

Awakening at the Point of No Return

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My early research (before human ecology and sustainability) focused on how cancer patients thought about their life before and after the moment that their doctor performed an act of social magic in declaring their illness terminal. Before, patients tended to employ metaphors of fighting, battling and conquering their illness; metaphors which gave them energy and determination helped them to bond with the people around them in common cause, and avoid thinking about death. After, however, the metaphor failed because the fight was lost, no preparations had been made for what came next, and sometimes bodies had been damaged by extreme interventions made in a last-ditch and unrealistic hope to win the battle. It is with some surprise that I find this early research increasingly relevant to my current area of interest: responses to the unprecedented global conditions of the 21st century.

CRUCIAL TRENDS

This is not the place for a detailed analysis of the figures – what the economist Ross Garnaut calls the ‘awful arithmetic’ – of climate change, but merely to point towards some crucial trends. The first trend is that estimates of the level of CO₂ in the atmosphere that we must keep below to preserve a liveable climate tend to fall rather than rise, from 550ppm, to 450ppm, to a more recent figure from Jim Hansen of 350ppm, which is well below current levels (383ppm). In line with this, targets for reduction of emissions tend to increase, from 60% by 2050 to 80% in the UK Government’s climate change bill, but with other commentators such as Crispin Tickell insisting on a 100% decrease by 2050. At the same time though, global emissions are rising rather than falling. The longer these emissions grow, the higher the target needs to rise and the earlier it needs to be fulfilled.

This means that if things continue on the trajectory they are on now, targets will become increasingly unmeetable, eventually becoming as absurd as a 147% reduction in CO₂ emissions by last week. At some point between now and then, there will be an act of social magic in which climate change is officially declared unstoppable and irreversible. In fact this would not be a single declaration, but a slowly building global consensus of statements from authorities that would eventually infiltrate into people’s psychology. The point of no return is, after all, a psychological moment of realisation as much as it is a physically measurable phenomenon. For James Lovelock (2006), the point of no return has already been reached, and he uses the metaphor of himself as a ‘planetary physician’ to perform the social magic:

This article is the most difficult I have written... My Gaia theory sees the Earth behaving as if it were alive, and clearly anything alive can enjoy good health, or suffer disease. Gaia has made me a planetary physician and I take my profession seriously, and now I... have to bring bad news... before this century is over billions of us will die and the few breeding pairs of people that survive will be in the Arctic where the climate remains tolerable.

SOCIAL MAGIC

Social magic (Pierre Bourdieu's term) occurs when a declaration of some kind profoundly changes the perception of our lived reality, such as a declaration that we are under arrest, are sentenced to prison, are fired, are now husband and wife, or are terminally ill. If the current trajectory of increasing global emissions and increasing targets for CO₂ reduction continues, then it is likely that the voice of James Lovelock will be joined by many authorities in declaring that we are past the point of no return in terms of prevention of runaway climate change. On hearing enough of these declarations, one by one, people's perception of their lived reality will change, and they will perceive that they are living in a world where the ability of the Earth to support human life is in a decline. They will perceive that for many human communities around the world, and a great number of species, this decline is a terminal one.

My argument is that everything we do now in massively transforming our society towards a low carbon future needs to take into account the possibility (or probability) of a declaration of the point of no return in the near future. We have to ask ourselves whether the kind of measures we are putting in place would still be valuable if that point is reached. For example, a massive infrastructure of carbon capture and storage devices would be useless, and building it would require a high cost in terms of money and the use of the last remaining fossil fuels. The chair of the UK Government's Climate Change Committee recently suggested that through the large-scale use of biofuels it may be possible to increase aviation while moving to a low carbon society. Again we must ask if, at the point of no return, we really need a large fleet of biofueled planes? What purpose would they serve, other than consuming biological resources at a time when communities around the world find it increasingly difficult to grow food and find enough fuel to survive?

DESIGNING FOR DIVERSITY & RESILIENCE

Alternatively, it would be possible to build a low carbon future in ways which prove valuable at the point of no return. If diverse and resilient woodland including fruiting trees was planted on flood plains as a way of reducing CO₂, then after the point of no return, it could provide flood protection, homes for a variety of species and food and fuel for humans. A robust public transport system built to reduce CO₂ emissions could prove more resilient to climatic shocks and energy crises than a system reliant on individual vehicles. And perhaps most importantly of all, the restoration of the ability of local communities to grow food and produce goods from local materials would both cut carbon and improve the chances of surviving if resources become scarce due to climate change or if communities are cut off by extreme weather events. From now on, with the trajectories of targets as they are, there is little choice but to mitigate climate change in ways that simultaneously enhance the ability of communities to adapt if the mitigation fails.

There is a further level to think about though, because the idea that we can adapt our way out of any of the calamities that climate change may throw at us could be as unrealistic as the belief that we can simply avoid climate change. As the IPCC points out:

Even the most stringent mitigation efforts cannot avoid further impacts of climate change in the next few decades, which makes adaptation essential, particularly in addressing near-term impacts. Unmitigated climate change would, in the long term, be likely to exceed the capacity of natural, managed and human systems to adapt (IPPC 2007:71)

There is another possible turning point then, when it becomes apparent that efforts to adapt cannot keep pace with the rapidly deteriorating conditions of the world. The question is, at that point, what do those communities which face annihilation do, and is it possible to start preparing for the second point of no return right now?

ANSWERS

One answer comes from the voices of terminal cancer patients speaking after the life-changing news has sunk in. These patients, again and again, describe the same experience: that the news has brought them to a new realisation of the preciousness of life, that they regretted all the time spent in meaningless activities, that some of the things they once saw as important (salary, position, type of car, etc.) no longer seem important now. They wish that they had taken more risks, loved more, spent more time with friends and family, more time in beautiful places, more time feeling totally and fully alive. Preparing, then, for the second point of no return therefore requires realising very early on that life is precious, reflecting on what it is that is important and meaningful in that life, and ensuring that there are no regrets about missed opportunities when the turning point is reached.

What does this mean practically? To give an example: It means that tonight we turn off our central heating, our televisions, our stereos, our individual electric ovens. We pick up some left-over ingredients from our cupboards and an acoustic guitar and head off for a party at a neighbour's house. The heat of bodies and laughter will keep us warm, the talking, singing and dancing will keep us entertained, and shared food will keep us nourished. The carbon savings from sharing the oven, from avoiding wasted food, and from the shared heating will contribute to mitigating against climate change. The strengthening of community will prepare us to work together in adapting to a changing climate and looking after each other to survive climatic shocks if the mitigation fails. And, perhaps most importantly, if adaptation looks like it also may fail, we will at least feel that we have lived a little before we reach the ultimate point of no return.

REFERENCES

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Arran Stibbe's research involves analysing texts which play an important role in the formation of identities and the construction of society. His current specialisation is in ecological linguistics, which involves investigating the ecologically destructive effects of discourses such as consumerism, and searching for alternative discourses which encourage more sustainable practices. He has recently published papers on ecological linguistics in numerous journals, and is the founder of the Language & Ecology Research Forum www.ecoling.net and chair of the EAUC's Education for Sustainability group.

NOTE

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