



June 2019

## Globalizing the Movement

### Contribution to GTI Forum [The Climate Movement: What's Next?](#)

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#### **What is the Climate Movement's State of Play?**

I have been asking people what they think has changed in the last year, and why. Most seem to agree that something has definitely shifted. If we had to choose one slogan to represent the pivot we are now passing through, it would be hard to beat Vaclav Havel and his notion of “living in truth.” It is an option that more people are exercising, people who are sick of the lies—even the comforting ones.

I know a few “climate communications” experts, and I have recently been enjoying teasing them about their long campaign to soft-pedal the science, a campaign that, particularly after the last IPCC report, looks a bit past its prime. They have had their reasons of course (the fact that despair can be a pacifying force, for instance), and while these justifications have not entirely dissipated, it is interesting to see how much less compelling they seem than just a few years ago. We are in very serious trouble, and there is no way forward unless we admit it.

If we are going to be honest about the state of the climate movement, we need to acknowledge that we are in a pretty awkward spot. We know now how much trouble we are really in, but we do not know what we are going to do about it. More precisely, we don't have a positive transition story that we actually believe in. And we won't, unless we really face the justice side of the problem.

Despite the brilliant green tech breakthroughs that are now at our door, the tech revolution is not going to save us. It is going to give us an opening, and it is going to make it possible for us to

save ourselves. But we still have to do so, and we will need more than nonviolent resistance. We will also need sustained and visionary planetary-scale cooperation, and that is simply impossible at today's level of extreme economic inequality. So redistribution has to be part of the core story, and we don't know how to talk about it, not at a planetary scale.

"Living in truth" is not in itself a transition strategy, and neither is being anticapitalist. They are just beginnings.

## **Do We Need a Meta-Movement?**

This brings me to Bill McKibben's opener. I agree with everything he said in it, but, if I may, he's only talking about part of the movement. His organizing focus is the zero-sum "game" that we are "playing" against the fossil/neoliberal/exterminist complex, but there is also a second game in play, and we have to win it, too, if our victory is not to be a Pyrrhic one. This is the global game of emergency cooperation, the global commons game, and while (fortunately) it is a non-zero-sum game, this does not make it any easier to win.

Yes, we need a meta-movement, but it needs to be a planetary one. Alas, the Green New Deal vision, fantastic though it is, does not in itself fill this gap. We have to be measured and strategic, but at the same time we have to start talking, seriously, about a global Green New Deal that is more than just a proliferation of national Green New Deals. Minimally, every national campaign needs an international plank, and if we want a real meta-movement, we have to go beyond this and give some real thought to planetary strategy and institutions in and of themselves.

Here, I'd like to suggest that we declare a moratorium on vague critiques of the Paris Agreement. Paris was built to be strengthened, which it will be, as soon as the world nations decide to strengthen it, which by the way is going to be a lot easier with a first version on the books than it would be without it. So think about Paris, and think about the Green New Deal, and think about the green technology revolution, as building blocks. The question is how to put all the building blocks together—and fast. If anything, it is clear that this means redirecting trillion-dollar investment flows, and that this, in turn, means thinking globally, because it absolutely means pumping massive amounts of public money into the Green Climate Fund (and other effort-sharing mechanisms) so that we can actually animate the Paris system. In practice, we have to

achieve the first-round pledges of national action, all of them, all around the world, even as we push our respective nations to put stronger pledges on the books. Remember, we are aiming for a global emissions level that is about 45% below the 2010 level by 2030. We are not going to hit it with bottom-up action alone, and we need to push for it within the existing institutional context.

We also need a plan for how we are going to deal with the terrible impacts of climate change. Think about large-scale global migration, which will be major issue as the equatorial belt warms towards uninhabitability, and think about how this migration is going to strengthen the “authoritarian nationalist” forces rising in the wake of neoliberalism’s destruction. This is a justice challenge of the first order, and we are not going to face it successfully if we are distracted by civil war. Think about the chaos that is going to rise if the fossil sector begins to collapse, as it must. People are talking about the “well-managed” phase out of fossil energy, but what does this actually mean? There are going to be losers as well as winners, and the losers cannot just be left to their own devices. And we need the global trade and finance regimes to be redesigned so that they support rather than undermine the international climate regime. All of which is to say is that the Green New Deal is a huge step forward, but that it is not nearly enough, not even at the level of a transition vision, not if we intend to mobilize at scale.

So we are in a pivot right now, but really it is just childhood’s end. We see how much trouble we are in. But if we are going to get serious about the emergency mobilization, we are going to have to get down to hard and practical questions about transitional justice, including global transitional justice. And we are going to have to do so without wishing nations away, because they aren’t going away. It is not enough to talk about state and local alternatives. When it comes to stabilizing the climate, the single most important fact may simply be that most of the people on the planet are still very poor. It can’t be us against them. It won’t work.

So do we need a meta-movement? Yes, and it better be internationalist.

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## About the Author



Tom Athanasiou co-directs the Climate Equity Reference Project, an initiative that develops tools and analysis to advance economic equity as a practical means to reaching a global climate change compact. Focusing on distributional justice and international cooperation, he is active in climate negotiations and co-coordinates the International Climate Action Network's Equity and Effort Sharing working group. He is the author of *Divided Planet: the Ecology of Rich and Poor* and *Dead Heat: Global Justice and Global Warming*, and co-author of *Greenhouse Development Rights: The Right to Development in a Climate Constrained World*.

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Cite as Tom Athanasiou, "Globalizing the Movement," contribution to GTI Forum "The Climate Movement: What's Next?," *Great Transition Initiative* (June 2019), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/climate-movement-athanasiou>.

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