

The Unfinished Business of Liberation

On one level, the inability of many great social movements to fully realize those parts of their visions that carried the highest price tags can be seen as a cause for inertia or even despair. If they failed in their plans to usher in a more equitable economic system, how can the climate movement hope to succeed?

There is, however, another way of looking at this track record: these economic demands—for basic public services that work, for decent housing, for land redistribution—represent nothing less than the unfinished business of the most powerful liberation movements of the past two centuries, from civil rights to feminism to Indigenous sovereignty. The massive global investments required to respond to the climate threat—to adapt humanely and equitably to the heavy weather we have already locked in, and to avert the truly catastrophic warming we can still avoid—is a chance to change all that; and to get it right this time. It could deliver the equitable redistribution of agricultural lands that was supposed to follow independence from colonial rule and dictatorship; it could bring the jobs and homes that Martin Luther King dreamed of; it could bring jobs and clean water to Native communities; it could at last turn on the lights and running water in every South African township. Such is the promise of a Marshall Plan for the Earth.

The fact that our most heroic social justice movements won on the legal front but suffered big losses on the economic front is precisely why our world is as fundamentally unequal and unfair as it remains. Those losses have left a legacy of continued discrimination, double standards, and entrenched poverty—poverty that deepens with each new crisis. But, at the same time, the economic battles the movements *did* win are the reason we still have a few institutions left—from libraries to mass transit to public hospitals—based on the wild idea that real equality means equal access to the basic services that create a dignified life. Most critically, all these past movements, in one form or another, are still fighting today—for full human rights and equality regardless of ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation; for real decolonization and reparations; for food security and farmers' rights; against oligarchic rule; and to defend and expand the public sphere.

So climate change does not need some shiny new movement that will magically succeed where others failed. Rather, as the furthest-reaching crisis created by the extractivist worldview, and one that puts humanity on a firm and unyielding decline, climate change can be the force—the grand push—that will bring together all of these still living movements. A rushing river fed by countless streams, gathering collective force to finally reach the sea. “The basic confrontation which seemed to be colonialism versus anticolonialism, indeed capitalism versus socialism, is already losing its importance,” Frantz Fanon wrote in his 1961 masterpiece, *The Wretched of the Earth*. “What matters today, the issue which blocks the horizon, is the need for a redistribution of wealth. Humanity will have to address this question, no matter how devastating the consequences may be.”¹⁴ Climate change is our chance to right those festering wrongs at last—the unfinished business of liberation.

Winning will certainly take the convergence of diverse constituencies on a scale previously unknown. Because, although there is no perfect historical analogy for the challenge of climate change, there are certainly lessons to learn from the transformative movements of the past. One such lesson is that when major shifts in the economic balance of power take place, they are invariably the result of extraordinary levels of social mobilization. At those junctures, activism becomes something that is not performed by a small tribe within a culture, whether a vanguard of radicals or a subcategory of slick professionals (though each play their part), but becomes an entirely normal activity throughout society—it’s rent payers associations, women’s auxiliaries, gardening clubs, neighborhood assemblies, trade unions, professional groups, sports teams, youth leagues, and on and on. During extraordinary historical moments—both world wars, the aftermath of the Great Depression, or the peak of the civil rights era—the usual categories dividing “activists” and “regular people” became meaningless because the project of changing society was so deeply woven into the project of life. Activist were, quite simply, everyone.

Which brings us back to where we started: climate change and bad timing. It must always be remembered that the greatest barrier to humanity rising to meet the climate crisis is not that it is too late or that we don’t know what to do. There is just enough time, and we are swamped with

green tech and green plans. And yet the reason so many of us are inclined to answer Brad Werner's provocative question in the affirmative is that we are afraid—with good reason—that our political class is wholly incapable of seizing those tools and implementing those plans, since doing so involves unlearning the core tenets of the stifling free-market ideology that governed every stage of their rise to power.

And it's not just the people we vote into office and then complain about—it's us. For most of us living in postindustrial societies, when we see the crackling black-and-white footage of general strikes in the 1930s, victory gardens in the 1940s, and Freedom Rides in the 1960s, we simply cannot imagine being part of any mobilization of that depth and scale. That kind of thing was fine for them but surely not us—with our eyes glued to smart phones, attention spans scattered by click bait, loyalties split by the burdens of debt and insecurities of contract work. Where would we organize? Who would we trust enough to lead us? Who, moreover, is "we"?

In other words, we are products of our age and of a dominant ideological project. One that too often has taught us to see ourselves as little more than singular, gratification-seeking units, out to maximize our narrow advantage, while simultaneously severing so many of us from the broader communities whose pooled skills are capable of solving problems big and small. This project also has led our governments to stand by helplessly for more than two decades as the climate crisis morphed from a "grandchildren" problem to a banging-down-the-door problem.

All of this is why any attempt to rise to the climate challenge will be fruitless unless it is understood as part of a much broader battle of world-views, a process of rebuilding and reinventing the very idea of the collective, the communal, the commons, the civil, and the civic after so many decades of attack and neglect. Because what is overwhelming about the climate challenge is that it requires breaking so many rules at once—rules written into national laws and trade agreements, as well as powerful unwritten rules that tell us that no government can increase taxes and stay in power, or say no to major investments no matter how damaging, or plan to gradually contract those parts of our economies that endanger us all.

And yet each of those rules emerged out of the same, coherent worldview. If that worldview is delegitimized, then all of the rules within it become

much weaker and more vulnerable. This is another lesson from social movement history across the political spectrum: when fundamental change does come, it's generally not in legislative dribs and drabs spread out evenly over decades. Rather it comes in spasms of rapid-fire lawmaking, with one breakthrough after another. The right calls this "shock therapy"; the left calls it "populism" because it requires so much popular support and mobilization to occur. (Think of the regulatory architecture that emerged in the New Deal period, or, for that matter, the environmental legislation of the 1960s and 1970s.)

So how do you change a worldview, an unquestioned ideology? Part of it involves choosing the right early policy battles—game-changing ones that don't merely aim to change laws but change patterns of thought. That means that a fight for a minimal carbon tax might do a lot less good than, for instance, forming a grand coalition to demand a guaranteed minimum income. That's not only because a minimum income, as discussed, makes it possible for workers to say no to dirty energy jobs but also because the very process of arguing for a universal social safety net opens up a space for a full-throated debate about values—about what we owe to one another based on our shared humanity, and what it is that we collectively value more than economic growth and corporate profits.

Indeed a great deal of the work of deep social change involves having debates during which new stories can be told to replace the ones that have failed us. Because if we are to have any hope of making the kind of civilizational leap required of this fateful decade, we will need to start believing once again, that humanity is not hopelessly selfish and greedy—the image ceaselessly sold to us by everything from reality shows to neoclassical economics.

Paradoxically, this may also give us a better understanding of our personal climate inaction, allowing many of us to view past (and present) failures with compassion, rather than angry judgment. What if part of the reason so many of us have failed to act is not because we are too selfish to care about an abstract or seemingly far-off problem—but because we are utterly overwhelmed by how much we do care? And what if we stay silent not out of acquiescence but in part because we lack the collective spaces in which to confront the raw terror of ecocide? The end of the world as v

know it, after all, is not something anyone should have to face on their own. As the sociologist Kari Norgard puts it in *Living in Denial*, a fascinating exploration of the way almost all of us suppress the full reality of the climate crisis, “Denial can—and I believe should—be understood as resistance to our human capacity for empathy, compassion, and an underlying sense of moral imperative to respond, even as we fail to do so.”¹⁵

Fundamentally, the task is to articulate not just an alternative set of policy proposals but an alternative worldview to rival the one at the heart of the ecological crisis—embedded in interdependence rather than hyper-individualism, reciprocity rather than dominance, and cooperation rather than hierarchy. This is required not only to create a political context to dramatically lower emissions, but also to help us cope with the disasters we can no longer to avoid. Because in the hot and stormy future we have already made inevitable through our past emissions, an unshakable belief in the equal rights of all people and a capacity for deep compassion will be the only things standing between civilization and barbarism.

This is another lesson from the transformative movements of the past: all of them understood that the process of shifting cultural values—though somewhat ephemeral and difficult to quantify—was central to their work. And so they dreamed in public, showed humanity a better version of itself, modeled different values in their own behavior, and in the process liberated the political imagination and rapidly altered the sense of what was possible. They were also unafraid of the language of morality—to give the pragmatic, cost-benefit arguments a rest and speak of right and wrong, of love and indignation.

In *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith made a case against slavery that had little to do with morality and everything to do with the bottom line. Work by paid laborers, he argued, “comes cheaper in the end than that performed by slaves”: not only were slave owners responsible for the high costs of the “wear and tear” of their human property but, he claimed, paid laborers had a greater incentive to work hard.¹⁶ Many abolitionists on both sides of the Atlantic would embrace such pragmatic arguments.

However, as the push to abolish the slave trade (and later, slavery itself) ramped up in Britain in the late eighteenth century, much of the movement put considerably more emphasis on the moral travesties of slavery

and the corrosive worldview that made it possible. Writing in 1808, British abolitionist Thomas Clarkson described the battle over the slave trade as “a contest between those who felt deeply for the happiness and the honour of their fellow-creatures, and those who, through vicious custom and the impulse of avarice, had trampled under-foot the sacred rights of their nature, and had even attempted to efface all title to the divine image from their minds.”¹⁷

The rhetoric and arguments of American abolitionists could be even starker and more uncompromising. In an 1853 speech, the famed abolitionist orator Wendell Phillips insisted on the right to denounce those who in the harshest terms defended slavery: “Prove to me now that harsh rebuke, indignant denunciation, scathing sarcasm, and pitiless ridicule are wholly and always unjustifiable; else we dare not, in so desperate a case, throw away any weapon which ever broke up the crust of an ignorant prejudice, roused a slumbering conscience, shamed a proud sinner, or changed, in any way, the conduct of a human being. Our aim is to alter public opinion.” And indispensable to that goal were the voices of freed slaves themselves, people like Frederick Douglass, who, in his writing and oratory, challenged the very foundations of American patriotism with questions like “What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July?”¹⁸

This kind of fiery, highly polarizing rhetoric was typical of a battle with so much at stake. As the historian David Brion Davis writes, abolitionists understood that their role was not merely to ban an abhorrent practice but to try to change the deeply entrenched values that had made slavery acceptable in the first place. “The abolition of New World slavery depended in large measure on a major transformation in moral perception—on the emergence of writers, speakers, and reformers, beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, who were willing to condemn an institution that had been sanctioned for thousands of years and who also strove to make human society something more than an endless contest of greed and power.”¹⁹

This same understanding about the need to assert the intrinsic value of life is at the heart of all major progressive victories, from universal suffrage to universal health care. Though these movements all contained economic arguments as part of building their case for justice, they did not win by putting a monetary value on granting equal rights and freedoms. They won by

asserting that those rights and freedoms were *too* valuable to be measured and were inherent to each of us. Similarly, there are plenty of solid economic arguments for moving beyond fossil fuels, as more and more patient investors are realizing. And that's worth pointing out. But we will not win the battle for a stable climate by trying to beat the bean counters at their own game—arguing, for instance, that it is more cost-effective to invest in emission reduction now than disaster response later. We will win by asserting that such calculations are morally monstrous, since they imply that there is an acceptable price for allowing entire countries to disappear, for leaving untold millions to die on parched land, for depriving today's children of their right to live in a world teeming with the wonders and beauties of creation.

The climate movement has yet to find its full moral voice on the world stage, but it is most certainly clearing its throat—beginning to put the very real thefts and torments that ineluctably flow from the decision to mock international climate commitments alongside history's most damned crimes. Some of the voices of moral clarity are coming from the very young, who are calling on the streets and increasingly in the courts for intergenerational justice. Some are coming from great social justice movements of the past, like Nobel laureate Desmond Tutu, former archbishop of Cape Town, who has joined the fossil fuel divestment movement with enthusiasm, declaring that “to serve as custodians of creation is not an empty title; it requires that we act, and with all the urgency this dire situation demands.”²⁰ Most of all, those clarion voices are coming from the front lines of Blockadia, from those lives most directly impacted by both high-risk fossil fuel extraction and early climate destabilization.

Suddenly, Everyone

Recent years have been filled with moments when societies suddenly decide they have had enough, defying all experts and forecasters—from the Arab Spring (tragedies, betrayals, and all), to Europe's “squares movement” that saw city centers taken over by demonstrators for months, to Occupy Wall Street, to the student movements of Chile and Quebec. The Mexican

journalist Luis Hernández Navarro describes those rare political moments that seem to melt cynicism on contact as the “effervescence of rebellion.”²¹

What is most striking about these upwellings, when societies become consumed with the demand for transformational change, is that they so often come as a surprise—most of all to the movements' own organizers. I've heard the story many times: “One day it was just me and my friends dreaming up impossible schemes, the next day the entire country seemed to be out in the plaza alongside us.” And the real surprise, for all involved, is that we are so much more than we have been told we are—that we long for more and in that longing have more company than we ever imagined.

No one knows when the next such effervescent moment will open, or whether it will be precipitated by an economic crisis, another natural disaster, or some kind of political scandal. We do know that a warning will, sadly, provide no shortage of potential sparks. Sivan Kartha, senior scientist at the Stockholm Environment Institute, puts it like this: “What politically realistic today may have very little to do with what's politically realistic after another few Hurricane Katrinas and another few Superstorm Sandys and another few Typhoon Bophas hit us.”²² It's true: the world tends to look a little different when the objects we have worked our whole lives to accumulate are suddenly floating down the street, or smashed to pieces, turned to garbage.

The world also doesn't look much like it did in the late 1980s. Climate change, as we have seen, landed on the public agenda at the peak of free market, end-of-history triumphalism, which was very bad timing indeed: Its do-or-die moment, however, comes to us at a very different historic juncture. Many of the barriers that paralyzed a serious response to the crisis are today significantly eroded. Free market ideology has been discredited by decades of deepening inequality and corruption, stripping it of much of its persuasive power (if not yet its political and economic power). And its various forms of magical thinking that have diverted precious energy—from blind faith in technological miracles to the worship of benevolent billionaire—are also fast losing their grip. It is slowly dawning on a great many us that no one is going to step in and fix this crisis; that if change is to take place it will only be because leadership bubbled up from below.

We are also significantly less isolated than many of us were even a decade ago: the new structures built in the rubble of neoliberalism—everything from social media to worker co-ops to farmer's markets to neighborhood sharing banks—have helped us to find community despite the fragmentation of postmodern life. Indeed, thanks in particular to social media, a great many of us are continually engaged in a cacophonous global conversation that, however maddening it is at times, is unprecedented in its reach and power.

Given these factors, there is little doubt that another crisis will see us in the streets and squares once again, taking us all by surprise. The real question is what progressive forces will make of that moment, the power and confidence with which it will be seized. Because these moments when the impossible seems suddenly possible are excruciatingly rare and precious. That means more must be made of them. The next time one arises, it must be harnessed not only to denounce the world as it is, and build fleeting pockets of liberated space. It must be the catalyst to actually build the world that will keep us all safe. The stakes are simply too high, and time too short, to settle for anything less.

A year ago, I was having dinner with some newfound friends in Athens. I asked them for ideas about what questions I should put to Alexis Tsipras, the young leader of Greece's official opposition party and one of the few sources of hope in a Europe ravaged by austerity.

Someone suggested, "Ask him: History knocked on your door, did you answer?"

That's a good question, for all of us.