Beyond the Dual Crisis: From Climate Change to Democratic Change

By CAROL C. GOULD

The Paris Agreement on climate change arrived at this past December promises constructive action to keep global increases in temperature below two degrees Celsius above their pre-industrial level. Although this initial step toward greater world cooperation on climate is most welcome, can we expect it to produce the desired results? And if not, why not? What more would be needed to mitigate dangerous climate change, as well as to adapt to it where necessary? To begin to answer these questions, we would require a solid diagnosis of the causes of the present climate crisis. We would need to understand why countries and people worldwide have not yet been able to rise to the challenge of addressing and dealing with the monumental climatic changes that threaten human existence and flourishing on the planet (and that threaten other species as well). In order to arrive at this explanation, and on this basis offer effective policy proposals, I suggest we have to look not only at the climate crisis but also at the democracy crisis.

I want to propose that progress in curbing climate change needs to proceed concomitantly with transformations in democracy. Indeed, these two crises—of climate and democracy—are supplemented with a third and long-standing one concerning global justice, including pervasive inequality and world poverty. It might even be suggested that we need to bring in a further contemporary crisis—that of global capitalism. This article will investigate the way climate intersects with these other forces and factors—inequality, capitalism, and especially democracy—and will make a few suggestions for a path ahead to address these various crises.

The approach taken here recognizes an important role for what has been called structural injustice—in other words, the way institutions, whether political, economic, or social, function to produce and perpetuate forms of human oppression and climatic harm, even if the individuals functioning within these institutions may be well-meaning and not specifically intending these negative modes or effects. From this perspective, the oft-cited reliance on individuals as consumers making changes in their attitude or even their behavior—in which they would dramatically lower their own contributions to emissions—can be seen to be inadequate to the task of bringing about fundamental change in planetary outcomes.

A substantial number of theorists have suggested that taking a different attitude toward the natural
world is the key factor to deal with climate change—for example, an attitude modeled on indigenous beliefs about the land, or else a spiritual view that emphasizes the interdependence of the natural or biotic world. I want to dispute such claims. If the problem is largely structural, then even though such new or reclaimed attitudes or perspectives may be valuable, they do not deal with the root causes of the climate crisis (or the democracy crisis, as we shall see).

Moreover, I would be highly reluctant to endorse one single attitude or perspective on nature that everyone would be expected to adopt. I will myself propose that we do indeed need to renounce views of human dominance over nature. But the attitude that replaces it can be based on a wide range of theoretical perspectives or approaches, all of which could support a practical attitude to the natural world in which we recognize and act on the recognition that we are an integral part of nature and dependent on it. This recognition does not require abandoning the importance of human goals or intentions and indeed the value of the development of human capacities—both individual and collective—over time. But we need to see humans and their activity as both a part of nature and as interdependent with the natural environment. Social construction of the natural world will necessarily continue—in which we interpret nature and create artifacts through our practical activity—but we need to more clearly understand the way that nature both constrains and enables human ends and processes and merits respect as well.

In order to elaborate these broad themes in this short article, we can begin with the concrete analysis of the crises of climate and democracy and of their root cause(s), move to a brief critique of existing proposals for dealing with them, and conclude with a few suggestions for moving ahead in regard to both domains, at the point of their intersection. Needless to say, both the explanation and the proposals will rely on the ideas of many others, but I believe that the account here brings together the various factors in an original and distinctive way.

CRISES IN CLIMATE AND DEMOCRACY—THEIR INTERSECTION AND THEIR COMMON ROOT

The readers of Minding Nature are all too familiar with the climate crisis. Suffice it to say that if present emissions rates continue, scientists predict the melting of the polar ice caps, the disappearance of the glaciers (along with the water they supply) including the Greenland ice sheet, the thawing of the permafrost and the potential vast methane release, the rise of sea levels with accompanying inundation of island nations and flooding in coastal cities around the world, the salinization of the oceans, increasingly severe weather disturbances, more widespread droughts, deep problems for agriculture in various regions, and more. These problems are attributed to the increasing concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, including carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide. Moreover, carbon in the atmosphere accumulates over time and will apparently take centuries to dissipate, so that the emissions problem becomes more and more acute, even if there are successful efforts to limit emissions. The destruction of tropical rainforests also plays a significant role both in carbon release and in the elimination of valuable carbon sinks. Indeed, the entire process—if unchecked—can be expected to manifest a transformation of quantity into quality—that is, the arrival of a so-called tipping point, leading to climate chaos, with runaway warming, profound degradation in weather, and other dire, uncontrollable consequences.

The democracy crisis at first glance seems altogether different, and it, too, is well known. It involves the hollowing out of real democracy or rule by the people. Instead, corporations and wealthy individuals exert major influence over both elections and public policy. In the United States especially, the role of virtually unlimited campaign donations by the superrich, including by corporations now regarded as “persons” in virtue of the Citizens United Supreme Court decision, exacerbates the problems that arise from the distortion of legislation and representation by means of per-
susive lobbying by powerful economic interests. Democracy has been reduced at best to “spectatorship,” in which citizens can only observe processes over which they have no control, replacing the core democratic modes of active participation in government, which theorists—from John Dewey to the present—have argued are essential to democracy’s flourishing.

At the international level as well, the institutions of global governance, including the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, and even the World Bank, display a “democratic deficit.” While these institutions have significant influence over the livelihoods and work conditions of people around the world who are affected by their policies, these people themselves have no opportunities to provide input into these powerful institutions. Instead, these agencies are controlled by large states that often act in the interest of the big corporations within them. Internationally, too, some states lack democracy altogether, including among them major global actors like China.

The two crises—climate and democracy—are directly interrelated by the fact that the kind of regulation and legislation that are called for to address climate change are rendered very difficult by lobbying and campaign contributions that themselves weaken democracy. Among the major players in such lobbying and donations are the fossil fuel industry and the wealthy individuals who run it. On the international stage as well, given the power of large emitting states and corporations on the global governance institutions, it is no surprise that few actions are taken to limit emissions or to offer major support for alternative energy development. Meanwhile, older authoritarian regimes (e.g., China) most often do not address the demands of their own citizens for more livable cities with breathable air.

We can observe, too, that climate change reciprocally exacerbates the problems for democracy. This is evident in the “security crisis” it engenders, bringing increased potential for conflicts between states and regions (whether within or across states). New forms of violent conflict have themselves been attributed in part to climate change—for example, the drought that aggravated the situation in Syria, which can be expected to intensify with the worsening of the climate crisis. Likewise, the refugee crisis that challenges European democracies at this moment is in part caused by climate change, and it is expected to vastly increase and deepen with the displacement of millions from coastal cities in future years. Other forms of human security are threatened as well, especially food security. And if governments and global governance institutions continue to be hobbled by their deference to fossil fuel corporate interests, they are unlikely to take the steps needed to deal with the climate crisis. Further, it is even possible that the rise to prominence of these security issues will lead to an abandonment of democracy itself in favor of authoritarian “solutions.” And where democracy still maintains its hold in liberal democratic states, the emphasis on security measures that are seen as required to manage climate change threatens to undercut our commitments to the basic liberties essential for democracy, such as freedom of expression and association.

But there is also, I suggest, a deep interrelation between the two crises under consideration here in a different sense: they can be seen as sharing in large measure the same root cause, a point too often unnoticed or disregarded in analyses of these crises and what to do about them. This observation will allow us to bring in the additional dimension noted at the outset—namely, the issues of deep inequality, global poverty, and injustice that exacerbate the other effects of climate change, producing especially harsh outcomes for developing countries and disadvantaged peoples. Injustice and inequality likewise intensify the democracy crisis, both nationally and internationally, by depriving people of effective voice in the process. In addition, they work against the capacity of democracies to regulate climate change because the affluent are currently much better able to avoid or mitigate its impacts. Moreover, with the deference afforded large corporate interests and wealthy donors, democratic states and global governance institutions alike have fewer incentives to support regulations on emissions or to promote renewable fuels.

An emphasis on structural injustice leads us to focus on the ways in which capitalism as a system functions to produce climate change. Indeed, the consequences it regularly produces for the environment are aggravated by capitalism’s own present crisis. Even without extensive political economic analysis, it is evident that the capitalist system depends for its functioning on both competition and growth (at the macrolevel of national and international economies, as well as at the micro-level of firms). For the most part, corporations tend to eschew regulation or limitation in the interest of greater profits and capital accumulation. This profit-seeking activity is not in the first place a matter of attitude—say, of greed—but rather
a basic mode of functioning of the system. Given the competitive environment (again, at both the macro- and micro-levels), corporate executives and managers see themselves as having no choice but to follow the logic of growth. Moreover, the need for increasing sales leads to an intense emphasis on promoting consumption, and even involves what has been called “the creation of new needs” for consumers, through advertising and other means. Indeed, efforts are made to turn nearly everything into a commodity to be bought and sold, including land and other aspects of the natural world.

In this situation, regulations in the interest of ecological sustainability necessarily come from outside the economy, and are most often viewed as an imposition of constraints on markets. Because of the power of corporate interests, intensified by competition from new corporations in emerging markets in the context of globalization, democratic governments have tended to resist putting in place the necessary environmental (or social) regulations. They most often refuse to impose carbon taxes or to provide serious incentives for the development of renewable fuels. The emphasis on growth and on competition among national economies, combined with the weakening of democracy within these states, in turn contributes to the increased power of corporate lobbies—excluding especially those of fossil fuel industries—and allows large corporations to flourish at the expense of the meeting of human (and non-human) needs.

We can add that this profit-oriented system operates in a way that generates inequality, as well as a certain measure of exploitation, given the divergent interests of owners/managers and workers/consumers within it. At the global level, inequalities emerge between developed and developing states, as well as within each of these. Given the centrality of competition, cooperative modes of social relationship are devalued within economic or political life. All of this in turn impacts on our dealings with global warming. Well-off individuals and firms can more easily protect themselves against its effects, and their disproportionate influence on politics leads to a lack of political or legislative action to address it. Disadvantaged people and entire countries are left to deal with adapting to climate change practically alone (despite the recent meager and non-binding commitments to international aid included in the Paris Agreement).

From this structural perspective, the contemporary emphasis on individual consumerism and acquisitiveness in the developed countries can be seen as a consequence of the operation of capitalist institutions, rather than as a cause of it. Likewise, the unlimited use (and using up) of the Earth’s resources, and the emphasis on extraction without end, are largely driven by an economic system oriented to corporate profit. Of course, none of this is to deny the strengths of this system in producing goods for large numbers of people, as well as the power of economic and technological globalization to increase the scope of interchange and communication across borders. But I believe that if we are to make a fundamental transformation in regard to climate change, we need to confront directly the deep problems with the existing system, especially as they impact both nature and democracy, and attempt to work toward some new directions.

ALTERNATIVE DIAGNOSES AND REMEDIES FOR CLIMATE CHANGE

The above approach to the climate crisis and its connection to the democracy crisis contrasts with several other existing ones, and it will be useful to briefly explore those contrasts here, before proceeding to some suggestions for moving ahead.

The standard approach tends to regard the source of the problem as one of bad actors—whether corporate or individual—operating within an otherwise well-functioning capitalist system. Alternatively, it sees the problem as a technological one that has resulted from the availability of mainly polluting sources of energy available for use under industrial capitalism, where the deleterious consequences of this use have only recently come to be recognized. The solutions offered in turn all fall within what is called climate capitalism or green capitalism. These have prominently included emissions trading schemes (e.g., in the European Union), carbon offsets, and the production of
green fuels, which were introduced partly in response to various “climate regimes” like the Kyoto Protocol. However, carbon markets have in practice led to various scams, given the incentives to gain substantial credits for destroying greenhouse gases, even where these pollutants can be removed from the industrial processes in question in inexpensive ways. Offsets involved in setting aside forests so that they can function as carbon sinks have sometimes interfered with indigenous peoples’ rights to use the land. Ultimately, the strategies employed tend to leave the power of big emitters largely unchecked, or else polluting industries are simply outsourced from developed to developing countries. In any case, the expansionary tendency of capitalism remains unacknowledged and relatively untouched.6

One element of green capitalism does hold special promise for mitigation, and that is the interest generated in developing renewable energy sources, where solar and wind power in particular are making significant headway. According to the REN21 Renewables 2015 Global Status Report:

Renewable energy provided an estimated 19.1% of global final energy consumption in 2013, and growth in capacity and generation continued to expand in 2014 ... Renewables represented approximately 58.5% of net additions to global power capacity in 2014, with significant growth in all regions. Wind, solar PV, and hydro power dominated the market. By year’s end, renewables comprised an estimated 27.7% of the world’s power generating capacity, enough to supply an estimated 22.8% of global electricity.7

The situation is less positive with respect to the use of renewables for heating and cooling, and progress has also been slow in the electrification of transport. Moreover, fossil fuels continue to benefit from sizable incentives in various countries, and the market in itself does not have a way of valuing the public benefits of renewables. Further, the transformation to renewable fuels (or their introduction) often lacks adequate financing, which is especially a problem in some developing countries where solar panels, for example, could provide a source of much needed power. Indeed, a more adequate distribution of energy globally remains a pressing need, with 15 percent of the world’s population, or about one billion people, still completely lacking access to electricity.

It is important to observe that this turn to renew-

ables is largely guided by policy making and often requires incentives for both development and implementation, where both the policies and the incentives are usually provided by governmental agencies. As the REN21 report observes, “Over the past decade, and particularly in recent years, advances in renewable energy technologies, global increases in capacity, and rapid cost reductions have been due largely to policy support, which has attracted significant investment and has further driven down costs through economies of scale.”8 Thus, it is not possible to rely on markets alone to support the transformation to renewables.

We can briefly make mention of a second approach to climate change that does not single out bad actors or the historical development of industrial technologies, but rather sees it as the aggregate effect of the choices of individuals, each of whom emits very little on her own, but who together produce deeply troublesome effects on the atmospheric concentration in carbon dioxide and other gases. These individuals do so simply in the course of pursuing their own self-interest in ordinary ways. Moreover, since they regard themselves as making only a very minor contribution, they may not acknowledge their role at all, and they certainly feel incapable of making a difference even if they understand the magnitude of the problem. They have no certainty under the present arrangements that others will comply, or they may simply demonstrate weakness of will. Thus, this explanation at the level of individuals can be coupled with the analysis of the situation going forward as a collective action problem. But in its focus on individuals, this approach disregards the severe impacts on the climate of large corporations, and it also fails to acknowledge how the current economic system militates against transformative change. Moreover, like the first approach, this one overlooks the ways that the weakening of democracy and the lack of opportunities for genuine participation or representation make it difficult to implement strict limits on emissions, or to institute carbon taxes, or to provide robust incentives for the development and use of alternative fuel sources.

A third approach that also contrasts with the one I offer attributes the problem primarily to a faulty attitude towards nature, and accordingly sees the remedy as lying in a shift in our attitudes. There is wide agreement on the problematic attitude: it is one of dominating nature, and of seeing human beings as having rights of unlimited exploitation of nature, of extraction and appropriation. I indicated earlier that I
am sympathetic to this critique, but that I see it as not standing alone or as existing just in the realm of ideas, but as tied to a mode of being and acting that is characteristic of capitalist economic systems. (Granted, it was also evident in the “state socialist” systems in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, but it could be argued that those systems were more “state capitalist” than socialist.) The approach under discussion here often goes on to propose a specific alternative attitude that is required in our dealings with nature, whether it is one drawn from indigenous tribes, or one advocating a specific spiritual perspective, which tends to require renouncing a humanist perspective. In this way, such approaches tend not to be very ecumenical and are instead quite demanding in requiring the adoption of a particular point of view.

To my mind, in contrast, many alternatives to an attitude of dominating nature exist and may suffice to support the requisite changes in behavior, though as indicated, I believe that changes in institutions are also necessary. It would certainly be important to more fully recognize the interdependence of the natural world, to see humans as a part of nature (though one conscious of itself), and to cultivate due concern and, indeed, respect for the interests and needs of other beings with whom we share this planet. Beyond this, various practical forms of training and skill are urgently required, if we are to transform our own habits and modes of action in regard to the natural world. And in regard to our social attitudes, we need to find a more cooperative way of being in the world, in place of rampant competition and “possessive individualism.” Yet I suggest that none of this will suffice without concomitant deep changes in our institutions, both economic and political.

SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR A NEW DIRECTION

What are the implications of the analysis offered here for moving ahead? Clearly, the focus on structural injustice has import for our approach to both the climate crisis and the democracy crisis. I will focus mainly on the latter here because it is less often considered in this context. Still, we can say that with regard to emissions and climate, some steps would have priority in this account: (1) the development and implementation of renewable sources of fuel, including solar, wind, geothermal, and wave power; (2) the intensive use of energy-efficient public transportation systems; (3) the control of waste through the production of sustainable and recyclable goods; (4) the cultivation of green agriculture in place of agribusiness; and (5) improved energy efficiency in building design and construction. These constructive steps need to be supplemented with immediate measures to limit emissions through regulations and taxes. Moreover, substantial assistance is needed to adapt them in developing countries, some of which are already impacted by climate change, along with help with future planning, if they request it.

A natural question arises with regard to such lists, however. It concerns the likelihood of these steps being implemented given the present political climate, both nationally and internationally, in which institutions of global governance are primarily oriented to meeting the interests of the powerful, rather than to resolving the climate crisis. Moreover, the global level lacks a truly governmental institution (which is why the term governance is used instead). So we will need to examine the political possibilities more deeply to determine what possible changes could be made in order to help produce the fundamental economic transformations needed to resolve the climate crisis.

Since this is a very large question, I can only make some brief remarks here. Some proposals can be implemented in the short term, while others have a longer horizon. They all involve ways of deepening democracy, despite the apparent oddity of calling for more democracy in a situation that has suggested to some that we have to turn to more authoritarian regimes for help.

In the short term, the most urgent need is to find ways to remove the influence of big money and big corporations on politics. As noted, this is an especially serious problem in the United States, both in regard to campaign financing and the influence of lobbying on legislation. In order to change the situation, we have to unmask the absurdity of treating corporations (which are abstract entities) as equivalent to natural persons who have human rights; and to more clearly reveal the way that lobbying undermines political equality. Of course, it is insufficient to mount only theoretical critiques, however compelling. Broad-based social movements to change this deeply inequalitarian system are required. Such movements do exist, though primarily elsewhere around the globe—for example, in a few Latin American countries, where people’s movements or those of indigenous groups have occasionally been able to make governments more responsive to people’s needs. The goal of the new social movements would be to refocus politics and legislation on dealing
with climate change (along with addressing other—related—wrongs, like exploitation). As I have suggested, in the near term, policies are urgently required that would set emissions limits and provide meaningful incentives for renewable energy technologies.

In order to deal with the underlying problems of the absence of real representation and people’s manifest alienation and disenchantment with politics, we need to look more intensively into their causes, and propose some thoroughgoing changes. We need to deepen democracy so that it goes beyond bare opportunities to vote (themselves threatened) and majority rule and begins to fulfill the richer notion of rule by and for the people. Given the increasing globalization of economies and social life, however, democracy has to become more extensive as well. The introduction of forms of transnational democracy would aim in the first place to mitigate the democratic deficit in global governance institutions by enabling democratic input by distant people in the policy making of these institutions, as well as by encouraging democratic deliberation within them.

To address the problem of amplifying opportunities for democratic self-rule by the members of a political community, I suggest that an important change would be for them to be able to exercise democratic decision-making not only in local political contexts, as they can do at present, but also in more ordinary spheres of economic and social life. This would consist in the introduction of self-management in firms (and in a range of social institutions beyond politics). Self-managing enterprises would give people some real control over everyday issues that matter to them and could empower them through the opportunities they would have to co-determine these spheres of activity with others. This extension of democracy can in turn be expected to meliorate the feelings of powerlessness and the resultant voter apathy that has marked liberal democracies for the past decades. Of course, taken alone, economic democracy of this sort would be insufficient unless politics, too, became open to wider participation and did not remain only with existing representative forms, which regrettably have been emptied of much of their significance.

I have elsewhere discussed at some length the idea of employee or worker participation in decision making (or democratic management of firms), its justification, and some specific forms it could take. Aside from the potential it holds to make political democracy more responsive to a wider range of citizens (and residents), and beyond the inherent benefits of enabling people to gain a modicum of control over their own work activity through cooperative decision-making, an economy of self-managing firms could probably bring some benefit in regard to pollution and emissions. Even if these firms remain committed to making a profit and to continuing growth, self-managing workers would likely attend to the local conditions in which they work and aim to rectify any pernicious impacts on their health and well-being. While current owners and top managers often live at a distance from places of production, the workers generally cannot do so. They and the communities of which they are a part are directly affected by the forms of energy used, as well as by pollution, waste, and other by-products of work processes.

Turning to the democratic deficit in global governance, one modest improvement would be to give the public some voice or input into decision-making, using the criterion that those deeply affected by the policies of these institutions should have an opportunity to express and clarify their own needs and to monitor the impact of these policies on their own economic and social human rights (as well as on civil and political ones). In the application to climate change, we can expect that opportunities for democratic input of this sort would call more attention than at present to the urgent needs for mitigation and adaptation in many developing countries.
The mention of human rights should remind us, too, that democracy in its deep sense is not only a matter of voting or even participation. It must also be framed by the recognition of human rights, both moral and legal (as often embodied in constitutions or covenants). Further, this broad set of human rights should serve not only as constraints on official action, but as goals for developing policies to fulfill them. Prominent among these rights are economic ones—to means of subsistence and an adequate level of well-being, along with education and health, as social rights.

Some have suggested that we need to recognize a right to an adequate environment (sufficient to maintain well-being) as among the human rights. Whether it is introduced as a formal right or not, it is clear that the present level of emissions and the deleterious climate changes those emissions are producing violate several other existing human rights, including the security of the person, health, and, in some cases, economic subsistence and even life itself. This impact on human rights provides yet another motivation for urgently addressing climate change beyond those already discussed.

Finally, we can go a step further in our efforts to deepen democracy. This would involve bringing in a Deweyan notion of democracy as a way of life. To have a democratic character (or a democratic personality, as I called it previously) requires increasing our capacities for both agency and receptivity (or listening), along with our empathic abilities. It would require a transformation from competitive to more cooperative ways of being, both in informal relations and in broader social and political contexts. It is possible, too, that these transformations in our habits and outlook—particularly a new emphasis on receptivity—would help make us more responsive to nature and to our interactions with it, as well as with other human beings. Certainly, this sort of opening to both nature and to the needs of others is something we need to work toward, to preserve both nature’s own capacities and its ability to sustain human beings going forward.

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