



OUR RESPONSE TO THE  
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SOMETHING NEW,



THE FUTURE OF  
THE CLIMATE  
JUSTICE  
MOVEMENT

Organizing  
On a Sinking  
Ship

Climate change rarely comes up at the top of the list when people are asked about issues that concern them most. While this is not surprising, it is nonetheless disturbing considering the gravity of the climate crisis. Yet the key problem of our collective negligence of the climate crisis is reflected in the question itself, rather than the answer. Let us be clear: climate change is not an “issue.” Rather, it is now the entirety of the biophysical world of which we are part. It is the physical battleground on which every “issue” is played out — and it is crumbling.

The global justice movement is one of the many actors trying to maneuver on this battlefield, and the direction it is headed in is reshaping the narratives, tactics and structures that comprise it, hinting at the future of social movement organizing on a radically transformed planet. The rules of the game have changed: welcome to the Capitalocene — goodbye to “activism-as-usual.” As the climate changes, so must movements if they are to withstand, even thrive, inside the coming cataclysm of winds, waves and wars.



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## MOVEMENT CULTURES IN THE CAPITALOCENE

The Capitalocene is defined partly by a disappearance of spaces of refuge: there is no escaping this problem, and nowhere to hide. We're all in the same boat. But the boat has crashed into a drifting iceberg, and is sinking fast. Our response to the climate crisis has been to rearrange deckchairs on the Titanic, but whatever we are doing, it isn't working. It's time to try something new. On a sinking ship, one's logic and frames of references must change, just as the traditional frames of the left must evolve in the emerging context of crisis. The struggle is no longer to organize the deckchairs so that we can ensure equal access for all. Rather, the most critical question now becomes: "How can we best organize ourselves to turn as many of these deck-chairs into life rafts?"

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Perhaps as obvious as the climate crisis itself has been the inability of social movements to properly organize around it. For years, the climate movement has been trapped between two discordant discourses: between changing light bulbs and global revolution. On one hand, any action can seem minuscule and ineffective compared to a crisis as big as the entire world. On the other, deep systemic change can seem far too slow for the urgency of the crisis we face.

Yet one cannot “fight climate change” in the absence of such structural transformations, for the climate crisis is itself the result of an extractivist logic based upon an exploitative relationship with the world around us. Long before the industrial revolution, the emerging capitalist world-system was fueled by the exploitation of women, people of color and entire ecosystems.

The climate crisis is the ultimate symptom of this extractivist dynamic, and is an entirely new species of crisis that requires our movements to enact an entirely different logic — including entirely different values, morals, assumptions and strategies — if we are to confront it. Confronting climate change means confronting the system and the culture that has caused it, and providing a scalable alternative. More than merely constructing a new politics to confront the “issue” of climate change, the task of the left in the Capitalocene is to cultivate new processes for engagement in politics. The culture of organizing itself becomes key.

As we scramble to adapt to life on a sinking ship, we can see the development of discursive, structural and tactical innovations that hold the potential to allow movements to narrate, enact and defend an alternative future that matches the scale of the crisis. Each crisis that ruptures our communities also ruptures cultural norms, creating an opportunity to organize. Nothing we can do will stop the ship from going under, but we can slow the sinking. Instead of waiting in line for the captain to give us a place in the lifeboat, perhaps it is time we started deciding — together — how to turn all these deckchairs we’ve been moving around into life rafts. ★



Confronting a crisis as big as the world means reimagining and re-engaging an understanding of collectivity that neoliberalism has not been able to sell or steal. If movements continue to be caught unprepared for the coming and current calamities, we risk letting those most vulnerable fall prey to those with the most privilege and power. The pressures of the climate crisis have the capacity to bring people closer together. Solnit reminds us how, “just as many machines reset themselves to their original settings after a power outage, human beings reset themselves to something

altruistic, communitarian, resourceful and imaginative after a disaster... [W]e revert to something we already know how to do. The possibility of paradise is already within us as a default setting.” If movements do not adequately seize on this possibility, however, the future itself will belong to those who have created the problem and who would push us further apart.

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If movements in the Capitalocene are to effectively confront this crisis, it means enacting an alternative set of values and organizational principles. The legacy may have less to do with solar panels and community gardens than with incubating scalable organizing cultures that can be shared with allies, volunteers and partners in ways that improve access to justice as we move together into an exponentially tumultuous future. It may just be these cultures, being incubated now inside globally connected movements, that will write the next chapter of human history.

Cultural revolution is not only desired; it is needed. If we fail to offer scalable discursive, tactical and structural alternatives to the extractivist logic that has created the climate crisis, then capitalism may itself transform the coming wave of disruptions into its own benefit, exacerbating existent inequalities for every social and ecological “issue” as it strengthens its stranglehold of the future on a rapidly destabilizing battleground. History is speeding up. It is time to play to win.

## SHIFTING NARRATIVES

The climate crisis has reached a critical stage at a strange time. Neoliberalism is devastating the social and ecological commons even as technological change has radically horizontalized media and communication platforms. People are both coming together and being pulled apart. Importantly, communication technologies are creating new social spaces for communities to tell their own stories on a global scale.

This is transforming global organizing, allowing once-marginal groups to influence the mainstream environmental discourse that had previously been controlled by a few privileged groups. In recent years, frontline and indigenous groups in particular have managed to shift the narrative. Rather than playing the role of victims in someone else's savior story, they are increasingly reframing themselves as the heroes of their own.

One poignant example comes from some of the most remote places on the planet: the atolls of the low-lying Pacific islands. The slogan of the self-named "Pacific Warriors" — "we are not drowning; we are fighting" — attests to the broad narrative shift that is possible when communities are able to speak for themselves. Their organizing has taken different forms, all of which are carefully constructed to be useful not only in building resistance to climate change but also in building resilience by strengthening traditional culture. From using handmade traditional canoes to blockade the world's largest coal port in Australia, to three-day ceremonies outside of the Vatican to a gift-giving ritual with German communities resisting lignite coal mining on the morning of a mass direct action, the Pacific Warriors — and thousands of other front-line and Global South communities — are decolonizing the stories the climate movement is telling itself.

Such narrative shifts have been pulling the global climate justice movement towards a more intersectional systemic analysis. By telling stories of compounded struggles of racism, colonialism and sexism, front-line and indigenous groups are grounding the intangible climate crisis in lived

portunity to enact a different form of politics based on cooperation instead of competition, an opportunity that can provide a glimpse of another possible world. "It's tempting to ask," Solnit cleverly points out, "why if you fed your neighbors during the time of the earthquake and fire, you didn't do so before or after." The climate crisis will provide our movements with clear opportunities to enact their politics and grow by providing a more functional response to the Capitalocene than that of capitalism.

## BUILDING LIFE RAFTS

The word "crisis" comes from the classical Greek *krisis*, meaning "decision." Yet despite the powerful slogan to that effect, the main decision we are confronted with is not one of system change or climate change. Climate change is now inevitable and so, therefore, is system change. The decision at hand is how that change will be organized: will it trickle down or will it rise up? Will it be based upon competition or cooperation? While the climate crisis is rapidly becoming a fact of life, the coming "system change" is precisely what has yet to be defined — and it is this decision that will shape the coming generations of human culture and society.

Let us be clear: responding adequately to the coming catastrophe will not be easy. Millions are already suffering from the impacts of a crisis they had no role in causing, and the nations and individuals who have grown rich off generations of exploitation will not simply roll over and share their accumulated wealth. From border walls to immigration policies to land grabs to LNG terminals to underground bunkers to private islands and private militaries: those with power and privilege are preparing to protect it.

Far from helping, the state often comes back in to put the genie back into the bottle. This use of force, when so openly directed at the victims, begs the question if those in power are not more afraid of our response to the disaster than of the disaster itself. Solnit comments: "The possibility of paradise hovers on the cusp of coming into being, so much so that it takes powerful forces to keep such a paradise at bay." Do not be conned into thinking that your government is doing nothing about climate change, or that the ultra-rich all believe it to be a hoax. Great preparations are underway for what is coming — they just aren't for you. Instead, they are based upon and aim to reinforce a systemic logic of competition and scarcity.

All major crises leave a power vacuum in their wake. The ability of people to meet their immediate needs through functional participatory structures reveals windows of opportunity for radical change. Often, these same shocks that are used as excuses for neoliberalism to privatize emergency services relocate entire communities or impose economic reforms. Yet each crisis is also an op-

experience. They are pulling climate change out of the atmosphere, into their bodies and out onto the streets. In a small but notable shift, the once marginal slogan — "system change, not climate change" — has now been absorbed into the hegemonic discourse.



## SHIFTING POWER

At the same time as front-line and indigenous groups are claiming increasing agency in steering the climate movement, more and more NGOs and "Big Greens" are reassessing their traditional approach and working to take "leadership from the most impacted" and support grassroots movements. This change is important, and it is amplifying stories that need to be told. Yet the same development points to an important structural paradox: how can a top-down organization support bottom-up organizing?

Despite the narrative shift, few mainstream NGOs are making serious efforts to actually embody the structural shift towards horizontality and bottom-up organizing. A rift is opening between discourse and structure, between form and function, between process and product. As movements prepare for the coming destabilization, the structure they use will dictate the scale, scope and depth of their capacity to respond. Any incoherence between discourse and structure that is now a small crack may eventually crack open into full-blown crisis. If movements are to survive, even thrive, in the Capitalocene, they must be looking to build a structural integrity that aligns with their political mission. These organizing structures will set the limits to our collective capacity to respond to the climate crisis.

The structures through which groups organize give body to their politics. In the wake of natural disasters, people find themselves uprooted and in need. Decisions are made on the basis of urgency, not political preference, and people participate in structures that appear to function in a given social context. An organizational structure's ability to suddenly absorb new people into meaningful participation will determine its success in both disaster relief and in activism, and may function as a door opening up unto a new politics, as people are forced by the nature of events to step outside of their traditional organizing structures.

*Just transition is a framework for a shift to an economy that is ecologically sustainable, equitable and just for all its members. After centuries of global plunder, the profit-driven, growth-dependent, industrial economy is severely undermining the life support systems of the planet. An economy based on extracting from a finite system faster than the capacity of the system to regenerate will eventually come to an end — either through collapse or through our intentional re-organization. Transition is inevitable. Justice is not.*

This understanding of the “inevitable transition” is key for movement organizing today. Any group pursuing radical change now has sufficient evidence that such change is not only necessary but urgent. In her eloquently written book, *A Paradise Built in Hell*, Rebecca Solnit shows that while “power” has a history of turning natural disasters into the next process of accumulation, privatization and destruction of the commons, people themselves tend to react very well in disaster. As the world gets turned upside down by a hurricane, earthquake, explosion or fire, values are also turned upside down and the individualism portended by capitalism is commonly replaced by an honest (and remarkably human) altruism. People spend days digging strangers out of rubble, shared food is cooked collectively, harvested from unmanned supermarkets or fields. Collective self-organization becomes key to survival.

As with Occupy Wall Street and Occupy Sandy, structures can lie dormant for years only to spring back to life as they are needed.

This same pivot also aligns the climate movement with the major popular uprisings of recent years, from the Egyptian Revolution to the *indignados* in Spain and Greece, Occupy Wall Street in the US, the Gezi movement in Turkey, the Umbrella Revolution in Taiwan, and far beyond — all part of an overarching participatory process bubbling out of the occupied plazas, squares, parks and airports. These place-based occupations have come and gone, but they have left a deep mark on the political education of a new generation of organizers who, having glimpsed a crack in the façade, are continuing to experiment with radical democratic processes in a growing diversity of forms. As the global climate movement shifts

towards an increased focus on process and participation, it can play a crucial role in global movements by organizing the physical infrastructure of power generation that embodies these principles.

As movements reframe the process by which they are organizing, it is the battlefield itself that expands, opening up a space that suddenly includes the vast majority of the world's population that has traditionally been excluded from decision-making processes. This transformation, which is already underway, may mark a turning point in history as anti-imperial, anti-sexist, anti-colonial, and anti-racist movements understand themselves as not only part, but leaders of a global insurrection to democratize the physical infrastructure and management of the coming world. It is time to be building bridges, for the waters are rising and there aren't enough boats.

### **“TRANSITION IS INEVITABLE — JUSTICE IS NOT”**

As movements come to terms with the fact that stopping climate change is impossible, they are tackling the hard task of imagining what a “just transition” would actually entail. The US-based broad coalition of environmental justice groups and labor unions, Movement Generation, spent three years tackling precisely this problem by envisioning such an eco-social process. Their strategic framework outlines that:

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As the scale of the crisis becomes more apparent, traditional boundaries of tactical differences are falling away. The unraveling world is reminding us just how tightly we are bound together. Children's climate education campaigns, food forests, electoral campaigns and road blockades are at the heart of movement and community efforts that are increasingly embracing an “all hands on deck” approach, carrying collective disobedience into the mainstream. This marks another important cultural shift, as more and more communities challenge not only unjust laws but also start questioning the legitimacy of the process by which laws are written and enforced. People and organizations are pivoting towards participatory democratic processes, and demand inclusion in the making of decisions that affect their life.

Yet for hierarchical organizations like major environmental NGOs, this points to another friction between form and function. Can one truly advocate for external disobedience while internally replicating those same power structures that are to be disobeyed?



Can any type of organization coherently advocate for disobedience against decision-makers, yet expect unwavering obedience towards their own hierarchical and unaccountable internal decision-making structures?

The German movement Ende Gelände has for three years been using a participatory organizing structure to coordinate thousands of people to enter and shut down open-cast coal mines. Their scalable structures have allowed thousands of newcomers to direct action to create safe spaces for participants to engage in actions within their comfort zones. This has only been possible by allowing groups the autonomy to make their own decisions and fostering a culture of co-creation through a participatory organizing process. Taking this politics even further, the Queer Feminist finger has for the last two years been enacting an eco-feminist politics of care by further collectivizing organizing and decision-making processes. Their radical inclusiveness is dependent upon opening participation to decision making, and has been growing exponentially.

### SHIFTING STRUCTURES

Environmental struggles are never won. They require constant vigilance. Furthermore, one may defeat a coal-fired power plant in one place only to find it built in a neighboring town — the project hasn't been stopped, just moved.

The climate movement, faced with an endless uprising of imposed projects, has been realizing the limitations of the NIMBY ("Not In My Back Yard") frame that could easily see Exxon Mobil construct mega-sized wind parks for shareholder profits rather than local energy. The climate justice movement is at a crucial transition as it pivots from a focus on fixing the problem to addressing the cause; from a discourse focused on "solar panels and wind turbines" to "democratically-controlled renewable energy." As such, the material infrastructure of

the coming world is beginning to align with the organizing structures themselves.

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