

## Power, Political Responsibilities and Climate Change

Simon Caney  
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### **Abstract:**

Tackling climate change and the transition to a zero carbon economy requires a radical transformation of the social, economic and political institutions that structure our lives. It calls for the overhaul of our cities, towns, and buildings and infrastructure; putting a price on carbon; investing in clean energy and facilitating clean energy transfer; and the re-evaluation of existing practices and social norms. It is also imperative that this transition is a just one, one in which any burdens are borne by those with the greatest ability to pay. All this requires concerted political action. But what kind of political action is required? Who has what political responsibilities to bring about this change? What political responsibilities do you or I have? What are the sources of these responsibilities? Political action requires coalitions and cooperation with others, but then this raises further questions that arise from membership of a political movement. What form should such political cooperation take? What responsibilities do people have as political actors? Do we have a duty to temper our view and compromise in the interests of effectiveness or out of respect for others? What epistemic responsibilities do agents have? How do we go about answering such questions? My aim in this paper is to provide some answers to these questions. I argue that Erik Olin Wright's theory of social transformation provides a fruitful framework for thinking about these issues. With this in mind, and drawing on the social scientific work on the politics of carbon, energy and energy transitions, I outline an account of agents' political responsibilities.

- I: Introduction
- II: Political Responsibilities
- III: Theory of Social Transformation
- IV: Political Transformation to a Sustainable World
- V: Kinds of Political Strategies
- VI: But Who has What Political Responsibilities?
- VII: Organization, Coalitions and the Creation of Power
- VIII: Concluding Remarks

### **I: Introduction**

People often refer to their and other people's responsibilities to address climate change. The concept of 'responsibility' is often employed in different ways. I am interested here in 'political responsibilities' understood as responsibilities to change the economic, social and political structures within which people live their lives.

Note: different from other ways in which the concept of responsibility is used  
 eg personal responsibility (Should I limit my own emissions? Not fly (or offset), be a vegan, not drive etc)  
 eg responsibility meaning 'who should pay for any costs that mitigating and adapting to climate change)

### **II: Political Responsibilities**

§1. An adequate account of agent's political responsibilities would provide answers to the following questions

Q1: The **content** of political responsibilities: What is it that agents should do?

Q2: The **kinds of agents** that have these responsibilities: Are these responsibilities borne by govts, firms, trade unions, individuals? Who are the duty-bearers?

Q3: The **scope** of responsibility: Which specific members of those classes? Suppose that we think that individuals have political responsibilities, do all individuals have them or just some?

Q4: The **allocation** of political responsibilities: How are political responsibilities distributed among the relevant agents? Which agents should do what?

Q5: The **limits**: What is an upper limit on what an agent can be expected to do?

Q6: The **means** What means may agents use and what ones may they not use?

My main focus is going to be on Q1 and then in light of that Q3, Q4 and Q5. I am going to assume (in response to Q2) that individuals, firms, governments, international institutions are potential duty-bearers.

§2. Such an account is largely absent from philosophical discussions of climate change. Some common patterns

- often there is silence on it (eg exclusive discussion of other questions)
- often incomplete statements on it (Governments ought to mitigate, adapt, etc)
- vagueness: there are duties to develop institutions (some might reach for the Rawlsian mantra of a “natural duty to uphold and to further just institutions.” (1999, p.257: pp.99, 258 & 293-294).

Partial Exceptions

Elizabeth Cripps’s account of “promotional duties” in *Climate Change and the Moral Agent: Individual Duties in an Interdependent World* (2013)

“Now consider an individual living in (say) the UK, faced with the problem of climate change. She could **campaign and vote** for candidates for local and national office who are committed to promoting international and national mitigation and adaptation efforts.[fn8] In the absence of such candidates, she could **stand** herself or encourage a suitable candidate to do so. She could **petition** her local MPs and MEPs to change their policies. She could **send emails** to the UK Prime Minister, the US president, the UN Secretary General, the President of the European Commission, or the President of China. She could write them **open letters** in national or international newspapers or on social media sites. She could donate to campaign organizations such as Friends of the Earth. She could **sign and circulate petitions**, in person or online. She could **join or organize marches** at international summits. She could **write articles, set up websites**, and otherwise call for adherents to the kind of norm-changing ‘global citizenship movement’ suggested by Dale Jamieson.” (2013, 143: footnote omitted)

- my worries about this – ad hoc, not systematic, not informed by an account of what would work
- Lack a systematic account of political responsibilities.

In addition to providing some answers to the above questions, I am going to be making some methodological suggestions.

### III: Theory of Social Transformation

The first is that

**Claim 1: To make progress in identifying the content of political responsibilities it is important to have an accurate understanding of what kinds of change are required and how social and political transformations occur. We need to know, that is, ‘what needs to be done’ and ‘how can we get from here to there’.**

§1. *Analytical Framework*. The best analytical framework for understanding such transformations is that developed by Erik Olin Wright in *Envisioning Real Utopias* (2010). He argues that they have four component parts (2010, pt III).

“A fully developed theory of social transformation involves four interlinked components: ... The first of these provides an account of the obstacles to emancipatory transformation. The second shows how, in spite of these obstacles, there are real possibilities of transformation. The third attempts to specify the future prospects of both obstacles and possibilities. And finally, the fourth component attempts to answer the question “what is to be done?” in light of the prior account of the obstacles, possibilities, and future trajectories.” (2010, pp.273-274)

First, “**obstacles** to ... transformation” (how are unjust arrangements able to perpetuate themselves? What are the obstacles to the necessary change?) **What political factors maintain the current ecologically unsustainable status quo?**

Second, “**possibilities** of transformation” (what features of the status quo might be utilised to bring about change?) **What opportunities are there to bring about a transformation to a zero carbon world?**

Third, “**future prospects** of both obstacles and possibilities” **What are the future prospects of transformation to a zero carbon world?**

Fourth, “**transformative strategies**” how might agents exploit the existing and future opportunities to effect transformation. Wright identifies three kinds of strategy. **What political strategies should those committed to climate justice employ to best bring about a just transition?**

## §2. Empirical Background

Identifying the content of political responsibilities to combat climate change requires a good understanding of the empirics. No armchair philosophizing! Or casual anecdotal references from one’s favourite newspaper. What is required is well-founded empirically robust understanding of the dynamics of climate politics.

There is an extensive empirical literature on energy transitions (eg Meadowcroft 2009). There is a large and growing literature on climate politics (Geels 2014; Hess 2014; Newell 2020; Oreskes & Conway 2020; Mildenerger 2020; Stokes 2020) and there are important contributions from sociologists (Shove & Walker 2007) and historians (Tooze 2020).

## IV: Political Transformation to a Sustainable World

### A: Obstacles

#### §1. *Powerful organizations which have thwarted attempts to pass environmental legislation*

Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway describe how fossil fuel companies have funded disinformation campaigns (2010, chapter 6)

\* Leah Stokes *Short Circuiting Policy: Interest Groups and the Battle Over Clean Energy and Climate Policy in the American States* (2020) chronicles how fossil fuel industries and electricity utilities have thwarted environmental legislation within US states (eg Texas, California).

“These companies have resisted innovation (Hirsh 1999a; Hughes 2004). They have lied about climate science (Anderson et al. 2017; Oreskes & Conway 2010). And they have attacked climate policies. By bending the political system to their will, these companies have created the climate crisis. Until policies are in place that effectively challenge fossil fuel companies and electric utilities’ political dominance, the lives of billions of people, communities, species, and ecosystems are in grave danger.” (Stokes 2020, Kindle Locations 5168-5172).

\* Matto Mildenerger *Carbon Captured: How Business and Labor Control Climate Politics* (2020) in his study of the climate politics in the US, Australia and Norway argues that carbon benefits from what he terms ‘double representation’. He details in each case how fossil fuel companies and labour unions fought against climate legislation (2020).

\* See further Geels (2014), Hess (2014) & Newell and Paterson (2010).

#### §2. *The power of inertia*

One of the key obstacles to realizing ecological sustainability is existing infrastructure – the design of towns and cities, transport networks (car, train, bicycle, walking), the existence or not of public transit, building design, waste systems.

\* Infrastructure has momentous effects on emissions. It shapes, defines, constrains individual agency in multiple ways. Furthermore, social practices (eg of car use) build up around it.

\* Its effects extend far into the future. There is extensive carbon lock-in. Karen C. Seto, et al (2016) IPCC AR5: “infrastructure and technology choices made by industrialized countries in the post-World War II period, at low-energy prices, still have an effect on current worldwide GHG emissions” (Blanco, Gerlagh & Suh 2014, p.355).

Unless societies redesign towns and cities (and provide public transit) they lock-in their citizens to high emissions lifestyles for decades to come.

\* Note further. Infrastructure has a major effect on the capacities of societies to adapt to a climate-constrained world (See Eric Klinenberg 2018)

\* Infrastructure is almost never discussed by political philosophers – maybe because its operations are largely invisible until it breaks down (Star & Ruhleder, 1996, p.113).

### **§3. Social Norms and Practices**

\* Elizabeth Shove & Gordon Walker (2007)

### **§4. Ideology and decision-making methods**

Hegemonic ideas such as commitment to limitless economic growth  
Use of indefensible social discount rates by leading economic models.

### **§5. Dysfunctional political systems**

(a) Short-termist; (b) no incentives to care about plight of non-citizens

## **B: Weak Links in the Status Quo/Opportunities for Change**

### **§1. Potential Coalitions - Co-beneficiaries of Climate Legislation**

Fossil fuels and air pollution

### **§2. System Threats – Insurance Industry, Investors**

Insurers are worried about high costs (and going out of business) and investors are worried about stranded assets.

### **§3. Ideologically Vulnerable Aspects of the Status Quo - Subsidies**

Some governments (US, China, Russia, EU, India) subsidize fossil fuel companies. A lot.

“Estimated subsidies are \$4.9 trillion worldwide in 2013 and \$5.3 trillion in 2015 (6.5% of global GDP in both years)” (Coady et al 2017, p.11).

Coady et al: “Eliminating subsidies would have reduced global carbon emissions in 2013 by 21% and fossil fuel air pollution deaths 55%, while raising revenue of 4%, and social welfare by 2.2%, of global GDP” (Coady et al 2017, p.11).

In short: governments are taxing people, and not using the money to fund renewables or clean energy, but are using them to make the problem worse. And they’re regressive.

### **§4. Utilising Existing Accountability Mechanisms**

Consider Article 14 of the 2015 Paris Agreement:

1. “The Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement shall periodically take stock of the implementation of this Agreement to **assess the collective progress towards achieving the purpose of this Agreement and its long-term goals (referred to as the “global stocktake”)**. It shall do so in a comprehensive and facilitative manner, considering mitigation, adaptation and the means of implementation and support, and in the light of equity and the best available science.
2. The Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement shall undertake its **first global stocktake in 2023 and every five years thereafter** unless otherwise decided by the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement.”

<https://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2015/cop21/eng/109r01.pdf>

## **C: Prospects for Change**

### **§1. Covid and the Financial Vulnerability of Firms**

Many firms now are financially vulnerable. This gives government’s considerable power for they can make any financial support to ailing businesses conditional on binding commitments to reducing emissions within a limited timeframe.

Hepburn et al (forthcoming)’s recommendations:

- “- clean physical infrastructure investment,
- - building efficiency retrofits,
- - investment in education and training to address immediate unemployment from COVID-19 and structural unemployment from decarbonisation,
- - natural capital investment for ecosystem resilience and regeneration, and
- - clean R&D investment.”

## V: Kinds of Political Strategies

### §1. *Varieties of political strategy.*

Some (yet to be specified) agents have responsibilities to adopt strategies of transformation. What forms can these take? Wright distinguishes between three types of strategy:

“ruptural” – confrontational, seek to overthrow the unjust system

“interstitial” – works within the existing system

“symbiotic” – works together with some elements of the existing system

### §2. *As applied to climate change*

#### *Ruptural political strategies*

- Campaign for eradication of fossil fuel subsidies
- Campaign for divestment from fossil fuel companies
- Campaign for carbon taxes

#### *Interstitial political strategies*

- Transition Towns (build examples of sustainable communities within existing societies)

#### *Symbiotic political strategies*

- campaign with investors and persuade them to invest in clean technologies  
Peter Newell and Matthew Paterson: “it is clear that, given the neoliberal context we live in, mobilising the money of private investors, most of whom are large institutional investors like insurance companies and pension funds, will be crucial to achieving this transformation to a low-carbon economy.” (Newell & Paterson 2010, p.76)

## VI: But *Who Has What* Political Responsibilities?

§1. We can and should look at this from two different points of view

- (a) What would best realize a just transition to a sustainable world
- (b) What is fair (in absolute and comparative terms) to duty bearers

§2. Start with (a). If we focus on bringing about a just transition than one plausible principle is:

**Claim 2: The Power/Responsibility Principle: With power comes responsibility**

(Caney 2014) [aka the Spiderman Principle]

Those with the capacity to bring about transformation to a sustainable world have a responsibility to use their power to do so.

§3. But what if I lack power?

**Claim 3: Those without political power can play an active role in a body that does have power**

To illustrate

Students .... student unions ..... call for divestment

Workers .... Trade unions .... campaign for green jobs

Those with pensions .... press pension company to divest from fossil fuels.

Journalists .... use your power to make the case for practical sustainable policies.

NGOs ... harness the existing accountability mechanism such as the global stocktake

Public intellectuals .... Challenge prevailing norms and ideologies

Economists ..... devise politically feasible environmental measures (Klenert et al 2018)

Townplanners ... a responsibility to design sustainable cities

Those with legal expertise .... help reform intellectual property law to incentivize clean development; provide legal advice to developing countries

In all cases: figure out ways in which one can empower political actors pursuing sustainability. Ask ‘where are the weak points’, who can make a difference, how can I contribute to that?

§4. *Taking the claims of duty bearers seriously*

**Claim 4: Any ascription of political responsibilities should not impose *excessive* (epistemic or other) burdens on participants (absolute standard) or impose *unfair* burdens on participants (comparative standard)**

§5.

**Claim 5: One corollary of the Power/Responsibility Principle – different people can have very different political responsibilities, depending on their capabilities and constraints.**

## VII: Organization, Coalitions and the Creation of Power

Next Claim. If you have some, but not enough, power forge alliances, create coalitions. One lesson of the political science literature is that political success (in passing climate legislation, funding clean energy etc) requires building coalitions: Roberts et al on coalitions (2018, pp.305-306)

“it is important to find ways to create supportive coalitions for the deliberate acceleration of low-carbon transitions despite this difficulty. The importance of these coalitions is easily demonstrated. Firstly, no single actor has the resources (expertise, money, legitimacy, organisation and leadership) to bring these transitions about. Secondly, within government, business, and civil society there are actors who seek to advance transitions and others who seek to impede them. Progress in accelerating change therefore depends on the formation of supportive coalitions, which we define loosely as alignments of disparate groups across government, business, and civil society, united by common interests or ideas.” (Roberts et al 2018, p.305)

### **Claim 6: Form Coalitions!**

§1. Membership of political groups or coalitions has further ethical implications. First, it generates an additional responsibility

**Claim 7: Members of political coalitions to create a sustainable world have a responsibility to be inclusive and representative**

R1: Epistemic – political coalitions that seek to create a more sustainable world need to be representative of society more generally, otherwise they are likely to be insufficiently sensitive to all the morally relevant implications of climate politics.

R2: Respect-Based – political coalitions that purport to speak for humanity have a duty to be representative

§2. Second, membership of political groups or coalitions leads to what we might call the Fidelity/Compromise Dilemma

**Claim 8: Members of political coalitions to create a sustainable world need to confront the Fidelity/Compromise Dilemma**

**On the one hand, there are reasons for people to compromise**

- **Effectiveness. Organizations can be effective only if there is unity.**
- **Respect for other members of one’s coalition**

[The best should not be the enemy of the good]

**On the other hand, there are perils in compromise**

- **There is a moral cost in departing from what one thinks is in fact best. Dangers of being co-opted.**

[The good enough should not act in ways that block the best]

### *Comments*

1. There is no easy and obvious solution to this dilemma. It’s a dilemma because both horns articulate reasonable concerns.

2. It is not a new dilemma. Think of the ‘revisionist-controversy’ in early 20<sup>th</sup> C (Rosa Luxemburg and Edouard Bernstein) and the debate between ‘reform’ and ‘revolution’. Think of internal debates within Green parties (eg the divisions in the German Green party in the 1980s between ‘realos’ v the ‘fundis’)

One potentially useful way of thinking about it

André Gorz’s (1964) distinction between two kinds of reforms

- “revolutionary reforms” (1964, p.12) – reforms that do not reinforce the current system
- “reformist reforms” (1964, p.12) – reforms that reinforce the status quo

To put it in terms employed in socio-technical transitions literature, there’s a case for “two world technologies” (Kemp and Rotmans 2005, p.35 & 49) – technologies which can be used in the current system but do not thwart the transformation of that system.

**Claim 9: With Power comes epistemic responsibility (on the importance of reflexivity)**

Identifying the best long-term political strategies is really hard; there is a duty to research the policies and political strategies, and to be willing to re-think, revise strategies, and learn from mistakes.

**VIII: Concluding Remarks**

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**Claim 8:** Members of political coalitions to create a sustainable world need to confront the Fidelity/Compromise Dilemma

**Claim 9:** With power comes epistemic responsibility

Criticisms, comments and suggestions very welcome.

[s.caney@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:s.caney@warwick.ac.uk)