"To change the heart and soul"

HOW ELITES CONTAINED THE GLOBAL CLIMATE JUSTICE MOVEMENT

Herbert Docena

Summary

Corporate executives and climate skeptics that mobilise against strong international climate change agreements have rightly been the focus of attention of many people concerned about the climate crisis. But another group of elites—those who actually believe in climate change —may paradoxically have done more to block effective solutions to the crisis: By actually trying to regulate the market at the global level, they may have succeeded in containing the only political force that could challenge the system that ultimately causes climate change.

ILLUSTRATION NOTE

On 15 August 2015, 1500 activists in an act of civil disobedience peacefully shut down the Garzweiler Lignite Mine in Rhineland, Germany, the largest source of carbon emissions in Europe. There is a growing awareness that corporate-led solutions to climate change won't work and that we need radical systemic change to tackle the climate crisis.

"The object is to change the heart and soul."

– Margaret Thatcher

On the final day of the UN summit held in Paris in December 2015, thousands of people defied a ban on public gatherings by converging at a boulevard leading to the business district in La Défense to denounce the new climate agreement that government negotiators were about to sign and celebrate at the conference venue in Le Bourget, 20 kilometres away.

Hoping to counter governments' attempts to control the narrative regarding the summit, they gathered behind giant inflatable 'cobblestones' and a red banner proclaiming "System change not climate change!" Departing from some other environmentalist groups, they held placards criticising the undemocratic ways in which decisions regarding our relationship to nature are ultimately made only by capitalists and other powerful groups in the current global capitalist system. In different ways, they put forward a more democratic alternative: a system in which 'the people' decide on important questions such as what sources of energy to use and what activities to power and for whose benefit, how many trees to fell and to produce what goods for whom or, more generally, how to organise our relationship to nature and in pursuit of what ends.

Broad and as defiant as the action turned out to be, however, it was still not as large or as confrontational as some of the organisers had hoped. Unable to rally more people behind them, the radical anti-capitalists had little choice but to abandon their original plan to barricade Le Bourget and also ruled out marching on La Défense. In the end, the protesters could only gather, lobbing their 'cobblestones' in the air, aimed at no targets. Meanwhile, the popping of champagne corks in Le Bourget or La Défense went undisturbed.

Why, as this particular but not uncommon episode indicates, are activists struggling for a more democratic system unable to attract more people to their side? Or why, despite the intensifying ecological crisis caused by capitalism, is the movement for radical system change still confined to the margins?

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Part of the answer surely has to do with how the world's elites have increasingly resorted to more coercive measures to keep people off the streets or prevent them from conceiving or expressing anti-systemic demands. But – as shown by the large number of people who refused to be cowed by the threat of force or to buy into the governments' discourse in Paris and beyond – it is not merely the presence or absence of physical or ideological repression that determine people's willingness to take on the powerful. Indeed, it pushes us to ask why more people are not willing to defy repression to fight for a democratic system.

This essay seeks to contribute to understanding the causes of the movement's weakness by drawing attention to another, typically overlooked, way by which the dominant seek to contain challenges to their undemocratic rule other than by trying to repress people's bodies in order to dissuade or restrain them from overthrowing the system: that of trying to mould people's very subjectivities – how they see their identities, how they make sense of their life situations, what they aspire to, whom they consider their 'friends' or their 'enemies' – in order to persuade people to actively defend the system.

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I argue that part of the reason why activists struggling for a democratic alternative to capitalism find it difficult to draw more people to their cause is because a section of the world's dominant classes have been waging what we can think of, extending Gramsci, as a kind of global "passive revolution": an attempt to re-construct or secure (global) hegemony by attempting to fundamentally reform global capitalism in order to partially grant the demands of subordinate groups. I show how, by purportedly trying to 'change the system', a particular section of the world's elites have achieved some success in countering radicals' attempts to reshape people's subjectivities, thus preventing them from fighting for a radically democratic system.

A resurgent global counter–hegemonic movement

To better understand how world elites seek to contain counter-hegemonic challenges to their rule, it is useful to go back to the late 1960s when new radical movements, including those mobilising around ecological issues, burst onto the world stage as part of a broader resurgence of radicalism.

Even before then, a growing number of people in industrialised countries and also in the 'Third World' had been increasingly concerned about their deteriorating living conditions as a result of the ecological degradation that came with capitalism's renewed post-war global expansion. Before the 1960s, many people still typically thought of these ecological problems and the impacts these had on their lives to be the result of others' 'bad personal habits', 'unscientific management' of resources, or insufficient regulation of 'big business'. They therefore generally thought that these problems could be solved and their suffering ended by the inculcation of better personal habits, more 'scientific management' of resources,' or greater checks on big business. Consequently, few directed their anger at the world's dominant classes in response to ecological degradation. While there would be a growing number of protests as people 'spontaneously' defended themselves against direct attacks on their wellbeing, they did not amount to the kind of organised and sustained resistance that threatened the ruling classes in earlier revolutionary upheavals in various countries.[1]

Starting in the 1960s, however, various intellectuals began to advance a different way of making sense of, and responding to, ecological problems. Herbert Marcuse, Barry Commoner, Murray Bookchin, or Chico Mendes, along with other scientists, journalists, writers, and organisers, began drawing not only from Marx but also from Morris, Kropotkin, Weber, and other critical thinkers to popularise new ways of looking at the world that challenged not just the dominant worldviews but even those propagated by so-called 'Old Left' activists.

Calling on 'the people' as members of exploited classes and other dominated groups whose interests were antagonistic to those of the world's elites, they argued that deteriorating living conditions were not just

because of bad habits, poor management, or the insufficient regulation of big business by governments, but because of the historically-specific property relations under capitalism. They revealed how capitalism drives capitalists, or those who own land, factories, power plants and other "means of production" and who therefore monopolise social decisions over production, to constantly intensify their exploitation of both workers and nature so as to maximise profits.

To overcome their suffering, they argued that reforms such as regulating big business – while not necessarily wrong – would not suffice; they needed to challenge nothing less than capitalism, patriarchy, racism, and other forms of domination. Though they did not necessarily agree on how to go about it, they urged them to end what Marx once called the "dictatorship of the bourgeoisie", or the system of rule in which only those who own the means of production ultimately make production decisions. This would involve fighting for the abolition of private property relations and building a society in which everyone collectively and democratically own the means of production and therefore have a say in making decisions about how to organise production. Only then, they argued, would it be possible to prioritise people's welfare and the planet's well-being over the need to constantly maximise profits.

Through their myriad efforts to propagate these new ways of making sense of and acting upon 'ecological' problems, these radical intellectuals began to reshape people's subjectivities by providing alternative ways of looking at the world, of understanding their identities, of diagnosing and overcoming their suffering.

As indicated by the growing membership and supporters of radical anti-capitalist 'environmental' organisations or movements that were concerned with 'environmental' questions, ever more people would begin to see themselves and the environmental problems they suffered in a new light.[2] Many started to think of themselves as members of oppressed and exploited classes and also began to connect 'environmental problems' and their social impacts to capitalist, patriarchal, colonial, racial or other forms of domination. As one activist who came of age during

this period put it: "a complete disaffection with 'the system'... resonated deeply between East and West, North and South".[3] Protesters moved beyond critiques of particular aspects of capitalism and "challenged the very essence of capitalism", according to the environmental historian, John McCormick. Many began to aspire to a post-capitalist, if not socialist, society. And they recognised the need to confront and overthrow the ruling classes and other dominant groups determined to perpetuate capitalism. "Whatever the cause", notes McCormick, "by 1970, there had been a revolution in environmental attitudes".[4]

With these changed subjectivities, people connected the struggle around 'environmental' problems to broader struggles for social justice and equality and channelled their anger about ecological degradation away from fighting other individuals or other subordinate groups towards the dominant classes, their allies in the state apparatus, and other influential groups. Struggles around pollution, nuclear power, pesticides, and so on would become central to a reinvigorated global radical anti-capitalist bloc and re-ignited something that world elites thought they had ended: a "global civil war".[5]

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Although they did not necessarily succeed in – or did not even attempt to – seize state power, their actions, the historian Eric Hobsbawm argued, were still revolutionary "in both the ancient utopian sense of seeking a permanent reversal of values, a new and perfect society, and in the operational sense of seeking to achieve it by action on streets and barricades".[6] Or, as geographer Michael Watts noted of the uprisings that swept the world in 1968, they were revolutionary not "because governments were, or might have been, overthrown but because a defining characteristic of revolution is that it abruptly calls into question existing society and presses people into action".[7] Critical of 'existing society' and pressed into action, a growing number of people began fighting for what later activists called 'system change' to address ecological problems.

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Intra–elite struggles

This resurgence of radical environmentalism in particular and of radicalism in general troubled those intellectuals drawn from or aligned with the world's dominant classes in the United States and other advanced industrialised countries. Barraged with unrelenting criticism – pickets, protests, boycotts, direct actions – and besieged by demands for stronger regulation and 'system change,' many US business leaders felt under attack. One executive probably captured the mood when he said in jest: "At this rate business can soon expect support from the environmentalists. We can get them to put the corporation on the endangered species list".[8] Not since the Great Depression and the New Deal, notes political scientist David Vogel, did US capitalists feel so "politically vulnerable". Although the exact conditions varied, the situation was similar in other countries where radical movements emerged.

Under siege, many dominant intellectuals and corporate elites struggled to understand what was going on, how to define their interests in the face of it, and how to react. Many thought that the so-called 'environmental problems' were not 'problems' at all or that they could be solved through the normal workings of the market or through existing institutions.[9] Insofar as they acknowledged the problem, many perceived only a threat to their company's or their industry's interests and sought to protect them by simply rejecting the grievances aired by subordinate groups, killing their proposals, and resorting to coercive measures to intimidate or discredit their proponents.[10]

But there were other intellectuals who pursued and advocated an altogether different response.

Unlike most reactionary elites, these reformists were typically from patrician or bourgeois families in their respective countries. Others were from less privileged backgrounds but had assumed high government office or positions in 'civil society' organisations, most notably the philanthropic foundations. But unlike government officials, they were what Weber called the "notables": those who lived *for* rather than *off* politics.[11]

Among those from such backgrounds who would play leading roles on climate-related issues would be people like Laurence and David Rockefeller, of the famous dynasty's younger generation; Robert O. Anderson, owner of the oil giant Atlantic Richfield; McGeorge Bundy, the former dean of Harvard and National Security adviser and later president of the Ford Foundation; Robert McNamara, former CEO of Ford Motors, Defense Secretary, World Bank President, and Ford Foundation trustee.

In other countries across Europe, Latin America and Asia, they included those with very similar backgrounds to their US counterparts. Among them were the likes of Giovanni Agnelli, chairman of Italian car company Fiat; Aurelio Peccei, former president of Olivetti and convenor of the Club of Rome; Alexander King, an influential British scientist; Maurice Strong, former president of a large Canadian oil company and later head of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP); Barbara Ward, a British economist and best-selling author, and adviser to numerous world leaders; Canadian prime minister Pierre Trudeau; Indira Gandhi, prime minister of India; Gamani Corea, secretary-general of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), from Sri Lanka; Mahbub ul-Haq, World Bank vice president from Pakistan; and numerous other 'gentlemen lawyers' and 'learned cosmopolitans'.

Though they came from different countries, had their own specific interests, and pursued different and not always congruent projects, this loose network of elite intellectuals often pursued the same actions or took the same positions on particular issues. This was not because they were engaged in a 'conspiracy' but because their background meant that they generally thought about and acted upon global ecological issues through the lens of a common worldview.[12]

Unlike other elites, they were generally more open to the view that global warming and other ecological changes were indeed happening. Thus, for example, the oilman-turned-philanthropist who funded some of the key organisations that would push for action on climate change, Robert O. Anderson, called for a "steady mid-course between doom and gloom alarmists and those who resist acknowledging the clear danger to which

the human environment is being subjected".[13] Similarly, the industrialists, executives, and scientists gathered in the Club of Rome would portray the environmental issue as nothing less than a "global crisis".[14]

And, unlike other elites, they thought that the problem involved far larger threats than simply the diminution of specific firms' prerogatives or countries' economic competitiveness. They worried about pollution impairing their access to raw materials, intensifying international competition and prompting protectionism, and potentially even igniting inter-capitalist wars, such as World War I and World War II, that could once again fragment the global market and impede capitalist expansion. But more than that, they also worried that environmental degradation would further fuel public dissatisfaction and anger and therefore encourage support for radicalism.

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Breaking with other elites, they effectively concluded that in order to defuse such a threat, at least some of the grievances and demands of subordinate groups needed to be addressed – something that could be done only by fundamentally reforming global capitalism.

Bound by these common views, these "enlightened reactionaries" – to use Karl Polanyi's label – set out to build a transnational reformist movement or "bloc from above", bringing together otherwise isolated elites and drawing in members of other classes to push for their project of 'changing the system.' They did this despite more conservative elites who wanted no change at all, and of course, against the radicals who wanted a very different kind of system change.

Undertaking parallel, sometimes even clashing initiatives, they deployed their vast economic resources and social connections – straddling the worlds of business, politics and science – to build this movement's capacity to engage in ideological and political struggle on the world stage.

Radical language, reformist ends

To attract support, they advocated a different way of making sense of, and, thus, of thinking, talking, and acting about 'global environmental change' that absorbed certain elements proposed by radicals while departing from them on the most fundamental questions.

Like radicals, they sometimes called upon or "interpellated" members of subordinate groups as belonging to the 'poor' as opposed to the 'rich', and sometimes even borrowed from radicals in designating them as part of the 'periphery' as opposed to the 'core'. But they studiously avoided calling them members of exploited or dominated classes whose interests are in conflict with those of the exploiting or dominant classes; instead, they preferred to emphasise their identity as members of one "mankind" whose interests are not at odds with the interests of the world's elites – all inhabitants of *Only One Earth,* as the title of Ward's bestselling 1972 book for the first UN conference on the environment put it.

Echoing radicals, they told people that global ecological problems had less to do with 'bad personal habits' and more to do with the broader political and economic system. As the 1974 Cocoyoc Declaration, a follow-up to the 1972 Stockholm declaration written by Ward, ul-Haq, and others, put it: "[M]ankind's predicament is rooted primarily in economic and social structures and behavior within and between countries". But unlike radicals, they stressed that the problem was not the system as such but rather the lack of regulation and inadequate 'scientific management' of the system at the global level. Though they would disagree over what counts as "excessive", all saw ecological problems as "evils which flow from excessive reliance on the market system", in the words of the Cocoyoc Declaration.

So, like radicals, they explained to people that they could only alleviate their suffering by pushing for what radicals called 'system change'. But against radicals, they told people that changing the system did not entail overthrowing capitalism, but rather enhancing the global regulation of capitalism through what the Club of Rome called "radical reform of institutions and political processes at all levels". Countering

both conservatives and radicals, they argued for the need neither to keep the system nor to junk it altogether but to improve it by reducing the "excessive reliance on the market" and by moving towards what the Cocoyoc Declaration calls the "management of resources and the environment on a global scale". The Club of Rome, for example, called for a "world resource management plan"[15] while the Trilateral Commission advocated "international policy coordination" for managing the "global commons"[16] in order to correct market failures, minimise inefficiencies, foster competition, and redistribute wealth in order to reduce poverty and mitigate ecological degradation. These proposals were what later scholars would call "international ecological managerialism", or global "ecological modernization".[17]

Put differently, they told people that they should aspire not to the creation of a post-capitalist society but to a greener, more regulated, capitalist society. For only by perpetuating reformed 'green' capitalism, pursuing more trade, more growth and 'sustainable development' could 'mankind' solve ecological problems, address social grievances, and realise the vision of the good life. As the Founex Declaration put it: "development" – meaning capitalist development – is the "cure" for the environmental problems facing the poor.

Consequently, against radicals who urge people to view the dominant classes as their oppressors and the targets of opposition, they urged the public to focus their anger only on particular members of the dominant group – i.e. 'bad capitalists' or those 'bad elites' (variously, the USA, the advanced economies, big business, the oil corporations, the Republicans, and so on). At the same time, they called upon the public to join the moral, responsible elites as 'partners' in pushing for and bringing about 'system change.' Much of what succeeding reformists would say and prescribe from the 1970s through to the 2000s essentially built on these recurring discursive or ideological themes.

Building their movement's capacity

Reformist intellectuals did not, however, stop at rallying people to their side and exhorting them to fight for their cause. Often in coordination, but also sometimes competing with each other, they mobilised to equip their supporters with cutting-edge knowledge on global environmental problems – and with 'policy options' for managing them – by funding or otherwise supporting hundreds if not thousands of universities and government or inter-governmental research departments and think-tanks.

Thus, for example, the Ford Foundation financed a whole battalion of academic centres, research departments and scientific networks such as the Aspen Institute, the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), the Brookings Institute, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Trilateral Commission "study groups", and many other outfits. The Volkswagen Foundation funded the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth* study. McNamara transformed the World Bank into the world's largest centre for research on the relationship between environment and development. As its first Executive Director, Maurice Strong established UNEP as one of the key initiators of large-scale collaborative research on the ozone hole, biodiversity loss, and climate change. Reformists in developing countries formed the South Centre, a think-tank that became a key source of analysis for government officials from the South.[18]

This is not to say that they merely funded research with which they would agree. Indeed, probably as a result of their own lack of knowledge, uncertainties, or internal tensions, they chose, or at least strove, to 'diversify their portfolios' by supporting different researchers approaching the problem from dissimilar perspectives, including those they would subsequently disagree with.

To improve their ability to advocate for the reforms they wanted, they also undertook various initiatives to identify and groom scores of highly educated middle-class professionals – lawyers, economists and scientists – who were supportive of their reformist vision, and devoted considerable

resources and energy towards promoting the 'professionalisation' of their activism. Ford, Rockefeller, Anderson and others, for example, bankrolled the formation of the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF), Natural Resources Defense Council (NDRC), and possibly thousands of other moderate or non-radical groups across the world.[19]

These 'capacity-building' efforts extended to a wide range of organisations, in part because of a deliberate strategy of taking risks and finding innovative people. Ford, even as it supported more moderate or even more conservative reformists, also funded 'public interest' organisations that were more critical of 'big business' and more inclined to raise questions of social justice.

Through such investments in generating knowledge and building movements, they assembled a loose, decentralised, transnational network of highly-trained reformists, occupying strategic positions in various governments, international organisations and civil society groups worldwide, which then pushed the world's governments to adopt a raft of far-reaching environmental measures to address global environmental problems at the local and global levels.

Thus, for example, equipped with research confirming global warming and with studies assessing possible policy options, this global network of reformists mobilised to raise the alarm and push for unprecedented global regulatory interventions to address climate change. It was UNEP, for example, that encouraged scientists to speak up and to push for an internationally coordinated response. Scientists and activists associated with EDF and other reformist groups organised a flurry of international conferences on the issue and pressed the world's governments to commence negotiations on an agreement. And it was EDF and others that spearheaded the formation of the Climate Action Network (CAN), which would go on to be become the world's largest network of NGOs calling for government "action" on climate change.[20] Simply put, if it had not been for the independent but converging initiatives of these reformists – and the elites that supported them – the UN negotiations on climate change might never have happened.

Although they did not necessarily agree on all the details, they did converge in pushing for a strong, legally-binding international climate agreements. They united behind demands for unprecedented internationally coordinated interventions in the global economy that could oblige certain countries and industries to drastically reduce their emissions and for establishing a kind of de facto global 'welfare scheme' that could compel some countries to transfer finance and technology to others.

A global battle for hearts and souls

Thanks to all these investments in political and ideological mobilisation, the reformist movement was able to go on the offensive from the 1970s onwards. Effectively backed by the threat of the more radical alternatives posed by the movements to their left, it succeeded in overcoming conservative resistance and incrementally put in place a range of ambitious and far-reaching environmental regulatory measures in many countries, such as the National Environmental Policy Act and the Clean Water Act approved in the USA in the 1970s At the international level, this reformist bloc secured agreements tackling global environmental problems such as the ozone hole, biodiversity loss, desertification, and climate change. These measures, as limited as they may have been, likely prevented even worse outcomes had reformists not pushed for them.

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In so doing, reformist elites did more than just deliver limited relief and material concessions to members of the dominated classes; they also countered radicals' attempts to reshape their subjectivities and succeeded in dispelling their attempts to channel people's anger and anxiety towards fighting for radical system change.

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This is because, by appearing to change the system and channelling limited benefits or advantages to subordinate groups, they undermined radicals' capacity to convince people to diagnose their suffering as the inevitable result of capitalism and to see themselves as members of antagonistic classes whose interests are always incompatible with the dominant classes.

And, as an increasing number of people came to see themselves as members of harmonious communities, to believe that their suffering is caused only or primarily by the lack of regulation of capitalism, to conclude that they could improve their conditions without going so far as having to overthrow capitalism, and to view at least some elites as 'partners' or 'leaders' to support, so ever fewer would therefore be motivated to defy the powerful and to cast their lot with movements fighting for radical system change.

For this and other reasons, radicals worldwide have not only found it harder to gain new adherents from the 1970s on, but even once committed fighters would either lay down their arms or 'defect' altogether.[21] Once on the upsurge, radical anti-capitalist movements would consequently be on the defensive, continuing to organise but increasingly pushed to the margins. In the USA, Europe, and probably in other countries where the radical environmentalist message had only a few years before gained traction, radical critique would "fizzle out" and anti-capitalist environmentalism would suffer a "precipitous decline".[22]

Conclusion

Thus, without always deploying the violence they constantly keep in the background, the more forward-looking of the world's elites have at the very least been able to dissuade people from struggling to replace capitalism with a different, radically democratic system; at most, they have been able to persuade or motivate them to actively fight to 'improve' an inherently undemocratic system in order to prevent it from being overthrown. By organising and mobilising a transnational movement from above to wage a global "passive revolution" in favour of regulating

the market, they have been able to defuse the class antagonisms that the radical intellectuals had sought to kindle. By so doing, they have not only prevented or restrained people from expressing or venting their anger, but have been able to harness that anger towards tinkering with the system in order to keep it the same.

Had these reformist elites not mounted this global passive revolution, it is unlikely that the world's governments would have attempted to establish global-level regulation to address global ecological problems. And had the world's governments not acted, it is unlikely that they would have staved off a global counter-hegemonic challenge to capitalism.

And yet, it is also important to stress that, as indicated by the willingness of a significant number of people to engage in mass civil disobedience action on the final day of the latest UN climate summit in Paris and the growing radicalisation of many climate activists worldwide, they still have not succeeded in completely defeating or eliminating this challenge altogether. For reasons that have to do in part with leading reformists' decision to accommodate conservative elites' demands to weaken their proposed reforms, our movement has not only survived the reformist offensive but in recent years, we have even become resurgent again.

But whether we will do more than survive ultimately depends on whether we can counter these more forward-looking elites' sophisticated and well-organised attempts to change the hearts and souls of those we seek to draw to our side. This does not necessarily mean always opposing the reforms and concessions that the more 'radical' among the reformists are promoting, or refusing to work with them. But it does mean constantly subverting their attempts to channel people's anger to only their chosen enemies and to confine them to just aspiring for a greener, more ecologically-conscious 'dictatorship of the bourgeoisie.' Put differently, it means pushing people to go beyond the horizon that the reformists seek to restrict them to, and to help empower them to dream of a democratic, because socialist, alternative.

The alternative is that we just remain stuck in place without being able to march forward.

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