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Activating Personal and Political Agency Contribution to GTI Forum [The Climate Movement: What's Next?](#)

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Within academia, there is a considerable pressure to engage in what Bill McKibben refers to as the “more books, more articles, more symposia” approach to addressing climate change. We are also compelled to do more talks, more public outreach, more policy engagement, more contemplation, more reflection—in other words, more of everything. Yet it is also clear that it is not the lack of knowledge and understanding that is driving the problem and impeding responses. It is perhaps the framing of the problem that actually *is* the problem.

What is the Climate Movement's State of Play?

McKibben's reflection that “we were in a fight, not a discourse” is interesting, and I see his point. However, it's also important to acknowledge that there are, in fact, many climate discourses. Each of them frames the problem in a different way, and prioritizes and promotes a different type of response. In teaching undergraduate students about “climate and society,” my colleague Robin Leichenko and I distinguish four climate discourses: the biophysical discourse, the critical discourse, the dismissive discourse, and the integrative discourse. What we try to get across to students is the need for an integrative approach that brings together the practical, political, and personal dimensions of the challenge. We stress the importance of approaching climate change as more than an environmental issue—it is a social issue and a human issue that calls for broader and deeper responses.

“System Change, Not Climate Change”?

There are many calls for systems change, but few people actually reflect on what a system is, who defines systems, what the boundaries are, and so on. If we take a generic Google definition of a system as “a set of things working together as parts of a mechanism or an interconnecting network; a complex whole,” it becomes clear that systems are relationships, and climate change is essentially a relationship problem. It is about how we relate to ourselves, each other, other species, the environment, and the future. Relationships are often expressed through power, politics, interests, etc. However, at the end of the day, if we buy into the mechanistic metaphor and see systems as a collection of separate parts, we will perpetuate the perspective that we are separate from each other and “the system,” and we will “fight it” rather than relate to it differently.

The Enlightenment paradigm is killing us, and science itself may have to transform to meet the climate challenge—this includes the social sciences. Personally, I have been fascinated with the development of a quantum social science that brings subjectivity, agency, consciousness, and intention into our understanding of structural and systemic change. Classical science tells us that the future is a choice, but also that we have no free will. My current project on “quantum social change” has led me to explore the implications of different interpretations of quantum physics for climate change responses, both metaphorically and meaningfully. To approach the relationships between individual change, collective change, and systems change through a different paradigm can have a profound influence on the narratives and stories that we tell ourselves.

Do We Need a Meta-Movement?

One could argue that a meta-movement is already taking place and gaining momentum, but that it is not yet obvious. Perhaps this is because it doesn't fit into our normal understanding of “social movements.” Young people's dissent against the climate status quo can have several expressions: dutiful (working within the system), disruptive (working against the system), and dangerous (creating an alternative system). Many people are engaging with all three types of dissent, sometimes simultaneously, sometimes consecutively.

Most successful social movements involve all three types of dissent. The number of people taking to the streets may therefore not be the best indicator of the success of a meta-movement, as it does not capture the quality of the engagement. The capacity to challenge “the given” and launch alternatives from values that are universal, such as equity, dignity, integrity, and compassion, will be critical to the success of any meta-movement. As more and more people recognize that we are both individuals and collectives, entangled through language, stories, and meaning-making, and that how we think, relate, speak, and act really matters, we may see transformations happening faster than anyone ever expected.

A social movement informed by the Enlightenment paradigm is likely to limit our collective capacity for social change. Indeed, allowing people to be the subjects of their own lives (as Paolo Freire emphasized), rather than reducing them to objects to be changed, can unleash powerful energy for social change. There is no lack of knowledge about the solutions to climate change, but they are unlikely to be realized at scale without activating both personal and political agency.

About the Author



Karen O'Brien is a professor in the Department of Sociology and Human Geography at the University of Oslo. Her research has focused on climate change impacts, vulnerability, and adaptation. She has participated in the IPCC Fourth and Fifth Assessments, as well as the Special Report on Managing the Risks of Extreme Events and Disasters to Advance Climate Change Adaptation (SREX). She has written and co-edited numerous books about global environmental change, including *Changing Environment for Human Security and Climate Change Adaptation and Development: Transforming Paradigms and Practices*. She is on the Science Committee for Future Earth and is the co-founder of cCHANGE, a website that provides news and perspectives on transformation in a changing climate.

About the Publication

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