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Learning to Be Postmodern in an All Too Modern World: “Whatever Action” in International Climate Change Imaginaries

POL BARGUÉS-PEDRENY and JESSICA SCHMIDT

Recent contributions in International Relations focus either on a shift from modernity towards postmodernity in approaches to address climate change, or underline the permanencies and continuities of modern thought and power hierarchies. In contrast, we suggest that there is a contradictory simultaneity of both of these framings through which the world is continuously decomposed and recomposed. Today climate change programmes seem to be driven by a key contradiction, which lies at the heart of the Anthropocene: the environment is ours to manipulate and yet is out of reach. Based on this framing, and thinking through Timothy Morton and Bruno Latour’s writings on political ecology, we argue that “whatever action” best captures current policy thinking: multiple initiatives are taken without a telos; rather they are designed to avoid that opportunities for adaptation and climate mitigation are foreclosed.

Introduction: Kaleidoscopic Reshuffling of Environmental Debates

Current climate change initiatives in international policymaking, as well as in the work of activists, artists and philosophers, seem seriously engaged and almost surprisingly innovative. The Environmental Health Clinic, directed by the artist, engineer and inventor Natalie Jeremijenko, has recently launched public installations in cities such as New York, Sidney and Barcelona to address environmental health concerns—like the “AgBags” that contain plants that are suspended over parapets, balconies and building walls to help reimagine urban agriculture.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) invests in innovation and tests, learns and readapts multiple experiments to protect the planet, like an app that facilitates e-waste recycling in China, the preparation of maps and spatial data to carry out national biodiversity plans in Zimbabwe, or the design of smart public transportation systems in Indonesia. The idea driving these varied approaches to tackle climate change is described in a recent UN publication: “Rather than thinking of strategy as a single plan built on predictions of the future, we should think of strategy as a portfolio of experiments that competes and evolves over time”.¹

1. UNDP, “Spark, Scale, Sustain: Innovation For the Sustainable Development Goals” (New York, NY: United Nations Development Programme, 2017), p. 2.

Concerned with the danger of climate change, the philosopher Timothy Morton is calling for a truly political ecology in the “Anthropocene” —considered a new geological era after the Holocene during which on one hand human actions have decisive and irreparable effects on the earth’s geology and, on the other, humans are placed at the same ontological level as non-humans.² For example, he suggests taking small pieces of plutonium, storing them safely and planting them in town squares and museums, so that we take responsibility for a substance we created.³

This apparent vigour in addressing climate change appears all the more surprising when the same narratives warn of devastated ecosystems, caution against persistent uncertainties, bemoan the incapacity of humans to deliver solutions, and assume that “the Earth has crossed a point of no return”.⁴ Initiatives, actions and experiments today seem to take place even if global warming is uncontainable, the Holocene cannot be restored, or as Morton expresses, “the end of the world has already occurred”.⁵ This makes us wonder: Why is it that artists, policymakers and philosophers seem to have recovered a self-assured enthusiasm and will act to finally save the planet and human existence while at the same time an apparently growing sense of irreversibility, helplessness and doom has taken hold of those concerned with environmental problems? A chiliastic celebration of possibility seems to interlock with a fateful expectation of a tragic Siberian winter after global warming extinguishes life.

In this paper we explore this tension and offer a novel interpretation of environmental policy frameworks originating in the global North. In academic literature, some studies tend to see a more or less linear trajectory from the beginning of environmental concerns in the aftermath of the Second World War to today’s focus on global climate change. This trajectory they see unfolding in consecutive shifts through liberalism and neoliberalism or modernity and postmodernity.⁶ By contrast, another group of critical scholars tends to emphasise the continuities of environmental approaches, noting that the split between modernity and postmodernity has been overstated.⁷ These critical studies tend to focus on the endurance

2. Timothy Morton, “How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Term Anthropocene”, *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (2014), pp. 257–264.

3. Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2016), pp. 161–162.

4. Clive Hamilton, “The Theodicy of the ‘Good Anthropocene’”, *Environmental Humanities*, Vol. 7 (2015), p. 237.

5. Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), p. 7.

6. David Chandler and Julian Reid, *The Neoliberal Subject: Resilience, Adaptation and Vulnerability* (London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016) criticise the evolution from liberal governance to resilience discourses that monitor and enslave societies and downgrade political subjectivities; Karen O’Brien, “Global Environmental Change II: From Adaptation to Deliberate Transformation”, *Progress in Human Geography*, Vol. 36, No. 5 (10 November 2011), pp. 667–676 observes that adaptation to climate change is an idea that was almost unknown to previous approaches to environmental problems; Jonathan Joseph, “Governing Through Failure and Denial: The New Resilience Agenda”, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (2016), pp. 370–390 and Pol Bargaúes-Pedreny *Deferring Peace in International Statebuilding: Difference, Resilience and Critique* (London: Routledge, 2018) argue that logics of governing today no longer work through top-down interventions but instead paradoxically work through selling assured failure as the new hope. See also Angela Oels, “Rendering Climate Change Governable by Risk: From Probability to Contingency”, *Geoforum*, Vol. 45 (2013), pp. 17–29.

7. For example, Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene* (London: Verso, 2016) criticise the idea that modernity was coherent by stating that it was indeed divided between those who assumed that humans could master nature and those who proposed a modest engagement.

of relations of domination and investigate environmental policies through the lens of power/knowledge.⁸ We do not disagree with these observations, but wish to slightly reshuffle the debate. Rather than a neat replacement of modernist programmes by postmodernist ones, or emphasising the permanencies and lack of historical disjuncture between the two, we propose to see contemporary ideas of environmentalism and resulting forms of environmental governance to be the result of an overlap between two previous imaginaries.⁹

We draw upon both the philosophical work on environmentalism of Bruno Latour and Timothy Morton and environmental policy frameworks, and highlight their current similarities. This allows us to offer an interpretation of contemporary rationalisations in environmental thinking and governance. In our sampling of policy reports, documents and programmes we are deliberately eclectic. Rather than following through one particular organisation, we draw upon a variety of sources that are not necessarily linked to each other. Our selection criterion is peculiarity: ways of programming, advising and reasoning that seem different from before, that strike the eye. The wider the sources we can draw upon in which we can find similar ways of rationalising the better for extrapolating wider trends in environmental thinking and governance. Similar to Maarten Hajer some 20 years before us, we wonder how it is possible to somehow “distill seemingly coherent problems” out of a “jamboree” of claims, concerns and actors.¹⁰ How are problems being defined and what has become possible and legitimate to think, suggest and implement across a variety of actors and narratives concerned with environmental problems? This research interest also includes the question as to why certain ways of thinking seem to be gaining traction today, independently of whether similar ideas have been around for longer. However, this way of sampling can by no mean claim to bring forth *the* definite analysis of the way things are. This is not the objective of this article. Rather it is an interpretational offer of which we hope it can fruitfully inform the critical debate on contemporary predicaments in environmental policymaking and their political consequences.

Erik Swyngedouw and Henrik Ernstson, “Interrupting the Anthro-ObScene: Immuno-Biopolitics and Depoliticizing Ontologies in the Anthropocene”, *Theory, Culture & Society*, February 13, 2018 and Frédéric Neyrat, *The Unconstructable Earth: An Ecology of Separation*, trans. Drew S Burk (Fordham University Press, 2018) note that the Anthropocene age is the culmination of the modernist project and argue that asymmetries and exclusions prevail in geoengineering processes.

8. Swyngedouw and Ernstson, *op. cit.*; Carl Death, “Bodies, Populations, Citizens: The Biopolitics of African Environmentalism”, in Sergei Prozorov and Simona Rentea (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Biopolitics* (Abington: Routledge, 2016), pp. 204–222; Eva Lövbrand and Johannes Stripple, “Bringing Governmentality to the Study of Global Climate Governance”, in Johannes Stripple and Harriet Bulkeley (eds.), *Governing the Climate: New Approaches to Rationality, Power and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 27–41; Doerthe Rosenow, “Decolonising the Decolonisers? Of Ontological encounters in the GMO Controversy and Beyond”, *Global Society*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2019); Timothy W. Luke, “Eco-Mangerialism: Environmental Studies as a Power/Knowledge Formation”, in Frank Fisher and Maarten A. Hajer (eds.), *Living with Nature: Environmental Politics as Cultural Discourse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 103–120; Karen Litfin, *Ozone Discourses: Science and Politics in Global Environmental Cooperation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

9. Similarly, Ingrid Boas and Delf Rothe “From Conflict to Resilience? Explaining Recent Changes in Climate Security Discourse and Practice”, *Environmental Politics* (2016), pp. 1–20, find that existing climate security discourses, which diagnose a simple replacement of ideas such as defense or neoliberalism by the rise of resilience, fall short of grasping resilience’s current conceptual flexibility.

10. Maarten A. Hajer, *The Politics of Environmental Discourse: Ecological Modernization and the Policy Process* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 1–2.

In this paper, we heuristically distinguish between three major approaches to environmental issues since the early 1950s, which are described in sections one and two respectively. In the first approach, while environmental concerns were global in reach, the actual, concrete manifestation of these problems was always considered to be local—and, as such, solvable by national, regional or municipal authorities. This approach was essentially anthropocentric, and we heuristically call it the modern approach. It assumed that human lifestyles had caused pollution and ecological degradation but it was also humans who with adequate technologies and, in particular, better knowledge could fix these damages they cause in nature.

In the second approach environmental problems came to be considered as wicked problems: problems so complex that they surpassed human capacities to tackle them. Here humans were still to be blamed for all environmental degradation but it was no longer within their reach to stop and reverse catastrophic ecosystem depletion. We call this approach the postmodern retreat, as the human herself was the problem to overcome and humans somehow needed to disappear to prevent further damage.

The third approach, the incipient one, discussed in section three, we call the “whatever action” approach. Within this approach there is renewed enthusiasm in dealing with what has now become the main environmental concern: climate change. Climate change is also conceptually different to earlier problems in that it is a problem on a planetary scale and there is no longer a clear-cut separation between humans and the environment. Climate change is inextricably linked to the idea of Anthropocene, where anthropogenic changes to earth are fundamental, irretrievable, ontological: the human impact is what fundamentally characterises the functioning (or dysfunction) of the planet. While humans are radically imbricated with ecosystems, these systems constantly adapt and transform. There is not so much a looming catastrophe that needs to be averted but rather the idea that we are already in the middle of it. As such, living in the Anthropocene also seems to open up new horizons of intervention. But the possible field of action as well as the actions taken themselves have become a lot more contingent. In order to capture this development, we introduce the concept of “whatever action” to highlight that there is an emergent imperative that what is being done matters less than the idea that something is being done, that something happens, moves. This third approach, we argue, has become possible through an overlap—rather than replacement—of the modern and postmodern imaginaries of environmental concerns.

Early Environmentalism: Humans Fixing Damage Caused by Humans

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the rate of population growth, consumer spending, the expansion of transport and the increase in industrial production and energy use made visible the human pressures on the environment.¹¹ The rise of environmental concerns was linked to the concrete experience with the pollution and degradation of natural areas. Tourists quickly realised and lamented that wilderness had been lost, while city dwellers protested that they could no longer swim

11. Samuel P. Hays, *A History of Environmental Politics since 1945* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), pp. 15–19.

in the river, as their parents did, due to water contamination. Environmental disasters, such as the oil spill by the supertanker Torrey Canyon on Britain's coasts in 1967 or the well blowout during drilling from an offshore platform that spilled crude oil onto the beaches of Southern California in 1969, increased public awareness and stirred green movements, from conservation commissions to political parties.

The first generation of environmental movements activated public policies, for example, to protect animals, plants, wild rivers and natural areas (see the Wilderness Act of 1964 or the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968 in the United States or the Conservation of Wild Creatures and Wild Plants Act in the United Kingdom in 1975). In its initial formulations, environmentalism was thus conceived as "an issue area" to preserve biodiversity and ensure a healthier life for all, alongside other areas such as economy or security that are included among state public policies.¹² Unlike more recent views of environmentalism as a world-view, initial frameworks were basically local and problem-solving: as *this* community and *this* river need protection, a *new* regulation may be required to prohibit *this* waste-disposal site. Galvanising events and polemics in the United States, like the media campaign to prevent dam construction in the scenic Dinosaur National Monument or the pesticide controversy generated by the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, turned localised environmental matters into nationwide concerns.¹³

In the 1970s, environmental issues began to turn into an international concern. Earth, in the pictures taken by the crews of the Apollo missions when travelling toward the moon, appeared as a beautiful, precious and fragile planet in need of care.¹⁴ An environmental movement started to take hold, seeking to propose an alternative to high politics and the East-West conflict. In critiquing industrialisation, the movement also provided a platform to problematise international inequality between the developed and the developing world.¹⁵ Several major reports were issued at this time that warned of environmental degradation worldwide. In this section, we focus on three: the famous Club of Rome report of 1972 that warned of *The Limits to Growth*; the *Global 2000 Report to the President*, commissioned by the then United States President, Jimmy Carter, originally published in 1980, as well as the 1972 United Nations report on the *Human Environment*.

From today's standpoint there is something remarkable about these reports. They all dramatise the degree of environmental degradation and pollution to a much greater extent than contemporary reports. They warn of the quickly

12. IPCC, "Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Part A: Global and Sectoral Aspects. Contribution of Working Group II to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change" (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); IPCC, "Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change", *Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Fifth Assessment Report* (Geneva: Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2015).

13. Gary Kroll, "The 'Silent Springs' of Rachel Carson: Mass Media and the Origins of Modern Environmentalism", *Public Understanding of Science*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (2001), pp. 403–420; Hal K. Rothman, *The Greening of a Nation?: Environmentalism in the United States Since 1945* (Troy: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1998).

14. For example, see the photographs "Earthrise" (Apollo 8, 1968) and "The Blue Marble" (Apollo 17, 1972) Robert Poole, *Earthrise: How Man First Saw the Earth* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

15. World Commission on Environment and Development (WECD), *Our Common Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

eroding “earth carrying capacity” that affected the availability of basic natural resources.¹⁶ The list of problems is long, ranging from issues of population growth, water shortage, deforestation, deterioration of agricultural soils, acid rain and air and water pollution. Importantly, it appears clear that humans and their way of life are to be blamed for such environmental problems. A snippet from the Global 2000 report on the problem of agricultural soil deterioration demonstrates this well:

Perhaps the most serious environmental development will be an accelerating deterioration and loss of the resources essential for agriculture. This overall development includes soil erosion; loss of nutrients and compaction of soil; increasing salinization of both irrigated land and water used for irrigation ... The food and forestry projection imply increasing pressures on soils throughout the world. Losses due to improper irrigation, reduced fallow periods, cultivation of steep and marginal lands, and reduced vegetative cover can be expected to accelerate ... [H]eavy dependence on chemical fertilizers also leads to losses of soil organic matter ... [M]any of these chemicals produce a wide range of serious environmental consequences some of which adversely affect agricultural production.¹⁷

It is certain techniques (like improper irrigation) together with technological advancements (like chemical fertilisers) that have caused environmental degradation. It is humans’ way of intervening in nature that causes the environment to deteriorate.

However, despite their worldwide nature, these issues and problems here are very concrete, limited, and have a graspable reach. In this context, it seems unproblematic to dramatise:

The available evidence leaves no doubt that the world ... faces enormous, urgent and complex problems in the decades immediately ahead. Prompt and vigorous changes in public policy around the world are needed to avoid or minimize these problems before they become unmanageable.¹⁸

Yet, there is reason for hope. ... [I]n fact, policies are beginning to change. In some areas forests are being replanted after cutting. Some nations are taking steps to reduce soil losses and desertification. Interest in energy conservation is growing ... The need for family planning is slowly understood. Water supplies are being improved and waste treatment systems built.¹⁹

It is acceptable to dramatise because there is firm confidence that humans dispose of the adequate resources and capacities to solve them. People and their machinery are responsible for deforestation and soil erosion, but with reforestation they may provide a solution; desertification is a problem caused by activities like agriculture, but water supply management is the possible solution that also lies within the remit of humans.

The idea sitting behind all environmental solutions is the conservation of an ideal status quo of nature, which in turn serves the purpose of human survival and development. One of the reports in which this idea transpires most starkly is the 1972 UN report on *Human Environment*:

16. Gerald O. Barney, ed., *The Report Global to the President 2000: Entering the Twenty-First Century* (Dexter, MI: Thomson-Shore, Inc., 1988), p. iii; Donella H. Meadows et al., *The Limits to Growth: A Report for The Club of Rome’s Project on the Predicament of Mankind* (New York: Universe Books, 1972).

17. Barney, *op. cit.*, pp. 32–33.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4.

Man is both creature and moulder of his environment, which gives him physical sustenance and affords him with the opportunity for intellectual, moral, social and spiritual growth. In the long, torturous evolution of the human race on this planet a stage has been reached when, through the rapid acceleration of science and technology, man has acquired the power to transform his environment in countless ways on an unprecedented scale. Both aspects of man's environment, the natural and the man-made, are essential to his well-being and the enjoyment of basic human rights.²⁰

Green movements did not imply going back to some primitive nature where humans were pure and acted in tune with the environment (a fantasy which never existed as such). Instead, environmentalism consisted of a myriad of present and future-oriented activities to preserve nature and enrich urban life. Hays explains it this way in the context of American environmental politics:

[T]he interest in nature was forward-looking, an attempt to improve the quality of life of urban Americans. The aim was not to discard urban amenities but instead to add to them by enhancing the role of nature in an urbanized society. Those active in promoting nature protection envisioned a future in which their children would be able to enjoy a quality of life in which nature played an important role, similar to that which they had experienced. Natural values were closely entwined with the values of a material standard of living, and not in contrast or contradiction to them.²¹

Based on humans' superiority over an external nature, fixing environmental problems could be addressed as a mere technicality. The main issue for early environmental policies was epistemological and methodological shortcomings with regard to projecting environmental impacts of human action. After highlighting the immense scale of environmental harm caused by humans, the UN report asserts:

A point has been reached in history when we must shape our actions throughout the world with more prudent care for their environmental consequences. Through ignorance or indifference we can do massive and irreversible harm to the earthly environment on which our life and well-being depend. Conversely, through fuller knowledge and wiser action, we can achieve for ourselves and our posterity a better life in an environment more in keeping with human needs and hopes.²²

Operating with this essentially modern idea of a passive nature serving human purposes, existing epistemological shortcomings were regarded as transitory. What humans did not know now will be known in the future due to technological developments and improved management was the fundamental assumption sitting behind early policy reports. Confident that the horizon of human knowledge would eventually suffice to fully grasp the challenges of environmental change, environmental protection and conservation appear fairly easy. Actions to protect the environment become a technical question of implementation (rather than one of the main barriers, as is the case in today's problematisation of environmental change). Once certainty is obtained regarding the trajectory of environmental change as well as human impact on this trajectory, there is not much of a contested decision to make from the viewpoint of these reports: no essential conflicts regarding the course of action to be expected nor any fundamental limits to solving problems arising out of environmental change to be reckoned with.

20. UN, "Report of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment" (Stockholm: United Nations, 1972), p. 3.

21. Hays, *op. cit.*, pp. 28–29.

22. UN, "Conference on Human Environment", *op. cit.*, p. 3.

Waning Confidence: The “Sustainability Gap” and the Human Retreat

The discovery of the “ozone hole” over the Antarctica by Cambridge scientists in 1985 made visible the fragility of the ozone layer and the global effects of halogenated man-made ozone depleting substances.²³ The scale was no longer local. Environmental issues required a more comprehensive endeavour and a shift in human mentality.

Throughout the 1990s and particularly the 2000s environmental concerns have been conquering the national and international agendas. Rather than an issue area to be considered or ignored, environmental concerns have devoured all other policy fields. The economy must become “green”,²⁴ development and climate change become inextricably linked,²⁵ the private sphere and global issues collapse into each other.²⁶ Everyone is inextricably involved and it is now the dangers of a changing climate that looms over humanity. The power of concerns with anthropogenic environmental change springs from its scale: in difference to any other policy field, this one is both singular and manifold, it is global as well as absolutely essential (if not addressed it affects the fundamentals of life).

The more environmental concerns are on the national and international agenda (usually in form of climate change), the more they turn into a “wicked problem”.²⁷ This wickedness relates to a noticeable change in the nature of the problem: other than ecosystem degradation, pollution and deforestation, climate change cannot be localised or delimited, it lacks an entry or anchor point from which to tackle it. As it seems in a way spaceless and intangible, it is per se difficult to address. As such, the modern confidence in the capacities of men to know and fix what they have caused is eroding even quicker than earth’s carrying capacities. First, it is the level of inaction that increasingly worries international policymakers, then it is also the belief in the possibility of firm knowledge that is waning.

While certainties are increasingly difficult to obtain, the more pressing problem is the failure to implement environmentally protective measures on a scale where a difference could be made. As the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) points out: “[T]here are significant knowledge gaps and impediments to flows of information that can constrain adaptation [to climate change], but knowledge in itself is not sufficient to drive adaptive responses”.²⁸ This critique of

23. J.C. Farman, B.G. Gardiner, and J.D. Shanklin, “Large Losses of Total Ozone in Antarctica Reveal Seasonal ClO_x/NO_x Interaction”, *Nature*, Vol. 315 (16 May 1985), pp. 207–210.

24. OECD, “Towards Green Growth: A Summary for Policy Makers” (Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2011); OECD, “Putting Green Growth at the Heart of Development: Summary for Policymakers” (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2013).

25. OECD, “Putting Green Growth”, *op. cit.*; UNDP, “Human Development Report 2007/2008: Fighting Climate Change: Human Solidarity in a Divided World” (New York, NY: United Nations Development Programme, 2007); UN, “Resilient People, Resilient Planet: A Future Worth Choosing” (New York: United Nations Secretary-General’s High-level Panel on Global Sustainability, 2012); World Bank, “Sustainable Development in a Dynamic World: Transforming Institutions, Growth, and Quality of Life” (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2003); World Bank, “World Development Report 2010: Development and Climate Change” (Washington, DC, 2010).

26. Noortje Marres, “Testing Powers of Engagement: Green Living Experiments, the Ontological Turn and the Undoability of Involvement”, *European Journal of Social Theory*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (1 February 2009), pp. 117–133.

27. IPCC, “Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability”, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 911.

inaction is echoed by other reports: “in recent years there has been a growing awareness that scientific knowledge alone is inadequate for solving the climate crisis”.²⁹

The language in these more recent reports has already been shifting markedly away from solving environmental problems and the idea of ecosystem conservation toward adaptation to climate change. Underpinning this shift is the increasing acceptance of climate change’s irreversibility and even unstopability.³⁰ But even the considerably lowered expectations of adaptation and mitigation prove to be unattainable.³¹ The IPCC, for instance, observes that not even small-scale results are being achieved with regard to sustainable adaptation to environmental change (let alone any solution to the climate change crisis):

The numerous assessments that have been carried out have led to increased awareness among decision makers and stakeholders of climate risks and adaptation needs and options. But this awareness is often not translated into the implementation of *even simple adaptation measures*.³²

Despite the rise of climate change into the single most pressing global issue of our times, humans seem to be utterly failing to address it in any substantial way or adopt more sustainable ways of living. Even though it seems pertinent to act, little is being done.

As the insight into a “yawning ‘sustainability gap’” is settling in,³³ policy advisors and scholars are, of course, asking themselves what the reasons are for the gap between scientific knowledge and current policies. Four major constraints have often been highlighted that are worth considering: the divorce between environmental responsibility and the market logic, the distance between green concerns and politics, cultural constraints and path-dependencies, and more fundamentally, humanness or humankind’s way of existing.

First, there is the reluctance of the private sector to engage:

Despite broad-scale recognition of the need to adapt, such as the World Economic Forum’s (2012) ranking of the failure to adapt as one of the highest global risks, ... and despite some examples of

29. Douglas J. Nakashima et al., *Weathering Uncertainty: Traditional Knowledge for Climate Change Assessment and Adaptation* (Paris and Darwin: UNESCO and UNU, 2012), p. 28.

30. Karen O’Brien has made a similar observation:

[T]here has been a significant increase in research on adaptation in recent years, as a result of the growing acknowledgement that some climate change is inevitable due to past emissions and system lags, regardless of current mitigation efforts. (Karen O’Brien, *op. cit.*, p. 669)

31. The notion of “loss and damage”, which has gained currency in recent UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) frameworks points to the same problem (see UNFCCC, “Report of the Executive Committee of the Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage associated with Climate Change Impacts”, FCCC/SB/2014/4 (24 October 2014)). “Loss and damage” refers to “negative effects of climate variability and climate change that people have not been able to cope with or adapt to” (Koko Warner and Kees van der Geest, “Loss and Damage from Climate Change: Local-level Evidence from Nine Vulnerable Countries”, *International Journal of Global Warming*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (2013), pp. 367–386; see also Koko Warner, Kees van der Geest, and Sönke Kreft, “Pushed to the Limit: Evidence of Climate Change-related Loss and Damage When People Face Constraints and Limits to Adaptation”, *Report No. 11* (Bonn: United Nations University Institute of Environment and Human Security, 2013).

32. IPCC, “Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability”, *op. cit.*, p. 852, added emphasis.

33. Noel Castree et al., “Changing the Intellectual Climate”, *Nature Climate Change*, Vol. 4 (27 August 2014), p. 764.

private sector engagement in adaptation, most assessments conclude that action in each of the potential arenas has been slow to emerge and that sharing of knowledge and experience has been limited.³⁴

This reluctance by the private sector is not very surprising since the profit logic according to which it functions stands in a fundamental contradiction to sustainability and climate change mitigation. Until today “policy and market conditions may be a stronger driver of behavior than the observed climate itself”, concedes the IPCC.³⁵ More than simply blaming the private sector and its actors directly, the IPCC here observes that constraints on climate change mitigation and adaptation measures emerge substantially from the market logic of the economic system itself.

Next to the logic of market economy, it is political systems—and here particularly representative democracy—that prevents climate change policies to take hold. As both the World Bank and the UNDP problematise, “carbon cycles do not follow political cycles”.³⁶ On this issue of contradictory logics between the environment and politics, the World Bank elaborates:

[S]tandard adaptation measures can fail because the public (the voter) often fails to think in preventive terms. So decision makers neglect prevention and preparedness because these issues do not win votes. In turn, decision makers’ realization that disaster relief has higher political payoffs than preparedness closes the circle of moral hazard. ... This realization works against policy change and reinforces bad policies.³⁷

Yet, in digging into the reasons for implementation failures, the constraints to adequate action become ever more fundamental. Not only economy and politics are to blame. Thirdly, it is also path-dependencies as well as people’s culture and the way it shapes behaviour that stands in the way of decision-making and policy-thinking to address climate change. For example, the IPCC criticises that thinking in terms of a straightforward line from gaining firm knowledge to the technicality of policy implementation is essentially flawed. This previous approach must necessarily be unsuccessful because it did not take into account major differences between contexts, in which humans are embedded.

Decision-making under climate change has largely been modelled on the scientific understanding of the cause-and-effect process whereby increasing greenhouse gas emissions cause climate change ... The resulting decision-making guidance on impacts and adaptation follows a rational-linear process that identifies potential risks and then evaluates management responses. This process has been challenged on the grounds that it does not adequately address the diverse contexts within which climate decisions are being made, often neglects existing decision-making processes, and overlooks many cultural and behavioral aspects of decision making.³⁸

Still, path-dependencies, context and culture are not the end of the line. There is a fourth constraint on action. The deeper the digging goes into reasons for the

34. IPCC, “Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability”, *op. cit.*, p. 843; see also, OECD, “Towards Green Growth?: Tracking Progress” (Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2015).

35. IPCC, “Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability”, *op. cit.*, p. 849.

36. UNDP, “Human Development Report”, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

37. World Bank, “World Development Report 2010”, *op. cit.*, pp. 337–338.

38. IPCC, “Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability”, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

sustainability gap, the more it is the humanness of humans that comes to the fore as the central constraint to successful climate change policy adaptation. Most clearly this can be seen in the 2015 World Development Report, titled *Mind, Society, and Behavior*, which links policy constraints directly with the limits of the human mind.³⁹ It problematises barriers to understanding as well as acting, due to the finite human capacity to be concerned. This limit goes beyond politics, culture and context; it is an essential limitation ingrained into us, we are told, simply by being human:

Our evolution as a species has shaped the way our brains work. We are particularly good at acting on threats that can be linked to a human face ... that challenge our moral framework ... or that evoke recent personal experience. The slow pace of climate change as well as the delayed, intangible ... nature of risks, simply do not move us.⁴⁰

It may be questionable whether this finite capacity to worry is indeed biological, as the World Bank presents it to be, or whether this has more to do with a notion of personhood associated with individual subjectivities in the Western-modern tradition. As proponents of “deep ecology” have long advocated, it may be necessary to overcome the “anthropocentric” and “narrow, atomistic, particle-like conception of self” and replaced it with

the view that our sense of self can be as expansive as our identifications and that a realistic appreciation of the ways in which we are intimately bound up with *the* world around us inevitably leads to wider and deeper identification.⁴¹

For subjects of finite worry, however, being concerned and climate change simply do not go together.⁴² In other words, humans have not just caused climate change because of their actions; it is their humanness that has caused such a fundamental imprint on earth.⁴³ This growing awareness—that it is not simply the deeds of modern man, separate from nature, that are the problem, but humanness as an inextricable part of earth—impels humans to retreat from the foreground, to refrain from doing anything. Human’s humanness is becoming the central predicament in the age of the Anthropocene. As soon as the environment ceased to be about local surroundings and turned into a global totality, humans become the wrong kind of creatures—too limited in all their capacities—to deal with this planetary dimension.

The End of Pessimism: Ecological Thinking and “Whatever Action”

Current climate change policies operate within the contradiction of human hubris and human self-hate. On the one hand, they operate within a postmodern consciousness that in order to save the planet, humans would need to disappear. On the other hand, the modern impetus of fixing things and doing something about climate change is still prevalent. What then are the parameters within which this

39. World Bank, “World Development Report 2015: Mind, Society and Behavior” (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2015).

40. *Ibid.*, pp. 324–325.

41. Warwick Fox, “Transpersonal Ecology: ‘Psychologizing’ Ecophilosophy”, *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (1990), pp. 89–90.

42. This conclusion is also reached by a group of scholars working on the shift from Holocene to Anthropocene. They have conducted various experiments with the goal of changing perceptions but the results “reveal that old intellectual habits can die hard” Castree et al., *op. cit.*, p. 766.

43. See Benjamin Grant, *Overview: A New Perspective of Earth* (Amphato Books, 2016).

contradiction can be operationalised? What options are there for contemporary climate change policies facing both the remnants of the failure of human hubris and the barriers posed by human incapacity? And how is this transpiring from current policy programming under climate change? Before addressing these questions, we briefly turn to the writings of Latour and Morton on political ecology. These are key for understanding where previous environmental debates got stuck and detect emerging alternatives in policymaking.

Latour worries about the continued marginality of the environmental movement and green parties in Europe. He explains the misfortune of political ecology by identifying that environmental concerns have been either treated as another area of public administration to be regulated on an everyday basis, or treated as an anti-humanist global plea, which has little traction among the public.⁴⁴ On the one hand, traditional ecology has reduced environmental problems to the domestic realm, where a particular natural area or national heritage is usually defended against the actions of invasive agents like mining enterprises; or reduced to the industrial regime, where ecology is “business as usual” and “the health of rivers is now monitored like the health of the workforce”.⁴⁵ On the other hand, critical perspectives of problem-solving ecology place nature before human actions. These seek to include more and more non-humans and respect their life-styles, as they call for slowing down all human activities. “It is difficult”, Latour ironically claims, “to present oneself in front of one’s electorate with a programme that envisages the possibility of making them disappear in favour of a ‘congress of animals’ who don’t even vote or pay taxes!”.⁴⁶ The two “failed” environmentalist perspectives reported by Latour could be said to coincide with the two perspectives examined above. The former committed the sin of human hubris, the second, of self-hate.

An alternative ecology, for Latour, is not drawn out in the abstract. It would require an ethnographic immersion into laboratories and study the political forces that sustain them to see how truths are produced, as he famously did at the dawn of his career.⁴⁷ In other words, it would require us to follow the everyday translations made by planners of natural parks, local authorities, conservation groups, cartographers, green parties and forest rangers, all associated with crowds of non-human entities, and see that they are not representing Humanity, nor defending Nature. Unlike earlier frameworks of environmentalism, which assumed to be protecting nature, greening the Earth, or saving humankind from apocalyptic scenarios, alternative ecology needs to comprehend that environmental practices unfold without telos. If we could recognise that the practice of political ecology “buries itself in controversies, it plunges into socio-technical imbroglis, it takes control of more and more entities with more and more diverse destinies, and it knows less with certainty what they all have in common”, argues Latour,⁴⁸ a new ecological regime could be imagined. The following quote—while somewhat lengthy—clarifies Latour’s political ecology:

44. Bruno Latour, “To Modernize or to Ecologize? That’s the Question”, in Noel Castree and Bruce Willemis-Braun (eds.), *Remaking Reality: Nature at the Millennium* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 223.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 226.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 234.

47. Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).

48. Latour, “To Modernize or to Ecologize?”, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

In the new regime, everything is complicated and every decision demands caution and prudence. One can never go straight or fast. It is impossible to go on without circumspection and without modesty. We now know, for example, that if it is necessary to take account of everything along the length of a river, we will not succeed with a hierarchised system that might give the impression, on paper, of being a wonderful science with wonderful feedback loops but which will not generate new political life. To obtain a stirring up of politics, you have to add uncertainty so that the actors, who until now knew what a river could and could not tolerate, begin to entertain sufficient doubts. The word “doubt” is in fact inadequate, since it gives the impression of scepticism, whereas it is more a case of enquiry, research and experimentation. In short, it is a collective experimentation on the possible associations between things and people without any of these entities being used, from now on, as a simple means by the others.⁴⁹

Guidelines have purposely been abandoned, but Latour actively encourages actions, even if they generate further unanticipated effects, even if a deep uncertainty haunts the whole process, even if everything is complicated. It seems ecology without certainty, ideals or goals. It resembles “ecology without nature”, as Morton put it.⁵⁰

Similar to Latour, Morton appears frustrated with the routes taken by political ecology. Morton conceives hyperobjects as “things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans”.⁵¹ Comets, black holes, the Solar System, as well as the Uranium, the biosphere, earthquakes or global warming are considered hyperobjects. Human-made plastic bags, nuclear radiation or capitalist machinery, too. The local manifestation of hyperobjects, according to Morton,⁵² makes humans aware that there are things they cannot fathom, let alone access or solve. This awareness is not the same as when early environmentalists worried about the massive growth in industrial waste or witnessed the slow degradation of natural areas. It is also different to observing that environmental problems are complex and global, as when, for example, scientist noted the appearance of an “ozone hole” in the Earth’s polar regions. More than that, hyperobjects force humans to see that there is no possible conceptualisation of the world, the environment or nature, but a fundamental gap between humans and things; indeed, a gap between every-thing: “Hyperobjects provoke *irreductionist* thinking, that is, they present us with scalar dilemmas in which ontotheological statements about which thing is the most real (ecosystem, world, environment, or conversely, individual) become impossible”.⁵³ Hyperobjects like global warming are so large that they “humiliate” traditional environmentalism and its assumptions of human control over the fate of the Earth, as well as relieve the postmodern anxiety about human incapacities to tackle global warming. Hyperobjects defeat human reasoning, finally shattering the modernist spaceship.

“What if hyperobjects finally force us to realize the truth of the word *humiliation* itself, which means being brought low, being brought down to earth?” asks Morton to introduce a novel ecological awareness.⁵⁴ As hyperobjects proliferate, human worry withers. There is no formula to comprehend global warming, as no one

49. *Ibid.*, p. 238.

50. Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2007).

51. Morton, *Hyperobjects*, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 19, original emphasis.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 17 original emphasis.

can narrate the origin of a travelling comet, as no one can relate to the life of the arche-fossil, as nothing can access the being of another object.⁵⁵ Morton assumes this insurmountable rift between humans and hyperobjects and immediately finds a new home, devoid of worry:

The more I know about global warming, the more I realize how pervasive it is. The more I discover about evolution, the more I realize how my entire physical being is caught in its meshwork. Immediate, intimate symptoms of hyperobjects are vivid and often painful, yet they carry with them a trace of unreality. I am not sure where I am anymore. I am at home in feeling not at home.⁵⁶

What matters for this paper is that Morton transcends traditional framings of environmentalism and anticipates a new ecology for the Anthropocene, a time in which hyperobjects put an end to the possibility of solving problems.

The current age is marked by an ecological emergency and the limited powers of humans. For Morton, hyperobjects force us to act, but we cannot act and get it right:

If even ... no ethical or political decision can be pure and free of compromise in the time of hyperobjects, then we are really making some progress. The asymmetry between action and reflection gives us a strong feeling of the uncanny. We know more than ever before what things are, how they work, how to manipulate them. Yet for this very reason, things become more, rather than less, strange. Increasing science is not increasing demystification. The ethical asymmetry is a function of an ontological asymmetry between humans and nonhumans.⁵⁷

The more we know about global warming, the stranger it becomes. The more policies are implemented, the less solvable it appears. Ecological awareness, he explains, can be compared to a mixture of “tenderness and horror, weirdness and joy”, much like Björk’s music.⁵⁸ It is like a feeling of permanent “jet lag”, as he expresses in his recent art exhibition to think about humans’ relation to an unpredictable future.⁵⁹

In the rest of the section, we argue that there are indicators that some policy advisors and policymakers are beginning to draw similar conclusions to Latour and Morton. That is, we observe that they execute a very logical move because they

55. Following Kant, Morton and other speculative realists assume that the world is independent from human experience. Some like Meillassoux or Brassier have given scientific reasons, noticing that entities abound way before or after human beings inhabit the planet (Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (London: Continuum, 2008); Rai Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). Others, like Harman, point to ontological principles, as no theory or praxis can gain genuine access to the being of objects (Graham Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures* (Winchester and Washington: Zero Books, 2010). Unlike Kant, these authors have extended the assumption of the mind-independent existence of entities to object-object relations, downgrading the status of human consciousness.

56. Morton, *Hyperobjects*, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

57. *Ibid.*, pp. 160–161.

58. Alex Blasdel, “A Reckoning for Our Species’: The Philosopher Prophet of the Anthropocene”, *The Guardian*, 15 June 2017, sec. The Long Read, available <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/15/timothy-morton-anthropocene-philosopher>>.

59. See exhibition in Centre of Contemporary Culture in Barcelona (CCCB) (<<http://lab.cccb.org/en/a-ministry-for-thinking-the-future/>>). For a critique, see Kai Koddenbrock and Mario Schmidt, “Against Understanding: The Techniques of Shock and Awe in Jesuit Theology, Neoliberal Thought and Timothy Morton’s Philosophy of Hyperobjects”, *Global Society*, Vol. 33, No 1 (2019).

face the same predicament, which consists of ironing out a mixture of modern and postmodern frustrations. This move is driven by three considerations:

- (1) Since our capacity to generate reliable knowledge is limited, knowledge can no longer be the basis of climate change policies and actions.
- (2) Since our capacity to worry is problematically finite and too limited to address climate change, “worrying” on a planetary dimension can no longer be the key driver of climate change policies, measures and programmes.
- (3) Since our capacity to halt climate change is limited and our worry lessens, taking action in terms of climate change must mean something different than halting it.

In other words, climate change programmes are now designed without being able to generate reliable knowledge, without worrying too much, particularly not about the planetary dimension, and with a modified understanding of taking action. These considerations are addressed in turn.

The acknowledgement that climate change constitutes a “wicked problem” is crucial here. A problem’s wickedness means that it would be futile to seek to eliminate it from the world; it is unsolvable, irreducible and part of reality. So wicked problems are problems to work out of from the inside, rather than from the outside. As Morton puts it, “we find ourselves like prisoners waking up inside the ecological mesh of lifeforms”. He reminds: “Inside the hyperobject, we are always in the wrong”.⁶⁰ Once again, the IPCC report, through a quote by Stephen Gardiner on the precautionary principle, sets the stage here: “Even our best theories face basic and often severe difficulties addressing basic issues ... such as scientific uncertainty, intergenerational equity, contingent persons, nonhuman animals, and nature. But climate change involves all of these matters and more”.⁶¹ The acceptance that our epistemological approaches even fail to produce solutions to basic climatic issues runs like a red thread through IPCC outputs:

Complex interactions among multiple climatic and non-climatic influences changing over time lead to persistent uncertainties, which in turn lead to the possibility of surprises.⁶²

Barriers to understanding trade-offs of the immediate benefits of localized adaptation and the longer term global benefits of mitigation, coupled with the limitation of models to simulate the intricacies of the interaction of the two present a challenge to designing and implementing an “optimal mix” of response strategies.⁶³

As uncertainty is accepted, preoccupations begin to disappear. The current mood is one of affirmation, avowing grief and loss: we will remain here caught in global warming in an age of emergency.⁶⁴ In the face of persistent irreducible uncertainties, the emerging response strategy is precisely *not* to pursue an “optimal mix”.

Contemporary climate change policy outputs have realised that it is impossible to understand and act upon a planetary dimension. Rather than asking us to deal

60. Morton, *Hyperobjects*, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

61. Gardiner 2006, cit. in IPCC, “Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability”, *op. cit.*, p. 925.

62. IPCC, “Synthesis Report”, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

63. IPCC, “Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability”, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

64. See Pol Bargañés-Pedreny, “From Critique to Affirmation in International Relations”, *Global Society*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2019) pp. 1–11.

with climate change either as a local problem (as in the modernist framework) or as a global problem (as in the postmodern framework), the *planetary* scale provides a platform in which both approaches, modernist and postmodernist, in their contradictory nature and despite their failure, can nevertheless be combined. The global dimension tells us not to exclude anything, while the modern spectre tells us to do something. The rally cry for today's battle within (rather than against) climate change then becomes: do not limit things down by pursuing delimited and limiting goals. Grasping the global dimension of climate change as such is no longer necessary to do something under climate change conditions. In this sense, climate change becomes a window of opportunity, rather than a barrier, for taking action.⁶⁵

Having accepted the wickedness of the problem, new spaces for doing something open up, while always remaining open to surprises and ambushes. Rather than an "optimal mix" what is now called for is a "whatever action"—a mix of practices as varied as possible which carry uncertain results. "Whatever action" combines the idea of contingency, on the one hand, and the idea of purpose on the other. The emphasis is not put on "whatever" alone, as if any option were tolerable, as if defeat had soaked up the esteem of policymakers and nothing else could be uttered. Neither is "action" the relevant word, as if they knew how to get things right, as if their courage and determination could have some reward. The apparent contradiction between the two words discloses a new vocabulary.

Despite major differences between different schools of thought within action theory,⁶⁶ there is broad consensus on two aspects: first, to qualify as an action, an event or process (on this opinions diverge) must have a reason in the sense of having a "because".⁶⁷ The "because" makes action something non-random, non-accidental. Second, for there to be action, there must be an agent. Someone must have willed, or at least started, what then qualifies as an action; otherwise it would be simply a process or an event.⁶⁸ Action, in other words, is delimited and distinct. It has a particular and concrete motivation—the "because"—central to it. An action is *this* happening, rather than something else, because an agent

65. For instance, policy advice and research that observes fundamental barriers and limits to adaptation see the solution in adopting even more ambitious mitigation (Warner, van der Geerst, and Kreft, *op. cit.*, p. 26; Robert W. Kates, William R. Travis, and Thomas J. Wilbanks, "Transformational Adaptation When Incremental Adaptations to Climate Change Are Insufficient", *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, Vol. 109, No.19 (2012), pp. 7156–7161). To address the problem that adaptation may have its limits, more adaptation is called upon. For similar remarks see Karin Bäckstrand and Eva Löwbrand, "The Road to Paris: Contending Climate Change Governance Discourses in the Post-Copenhagen Era", *Journal of Environmental Policy and Planning* (2016), doi: 10.1080/1523908X.2016.1150777; Hugh C. Dyer, "Climate Anarchy: Creative Disorder in World Politics", *International Political Sociology*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2014), pp. 182–200.

66. The question of the nature of an action, of what characterizes an action (rather than for example, an event) has produced a veritable philosophical debate and has even led to the emergence of action theory as a philosophical subject. The naturalistic approach in action theory sees cause as the defining principle of action, whereas the teleological approach sees end or purpose to be its essence. The former therefore considers the nature of action to be located prior to its execution; the latter considers the nature of action to be defined by its futurity. Christoph Horn and Guido Löhrer, "Einleitung: Die Wiederentdeckung Teleologischer Handlungserklärungen", in Christoph Horn and Guido Löhrer (eds.), *Gründe Und Zwecke: Texte Zur Aktuellen Handlungstheorie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2010), pp. 7–45.

67. Horn and Löhrer, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

68. For Aristotle, "what makes an event an action is that it is an exercise of a certain kind of causal power". See Ursula Coope and Christopher Shields, "Aristotle on Action", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary*, Vol. LXXXI (2007), p. 112.

or several agents started it. Acting introduces *this* at the expense of all that *could have been*.

The notion of “whatever”, in contrast, can be defined as “that which is neither particular nor general, individual nor generic”.⁶⁹ The idea of “whatever” refuses distinctions and categorisations. No purpose, end, cause or reason can be ascribed to “whatever”. With the contingency of “whatever” there is no longer a categorical difference between all that could be and that which is. The notion of “whatever” denotes being “such as it is”.⁷⁰ This means that it is without qualifications, nothing is excluded or essentially included. In denoting being such as it is, “whatever” eclipses the possibility of theorising, of making a plan about how things are and how they should be. Instead, it necessarily leads into the realm of pure practices, as Latour imagined for his alternative ecology, including all those practices that are not yet. In a key difference, therefore, to action, it has no essence or essential content. “Whatever”, in the end, extends all that actually is and is being done into infinity, whereas “action” erases all that could have been. The two ideas therefore stand in stark opposition.

It is precisely because of this contradiction that we find that thinking in terms of “whatever action” best enables us to grasp contemporary environmental policy-making and associated projects. While “action” qualifies and modifies the notion of “whatever”, this is also the case vice versa: “whatever” qualifies and modifies the notion of “action”. Key here is a double anxiety that pervades contemporary environmental policies. A fear of closure and exclusion coupled with a fear of inaction.

“Whatever action” therefore has come forth as the current way to counter both anxieties. Climate change policymaking today seeks to keep open all that could be (counter-intuitively) through action. It does so by incessant action—through a multi-level multiplicity of (micro-) projects that ideally lead to ever new projects.⁷¹ Taking “whatever action” is the implementation of Morton’s jet-lag condition. The goal of taking “whatever action” thus is to never determine what is ultimately right or wrong for mitigating the impact of global warming because this is difficult, if not impossible to know. In this way, the lack of knowledge does not lead to inaction and hesitation. The contrary is the case, today’s climate change policies seem to point towards an attempt to turn the actuality of “action” into the radical potentiality of “whatever”, as if seeking to make real all that could be. The purpose of “action” thus is to make “whatever” a reality; and the “whatever” keeps global climate change “action” going. The “whatever” says that “action” in the name of climate change is not allowed to stop—to make a final decision on what is and should be done.

Launching climate-related initiatives, programmes or projects becomes more important than achieving any decisive results. Rather than acting quickly, as in the “time to act” slogans of climate change protesters,⁷² practitioners are called

69. Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 107.

70. Jenny Edkins, “Whatever Politics”, in Matthew Calarco and Steven DeCaroli (eds.), *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 73.

71. For example, see Sarah Orleans Reed et al., “Resilience Projects as Experiments: Implementing Climate Change Resilience in Asian Cities”, *Climate and Development*, Vol. 7, No. 5 (20 October 2015), pp. 469–480.

72. Karl Mathiesen, “Time to Act: Climate Change Protesters March in London”, *The Guardian*, 7 March 2015.

upon to act with precaution in a strange context where their initiatives cannot have predictable effects. The important point for “whatever action”, for not closing the window of opportunity that the ungraspable planetary dimension of climate change provides us with, is therefore not to have a conventional framework for action. It tells us to immerse ourselves into pure, but prudent, practices. With “whatever action”, the notion of adaptation equally opens up to the infinite.

Certainly, many of the programmes conducted under the umbrella of climate change adaptation seem to look strikingly familiar to those early environmentalist ones. “Ecomodernism”, which believes that humans and their technological artefacts may transform nature to improve life and protect natural systems, is alive and kicking.⁷³ For instance, regreening of the Sahel in Western Africa is presented as an example of transformative adaptation to climate change.⁷⁴ One could imagine similar efforts to have occurred 30 years before under the conservation paradigm when it was local soil erosion and desertification that concerned national and international policymakers. This similarity should not surprise us. It goes to show that the spectre of modern thinking indeed still seeps through climate change policies today. Yet, upon closer examination, there is a difference to conservation programmes of the 1970s. The difference does not lie in the individual programmes themselves but rather in the expected outcomes and overall objectives. There are less-goal-oriented actions and there is a degree of prudence and cautiousness.⁷⁵

“Whatever action” as a way of dealing with wickedness as a reality can be said to sit behind, for instance, a comprehensive project funded by the influential Future Earth initiative. In this project, Elena Bennett and colleagues seek to find out what might be good about the Anthropocene rather than catastrophic. Finding the “good Anthropocene” is all about launching as many grass-root initiatives (“seeds”) as possible. Such seeds are sown through all sorts of bottom-up initiatives and particularly through “participatory scenario exercises”.⁷⁶ These scenarios

might explore the ability of previously unimagined combinations of seeds to succeed in a world of diverse Anthropocene challenges, creating novelty from such combinations. Because the seeds are themselves diverse, the scenarios created from them can more easily represent diverse views of what a *good* Anthropocene might mean.⁷⁷

Similarly, after decades of rather unsuccessful development programming and in the light of the new Sustainable Development Goals under climate change, the UNDP has adopted a novel development practice. In 2014 the UNDP established an Innovation Facility to foster and fund micro-projects that centre on technological, financial and social innovation—like the use of drones and remote sensing for detecting forest fires, the introduction of a mobile phone app to manage electronic waste or an Internet platform through which small projects can be crowd-funded.⁷⁸

73. See the “Ecomodernist manifesto” of 2015 (<<http://www.ecomodernism.org/manifesto-english/>>). For a critique, see Hamilton, *op. cit.*

74. Kates, Travis, and Wilbanks, *op. cit.*, p. 7157.

75. Bruno Latour, “A Cautious Prometheus? A Few Steps Toward a Philosophy of Design with Special Attention to Peter Sloterdijk”, in Willem Shinkel and Liesbeth Noordegraaf-Eelens (eds.), *In Media Res: Peter Sloterdijk's Spherological Poetics of Being* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011), p. 153.

76. Elena Bennett et al. “Bright Spots: Seeds of a Good Anthropocene”, *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, Vol. 14, No. 8 (2016), pp. 441–448, 445.

77. *Ibid.*, p. 446.

78. UNDP, “Spark, Scale, Sustain”, *op. cit.*

What becomes clear from both the immense variety of projects as well as their micro-scale nature is that the rationale is not to innovate for greater goals or actual objectives to tackle climate change. Rather the emphasis is on innovation as such: innovate—not to achieve something specific, but simply for the sake of it. Moreover, prudence and precaution are built into innovation by scale: all of these projects are located at a very local, very immediate and everyday level. Like the seed-sowing approach described above, the imperative here is not to exclude anything, while making sure that something is being done as a way of working within a wicked reality.

The IPCC report also hints towards this new climate change agenda when putting the management of “current and future climate risk” at the forefront of its current assessment report.⁷⁹ Here the IPCC has revised its notion of risk: while it previously operated with a linear understanding of risk as an impending perilous event, it now acknowledges that the concept and understanding of risk is much more complex.⁸⁰ Rather than concrete and material, these risks are abstract and disembodied, and they are permanent rather than temporary.⁸¹ Operating with a more complicated notion of risk “warns against a uniform epistemic approach”.⁸² The danger of adopting a uniform approach lies in “widespread misunderstanding and disagreement”—that is, the more is being neglected in uniform epistemic approaches, the more these neglects begin to haunt, thwart and boycott attempts to foster climate change adaptation policies. Consequently, the IPCC recommends much the same rethinking as the Future Earth research group (“seed sowing”) and the UNDP (“innovation”):

In complex situations, sociocultural and cognitive-behavioral contexts become central to decision-making. This requires combining the scientific understanding of risk with how risks are framed and perceived by individuals, organizations, and institutions ... For that reason, formal risk assessment is moving from a largely technocratic exercise carried out by experts to a more participatory process of decision-making.⁸³

Under conditions of uncertainty, nothing and no one can legitimately be excluded without the danger of producing unintended and unforeseeable consequences hanging like Damocles’ sword over all measures and programming. Not doing anything is not an option either because of the tenacious modern idea that humans are responsible and that they need to do something to avert catastrophic environmental change. Not limiting anything down and keeping all possibilities open without, however, advocating retreat from climate change policies, necessarily must lead to a more participatory approach.

In addition to participation averting the risk of exclusion, the idea of developing resilience—generally seen as the capacity to bounce back from, adapt to and thrive on disruptive events and stresses—becomes imperative.⁸⁴ Rather than

79. IPCC, “Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability”, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

80. Ulrich Beck, “Emancipatory Catastrophism: What Does It Mean to Climate Change and Risk Society?”, *Current Sociology*, Vol. 63, No. 1 (15 December 2014), pp. 75–88.

81. John Handmer and Paul James, “Trust Us and Be Scared: The Changing Nature of Contemporary Risk”, *Global Society*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (1 January 2007), p. 120.

82. IPCC, “Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability”, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

83. *Ibid.*, 201.

84. Katrina Brown, “Global Environmental Change I: A Social Turn for Resilience?”, *Progress in Human Geography*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (1 August 2013), pp. 107–117.

implementing specific technocratic policies, climate change resilience programmes integrate diverse knowledge types, work at different scales and admit that the most important outcomes are the unexpected ones.⁸⁵ Resilience constitutes the core capacity in living in and through a wicked problem reality.⁸⁶ As the IPCC points out, “developing resilience can be seen as managing a range of potential risks that are largely unpredictable”.⁸⁷ The cautiousness implied in seeking to avert exclusion and analytical reductionism requires constant reassessment of the micro-practices, participatory initiatives and other risk management programmes. “Iterative risk management involves an ongoing process of assessment, action, reassessment and response ... that will continue—in the case of many climate-related decisions—for decades if not longer”.⁸⁸ These actions are open-ended and experimental, forcing into being all that could be.

Conclusion

Environmental debates and climate change policymaking may often sound like a never-changing tune. We are constantly reminded that actions need to be taken and every foreword in respective policy reports urges all stakeholders, be they companies, governments, households or individuals to act environmentally sensitively and call for full engagement in the face of climate change. It seems difficult to imagine any other topic that moves or is supposed to move globally. In this article, we have argued however, that there are substantial modifications in the environmental protection theme. While the music is still playing, the tune has become a different one.

Central to detecting the changing tune of today’s climate change frameworks is to look closely at preceding problematisations and rationalisations. We have heuristically distinguished a modern and a postmodern approach to environmental protection. Whereas the former was confident that actions can and should be taken to halt environmental degradation because man mastered nature, the latter increasingly saw humans as the greatest problem for planet Earth.

Today’s environmental policy-making, we have argued, is the result of this irresolvable intersection between the modern ethos with its idea of human cause and human capacity to solve environmental degradation and the postmodern retreat in which the human should best disappear if the planet is to be saved. Both approaches loom in their respective failure and we are unable to rid ourselves from their shackles: neither was the confidence in mastering nature called for nor could humans unbecome humans. Out of these spectres of failure that haunt our understanding of ourselves and the capacities we have—or lack—to address climate change, the current approach of “whatever action” is emerging. “Whatever

85. Reed et al., *op. cit.*; Juergen Weichselgartner and Ilan Kelman, “Geographies of Resilience: Challenges and Opportunities of a Descriptive Concept”, *Progress in Human Geography*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (7 February 2014), pp. 249–267.

86. David Chandler, *Resilience: The Governance of Complexity* (London: Routledge, 2014); Jessica Schmidt, “The Empirical Falsity of the Human Subject: New Materialism, Climate Change and the Shared Critique of Artifice”, *Resilience*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (1 December 2013), pp. 174–192. Peter Finkenbusch “On the Road to Affirmation: Facilitating Urban Resilience in the Americas”, *Global Society*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2019).

87. IPCC, “Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability”, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

88. *Ibid.*, p. 200.

action” implies the relentless putting forward of diverse initiatives which have uncertain outcomes, thus combining in an oxymoronic manner the notion of contingency—“whatever”—and the notion of purpose—“action”.

Contemporary climate change policy-making is forced to operate within the double insight that, on the one hand, actions need to be taken but, on the other hand, little can be done to reverse the crisis. In programmes and projects revolving around climate change, “whatever action” offers a new way out of the double impasse of the human as the one who is the central agent for addressing catastrophic climate change but also the most inadequate creature on the planet to save it. Rather than seeking to solve issues, actions by as many participants as possible are operationalised to foreclose the possibility that anything is foreclosed. In this way, actions are not purposeful in the common sense. They are only purposeful in being directed at the “whatever”: to make potentiality real, to open up all that could be and to force it into being. By incessantly launching actions, programmes and projects with participation as great and varied as possible, so the hope of contemporary climate change policy thinking, the seeds of potentiality are sown into reality.

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