate movements win?

Ansar Fayyazuddin: I think this leads us to larger questions about where political change comes from. There's a view that what we need is the right sort of people in government who will bring about changes that will counter the climate disaster we are heading toward. And then there's another view, which is that of building movements from below to challenge the defining practices of our society that have been so ecologically destructive. I'm very much on that second side: believing in movements that will either challenge the leaders and force them to do something or to build alternative modes of being.

For that, we have to be able to address not just the experts or technocrats, but rather ordinary people whose lives are being directly affected by the drivers of ecological destruction. The ecological crisis is not an abstraction when asthma rates are rising and water quality is deteriorating. For most people, it's a lived experience.

We have to make the kind of connections that speak to people, and I think our focus should be on finding ways to energize people, take control of the narrative in some sense, and connect their own lived experience to the changes that need to be brought about. I know this is very difficult, but I think that it's the only way forward. Because I don't really see any changes coming from our elected leaders or from corporations anywhere in the world.

What about you, Andres, what do you think?

> **Andres Chang:** I think bottom-up movements have done so much to push the envelope and translate people's energy into action, but there's a long way to go. The climate crisis has been politicized to the point that it's now a cultural issue. A lot of working people do not support phasing out fossil fuels at all because

they've been sold a victimization narrative. They want to fight back against their cars and gas stoves being taken away.

As a sustainability professional, I've been thinking about what we can do to overcome this narrative and build popular support for climate action. The profession has two strengths I'm focused on: reach and connectivity. Sustainability professionals have insider access to companies responsible for a vast sum of emissions. We tend to be well-connected across our organizations, too. We should be supporting bottom-up movements—for example, by sharing unionization tactics and coordinating across geographies—as much as we now focus on top-down work. I can't imagine this being popular with funders or CEOs, but I also don't really care. And it's not a replacement for top-down climate work because ultimately we need both.

On business sustainability

AF: Do you see attempts at business sustainability actually achieving something concrete? Because I feel it is mostly a form of rhetoric, but I'm curious what you think.

AC: I do see business sustainability having some concrete achievements. One thing that's critical is that businesses are making themselves accountable to a broader group of stakeholders just by committing to emissions targets and reporting on them annually. That in itself takes us a lot further than we were just a few years ago.

And there's no way to avoid the fact that every sector of the economy needs to decarbonize. We could talk all day about socialism and nationalizing the energy sector—ideas that I support—but nothing changes the fact that there will need to be people steering the energy system through a challenging transition.

AF: One aspect that I've become more aware of is that the fossil fuel industry is heavily subsidized by the government. So it's not just that they're a private enterprise driven by the market, it's that they also get money from the state itself to keep them going, making them immune from market pressures, for instance from ecologically minded consumers.

So we are not just seeing the market determining the course of events but rather a more complex entity that is entangled with the state.

I hope you're right that somehow things can be shifted in a positive direction, but I feel that we keep taking backward steps. I mean, take Biden, for instance, the way that he's responded to the Ukraine crisis is through even more production of fossil fuels rather than using this as an opportunity to cut back on fossil fuel dependence.

> **AC:** I think you put your finger on the issue in a way, which is that we don't have a good reason to trust our governments to navigate us out of this crisis. Whatever faith I had in the Biden administration has been mostly erased in the last two years. But looking at what's needed to build a people's movement versus our capacity on the ground is a challenging problem to think through. I'd love to hear more about how you see grassroots power getting built.

How does grassroots power get built?

AF: There are lots of hopeful eruptions I've seen over the years. For instance, the water protectors against the Dakota Access Pipeline were really incredible. Despite really massive state repression, they were able to stand their ground and win. Same thing with the movement for clean water in Flint and in other parts of the world, like the anti-dam movements in India. These were made by ordinary people, people who are not so politically active outside these issues, rising up and trying to do something. When we're able to connect issues that are often expressed very abstractly in concrete terms, then we have the possibility of people rising up.

I read a book a couple of years ago by Arlie Russell Hochschild about a community with very right-wing views in Louisiana who lived in this environmental disaster zone created by the petrochemical industry.[1] These politically conservative people could also see what the industry was doing to their land—land that they were so attached to and that they'd been on for generations. These people know what's going on to the environment and to their own bodies: many of them have suffered from cancer, they have relatives who have died from it, the whole area is called cancer alley. What Hochschild shows is that a certain narrative sustains these very conservative views, but I think that narrative and its associated conservatism is fragile. When that narrative is confronted with reality

and when connections are made to what can transform the situation causing these health consequences, it can be disrupted and give rise to a radical environmental movement. We have seen this in other parts of the world as well: people can have conservative views, but when their lives are being threatened or there is some other impetus, they can rise up and adopt a more radical mindset.

> **AC:** This gets me thinking about expressions of class solidarity more generally. For example, the yellow vest (*gilet jaunes*) movement in France where normal people from the countryside rose up to protest the fuel tax that was intended as a climate change mitigation effort. I also think about that event as a clear example of what poorly designed climate policy looks like. More recently, there was this trucker movement in Canada. I didn't know what to make of that either because it was a group that seemed very right-wing in their political beliefs demonstrating what appeared to be class solidarity. In reality, that might not have been the case, but it was portrayed as such by the media and received that way by millions of observers.

AF: Yeah, I think it's complicated. One of the issues we're dealing with, like you mentioned earlier, is that a lot of these things are turned into culture wars. Like, saying these people are stupid and we're the enlightened ones and so on. Instead of trying to understand what the other side is trying to say or engage with them, we maintain entrenched positions where we're not trying to convince anyone anymore. We just dismiss people. I think that's why I found Hochschild's book to be an important one: I think she really tried to listen to people and realized that what they were expressing was a kind of sorrow about what was happening to them. But as long as we only hear the rhetoric—and not what people are really expressing about their condition—we will never be able to communicate with them.

I think we need to find ways of really engaging with people and trying to find ways of convincing them rather than dismissing them as belonging to a certain ideological block that can't be reached.

> **AC:** Sometimes I hear the question "do we need a common enemy?" Or maybe it's just clear that we do need a common enemy and a common set of goals that work across the political spectrum, which can bind people together in class solidarity. Some potential shared targets are fossil fuel corporations and billionaires. I think

almost everyone can support the idea of getting rid of billionaires, and I fully believe we need to be taxing billionaires out of existence. Partly as a climate solution and partly as a social justice issue.

AF: I totally agree with you there.

On techno-solutionism

AC: Techno-solutionism is a theme in this book and something I know you have thought a lot about. Can you give us an idea of why techno-solutionism matters?

AF: The part I'm concerned with is the idea that an ecological issue resulting from how our society is organized can be reduced to something very narrow, and once you define it in that narrow sense, you can apply a technical solution to it. And so, you conceive of it not as a social problem but as a technical thing that can be overcome without changing anything about our society.

A perfect example is the idea of greenhouse gases being the cause of climate change—which is true—but if it's posed only as a question of greenhouse gas concentrations, then geoengineering offers a solution, which is just trying to remove those gases or finding a way of preventing the sun from heating up the earth. I think this fails to take into account a number of different factors. One is that the problem arises through the logic of capitalism, which is of constant resource-intensive production seeking ever increasing profits. Capitalism is thus inherently eco-destructive and greenhouse gas production through burning fossil fuels is only one element of its destructiveness. If the system needs to constantly produce more and more in order to make greater and greater profit, it will always be eco-destructive because its greed knows no limit.

To view it as just a carbon dioxide problem is to suggest that all of the structures that are eco-destructive can be kept in place, and all you have to do is to extract carbon dioxide or other greenhouse gases from the atmosphere. When you look at the companies that are formed to produce carbon capture technologies, all of them have very deep ties to fossil fuel industries. Shell, Chevron, and every other oil company has a branch dedicated to carbon capture, etc. They are deeply implicated in both destroying the environment and in pretending to solve the problem. I think this is a very generic feature of techno-fixes:

defining complex problems narrowly in technical terms and then posing a profit-making technical solution, which leaves the larger problem untouched.

> **AC:** There is so much we can do that goes beyond the scope of narrow technical fixes. Although I don't think that framing the climate crisis in terms of greenhouse gases is inherently damaging because if you follow the logic in a certain way, it leads you to the conclusion that we need to abandon fossil fuels immediately. Without a doubt, greenhouse gas concentrations need to be considered alongside other factors like ethics, risk, and links to social and environmental issues.

AF: The use of fossil fuels is actually creating a host of problems *including* producing greenhouse gases, but it's destroying other things too. It's poisoning our waters and doing all kinds of damage to the environment. So I think techno-solutionism shifts the focus away from what we really need to do, which is stop using fossil fuels, and shifts us instead to a dreamland where we can just capture all these gases at some point in the future.

On nature

> **AC:** Are there certain things you think science gets wrong about nature?

AF: I think that's an interesting question. First of all, there's not a single scientific view on nature. There's a multiplicity of views, and nature itself is quite a complex notion. But there are some predominant views that figure into the climate crisis. For example, the idea that the organism and the environment are separate, such that the organism always confronts the environment as its enemy. The paradigmatic form of that is a restricted view of evolutionary theory where organisms evolve in such a way as to overcome challenges posed by the environment. But when you think about it, the organism and the environment are not two separate things. The organism cannot live without an environment. There's no human being who can live without anything around them. Instead of putting humans and the environment in opposition to each other, we should think about them in a unified way.

Humans certainly can't exist without what we call nature. But I think often nature is treated as a barrier that has to be overcome. One person who has looked at this in great

depth is the environmental historian Carolyn Merchant.[2] She writes from a feminist point of view about how nature is treated as something that has to be conquered, and I feel this has become the way that many climate solutions are also posed. We are not willing to accept the constraints of nature; we just want to manipulate nature. We don't want to give up on certain ways of living, so we have to find ways for nature to deal with how we live.

So I think there are certain aspects of scientific thought—especially, how nature and nurture are counterposed—that are quite wrong. Instead of thinking of the organism as this intrinsic thing and the environment as the context in which the organism develops, I think we need to think about the symbiotic relationship between, and ultimately the unity of, the organism and the environment.

> **AC:** Wow, I love these ideas. I first encountered some of them in a book called *Enlivenment* by Andreas Weber.[3] He makes the argument that nature should be understood as a network of mutual transformations, not as an efficiency-driven machine. Many people think of nature in these mechanistic terms, but it's not true when you look more closely. Forest ecosystems are not at all efficient in how they use energy.
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> Some of these ideas also reminded me of an artist collective called the Institute of Queer Ecology. They've made similar critiques of mechanistic and efficiency-centered thinking, and they propose much more life-giving ways of interpreting ecology. In their series *Metamorphosis*, they use the life cycle of a butterfly to illustrate how society could dissolve and restructure itself, the same way a caterpillar does when it builds a cocoon, before emerging as something new.

AF: I like that metaphor.

> **AC:** A good one to end on.