

Dan Taylor, “Climate Anxiety, Fatalism and the Capacity to Act” outline (February 2021)

Work in progress paper, produced for a public talk. Not to be quoted/reproduced without citation. Please contact me for details on references

In 2018, a group of leading climate scientists gathered by the United Nations produced a landmark report on the future of global climate change. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change declared that we, humanity, had twelve years – until 2030 – to globally reduce greenhouse emissions by 45% from 2010 levels, and by 100% by 2050 – in order to avoid more than 1.5 degrees of warming. Why 1.5 degrees? Above that level, and particularly above 2 degrees, many regions of the earth become inhospitable and food production and drinking water supplies substantially diminished. With 1.5 degrees warming say, at least 14% of the world’s population would be exposed to severe heatwaves every five years, with 2 degrees that increases to 37%. There will be increased flooding, tropical storms and mass extinctions of insects, birds and animals. Some regions of the world, for instance around the Tropics, will become inhospitable by the middle of the century, with potentially hundreds of millions being forced to leave their homes as climate refugees. The damage caused by 1.5 degrees would amount to \$54 trillion, up to \$69 trillion from 2 degrees.

The UN concluded that it was unlikely that these reductions would be achieved by 2030. Last year was the joint-hottest year on record (with 2016). More pessimistic forecasts now pose that, failing a substantial turnaround in the next decade, we are on track at least 3.2 degrees (following the Paris Accords), if not 4, 5 or 6. Our own climate has already warmed by 1 degree since 1850 levels.

What reports like this call for is an ambitious political solution – globally, ending the use of coal, substantially reducing fossil fuels and shifting to renewables. It relies on aspirations for carbon capture technologies that do not viably exist yet. Changes like this, if implemented, would totally transform a globalised capitalist economy reliant on extraction, uncosted air, road and sea emissions and disposable goods. Perhaps they would end it. But awareness of climate change and global agreements on restricting greenhouse emissions is long-standing: the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro had led to first UN Climate Change framework and the Kyoto Protocol on reductions (remember that?)

All of this might be making you anxious. You are not alone. It completely transforms our relationship with time. Many of us live in the present tense, only. But now the present becomes determined by the past – historic carbon emissions have and will continue to transform the planet. And the survival of billions in the future becomes dependent on our present moment. As David Wallace Wells writes,

‘Global warming has improbably compressed into two generations the entire story of human civilization. First, the project of remaking the planet so that it is undeniably ours [the Anthropocene] That second generation faces a very different task: the project of preserving our collective future, forestalling that devastation and engineering an alternate path.’

Which leads to climate anxiety. What is ‘climate anxiety’?

Sometimes known as ‘eco-anxiety’, the term was first used by sustainability academics from 2007, but it is from around 2017 that the term enters wider currency. A recent article on climate anxiety published in *The Lancet* in September by Judy Wu and others gives a good, basic

definition: an 'anxiety related to the global climate crisis and the threat of environmental disaster'.

In a 2017 guide to climate anxiety, the American Psychological Association described it as 'a chronic fear of environmental doom'. Another definition has 'the distress that is produced by environmental change impacting on people while they are directly connected to their home environment'.

Symptoms associated with climate anxiety in the *Lancet* include 'panic attacks, insomnia, and obsessive thinking.' There are also concerns that it may also exacerbate existing conditions like depression, anxiety disorders and substance use disorders.

Mental health studies across the developed world, from Australia and Greenland to the US and UK, indicate rising numbers of people reporting stress or depression about the climate. The topic has received prominent coverage in major news outlets, from CNN and Time magazine to the BBC, Guardian and New York Times, sometimes in the context of the ethics of bringing children into such a catastrophe-inflicted world.

Above all, it is frequently diagnosed (loosely) in the young. A BBC survey of 2000 children aged between 8 and 16 last year found that nearly one in five were having nightmares about it, with around 3 in 4 worried about the state of the planet right now. The reasons are obvious – what lies ahead, but the example of Greta Thunberg and the school climate strikers from 2018 resonated. But the underlying themes – unpredictability, uncontrollability, its lethal threat, decades of inaction – affect all of us.

Living in an 'age of anxiety' is nothing new: W.H. Auden used the term to describe his society in the late 1940s, an alienated world of industrialisation, bureaucracy and a lost sense of meaning. We might also consider fear of nuclear war. A 1986 publication by the US Institute of Medicine on "The Medical Implications of Nuclear War" observed a not dissimilar sense of widespread fear and helplessness among young people about another seemingly looming apocalypse.

Q1. How does climate anxiety differ from other forms of cultural or social anxiety?

We can observe two factors: first, the universally agreed 'existential threat' of climate change, whose evidence and catastrophic effects become more evident with each year, particularly with more spectacular forest fires, floods, coral reef die-off and receding polar ice. Second, the complexity of allocating responsibility or simple countermeasures. Whereas chances of nuclear war could be reduced by weapons treaties between two organised superpowers, the causes of climate change seem to implicate all of us.

For Professor Susan Clayton, one of the contributors to the American Psychological Association report, the 'psychological responses to climate change such as conflict avoidance, fatalism, fear, helplessness and resignation are growing'. But, paradoxically, 'these responses are keeping us... from properly addressing the core causes of and solutions for our changing climate and from building and supporting psychological resiliency.'

Let's highlight this paradox: the belief that it's all f*cked might increase the likelihood that it's all f*cked. That when we begin to think about a shared global threat, we feel a debilitating anxiety that diminishes our capacity to act. Where action is needed, we cannot act because we are impaired by a feeling of learned helplessness that we are powerless to influence events.

This is a problem not simply for climate change activism, but to traditional accounts of personal autonomy more broadly. Considerations of what it means to be autonomous, that is, self-governing, have often focused on the internal account of agency – like the will or free will that

initiates action, or which reflects our capacity to act. When the philosopher Kant wrote about autonomy, he presented it in terms of what he called the categorical imperative. This is a moral law that is universalizable – it applies to all people, at all times, without any hypothetical conditions. The end never justifies the means. Our autonomy consists in being able to act according to this law – being able to recognise it, and then to pursue it regardless of our hypothetical desires. We have a moral responsibility to be truthful then. For Kant then, we become more autonomous and active once we learn to recognise what duty demands we do, regardless of the difficulty in executing it. It's not dissimilar to Greta Thunberg. But it is highly difficult, and figures from Hegel to John Stuart Mill have criticised it as impractical.

But we should always tell the truth, right? Let's consider the approach of the most popular British protest movement against climate change in recent years. Extinction Rebellion has three demands: for the government to tell the truth about climate change, as well as net zero emissions by 2025 and a citizens assembly to tackle the problem. Their protest model relies on 3.5% of the population being jailed for protest activities, thereby winning over public support to the issue. While elements of this may sound optimistic about the powers of protest, their approach is actually framed by a similar doom-scenario in our earlier climate anxiety discussion – that rebellion begins with grief – grief for a planet about to be lost, and the need to adapt now.

This approach is informed by a 2018 paper by Jem Bendell, a professor in climate sustainability titled "Deep Adaptation: A Map for Navigating Climate Tragedy". The argument, which draws on substantial evidence, is that we must reconsider our lives and work 'in the face of an inevitable near-term social collapse due to climate change'. This will happen in our lifetime. We need deep adaptation, relinquishing all the features of a carbon economy that jeopardises future survival, and cultivating resilience for an apocalyptic world ahead.

Bendell wants to motivate readers by presenting, in stark terms, the cost of business as usual. Readers have often complained that the paper is too depressing. The topic is depressing. But fatalism can reinforce inaction. There are two things we can pick out:

1. *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?* If we take total collapse as a given, then we leave unquestioned the economic and political structures responsible for carbon emissions. It can reinforce the pessimistic view that a corrupt, greedy human nature has inevitably created the problem. Or that global overdevelopment has spun out of human control. Perhaps that's reflected in the 'Anthropocene' as a term. But in fact climate emissions have been produced unevenly, and nowhere with explicit mass democratic support. For that reason, Jason Moore and others suggest the term 'Capitalocene'.
2. *Change will not be achieved without collective solidarity.* Bendell assumes that reading this paper will lead us into radical action, like that of Extinction Rebellion. But both Bendell and Extinction Rebellion assume there is already an underlying collective solidarity in which people across classes and communities will risk jail or losing their jobs for a depressing future-scenario. In theory, there is no reason why they wouldn't. They usually give examples of civil rights and anti-colonial independence movements. But our modern liberal individualised societies are very different. For that reason, people like Anatol Lieven are increasingly talking about the nation-state as the driver of change, for instance in a Green New Deal, using its vast resources to pull together a solidarity movement like Allied mobilisation in World War Two.

Why should we care about people we do not know, have never met, or have nothing in common with? In a polarised era, this is pertinent. For the philosopher Martha Nussbaum, all civilised societies should aim for their members to gain 'moral adulthood' through developing 'a capacity for concern' with others in our society. But fear diminishes our sense of care and concern.

Writing in response to Donald Trump in 2018, Nussbaum makes a simple but important point. Many Americans felt powerless and afraid, helpless to control the events that really impacted their lives. But rather than suffering producing solidarity for others who suffer, there was a different effect. Fear makes us want to regain a sense of control. We welcome figureheads who make us feel safe and who blame minorities or distant elites in conspiratorial terms for the perceived threat. For Nussbaum, fear 'drives out all thoughts of others'. It makes us less caring and less future-focused, not more.

How does Nussbaum reach that argument? Well, she combines a discussion of the psychology of toddlers and aggression with a now-familiar broadside that assumes that most of the pre-Trump political and economic institutions of the United States were working well for most Americans. We should challenge that view. Trump was not an anomaly. And emotions like 'fear' don't have a life of their own. They are cognitive responses to our environments. The right answer is not then a bland medicine of 'hope', but a serious and honest assessment of what gives rise to feelings of insecurity.

Which takes us to our final companion, the 17th century philosopher Spinoza. Think back to that apocalyptic climate change world earlier. 'Nasty, brutish and short' you might've said. Those are the words of Thomas Hobbes to describe the state of nature which human beings find themselves in when not in an organised civil society. Now Hobbes was a contemporary of Spinoza, they read each other's work. Spinoza borrowed the idea of the state of nature. He also saw it in terms of fear. But he said that the motive-force in forming organised societies was a fear of solitude. Fear forces us to think and work together. And for Spinoza, we think and work together best in a democracy, where as many people as possible can act and work together towards a common interest – their shared survival and flourishing. Because, by nature, we are cooperative creatures who can be guided by reason to live in ways that increase our shared quality of life. On a simple level, that has been one achievement of the Anthropocene, giving us a way of life, survival and leisure time unthinkable even a century ago. So can democracies meet the challenge of climate change, and if so, how?

Coming out of a global lockdown provides a rare, generational opportunity to rebuild economies (if not politics) on a new footing. But action ahead remains unclear. Perhaps the issue is that much of our politics or economics is democratic in name only. Which brings us to the most important question of all. What, if anything, can we do about climate change?