

Not in Front of the Children. Liberal mediations of the apocalypse.

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Scientific and economic perspectives define the climate change debate. They give credibility to, and are in turn legitimated by, the global climate targets policy regime. The targets regime has, for 20 years or so, operated under the claim that climate change would not be a problem until the planet had warmed by an average of 2°C. That framework has given space and succor for a range of strategies and narratives which equate 2°C of warming with solving climate change.

2°C doesn't equate to solving climate change but the pretence that it does, and the widespread use of the argument that science has defined 2°C as the dangerous limit (it hasn't) provide liberal western democracies with the conceptual framework for understanding what sort of problem climate change is.

The liberal mediations element of the title of this presentation refers to the liberal desire to do away with climate change, but in every other respect maintain the existing order. The liberal is as horrified by an eco-socialist response to climate change as it is traumatised by a Trump vision of climate policy. The targets regime represents the liberal political territory designed to keep both those nightmare scenarios at bay. 2°C of warming means the end of coral reefs and I cannot imagine what that means for humanity's future. But liberal politics would see that as a more acceptable price than anything that interfered with capitalist economics and imperialist foreign policy.

The '*not in front of the children*' part of the title refers to the growing orthodoxy in climate change communication that it is

- a. best not to talk about the impacts of climate change (doom and gloom) and
- b. Ideally it is best not to mention climate change at all, and instead talk about green energy, health etc

Let us briefly turn to WG Sebald writing about the bourgeois desire for order as revealed in the almanacs of 19th century Germany. Here Sebald remarks - apropos the peaceful agrarian visions we are familiar with from 18th century English pastoral landscapes, where peace would reign if people were content with the fruits of their own hard labour - that the educated middle class is wont to articulate its discomfort at the rapid spread of the economy of goods and capital it had itself created and which was now proliferating year on year - and here we may substitute goods and capital for acidifying oceans and Siberian methane bombs.

Or we may reflect on why it is only the middle classes who worry about the apocalypse, an issue which troubled Boris Groys who turned to Derrida for an answer and concluded that the working class have no investment in the middle class future, and all the middle classes

fear is the destruction of the libraries, galleries, museums and opera houses whose very existence gives legitimacy and life to their culture.

So where did it all begin and what we going to do about it? Well, those are both intimately interdependent issues.

Mark Greif, in *The Age of the Crisis of Man* describes the founding of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) as a world institution entirely devoted to a universalist view of human nature, and the stimulation of a single and universal culture (2015:85). The first Director General, Julian Huxley was a fan of eugenics and so perhaps it is not surprising that this universal human was not imagined to be an African Bushman, an Australian aborigine or even a Chinese peasant but was instead imagined to be the sort of person one might find wandering the halls of UNESCO and other United Nations buildings.

And once you have this vision of the ideal universal human in place it is not too difficult to start imagining a single dangerous limit to climate change that this individual would find acceptable and the social sciences can work with as part of what has been called 'the overriding liberal vanity of rational improvement.'

So I am suggesting the targets regime is a political device and a technology of power designed to perpetuate the interests of the liberal bourgeois. We may want to consider doing away with them or at the very least open up the debate about where to next, given the failure of the targets regime. Let me list those failures;

- 2°C is too much warming to prevent dangerous climate change
- It is not a construct or framework which has motivated politicians to act on climate change
- It is not rooted in any meaningful and engaging vision of humanity's future, so if a powerful nation doesn't want to play it can just throw it in the bin
- It means nothing to the vast mass of humanity, which has little or no knowledge of the targets existence, purpose or meaning

Ah well, we have the 1.5°C target some of you might say. Seeing as warming won't be limited to 2°C then changing the target to 1.5°C, in terms of human welfare, is irrelevant. What should be happening is not an elite discussion of what, if anything should replace the 2°C target but rather, who should decide what if anything replaces the 2°C target.

Conversations

Marshall Berman, tracing the emergence of the Enlightenment and Modernity, tells us of details from Montesquieu's novel *The Persian Letters* (1721). Persian immigrants to Paris find, while walking the streets, that women come over to talk to them. The Persians assume the women must be whores, but the women tell them they just want to talk, and there is this new thing, invented by women but bringing both women together, called 'conversation.' Later on the Persians learn about the salons and have wonderful conversations there. Or we can

look to the account offered by Kristin Ross in *Communal Luxury*, which demonstrates the importance of talking in generating the movement that created the Paris Commune. The examples of the role of conversation in social progress are legion.

Scotland has the world's most ambitious climate targets, and wanted a nation wide conversation to build awareness of the radical changes being undertaken. Results of what we found in researching and designing model is

Lesson 1 - There is very little scepticism among the public about the fact that the climate is changing. Everyone who participated in these workshops accepted the reality of climate change.

Lesson 2 - Ordinary members of the public know enough about climate change to talk about what they want done about it. Though many participants expressed doubts about their knowledge of the subject, when it came down to it they had plenty to say about what changes they want to see happen.

Lesson 3 - You don't need to be a climate expert to have a conversation about climate change. People were able to talk about the challenges climate change poses for Scotland without needing a primer in the science of climate change.

Lesson 4 - People really enjoyed taking part in the conversations. They said they never had the chance to talk about these issues in their day to day life, and valued having their opinions listened to.

The take home message for politicians is clear - if you bring members of the public together in an informal setting to talk about climate change, if you approach the topic starting from where people already are in terms of their values, their hopes and their concerns, if you step back and let participants talk to each other, and if you avoid turning the discussion into a lecture about the science of climate change, people will become engaged, will participate and will enjoy having the chance to talk about this topic.