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Climate insurgency between academia and activism.

An interview with David N. Pellow by Marco Armiero and Salvatore Paolo De Rosa

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1. With the expression "urban climate insurgency," we refer to the ensemble of radical practices that reject the climate consensus while fostering an antagonist agenda about climate change. Do you see a potential or existing convergence between radical movements such as BLM and climate justice?

I would like respond to this question by referring to the critical work that the Central Coast Climate Justice Network (C3JN) is undertaking. C3JN is a multi-racial network of social justice and environmental organizations and leaders committed to a climate movement that advances social, economic, and environmental justice for California's Central Coast communities (this is the region just North of the city of Los Angeles, including Ventura, Santa Barbara, and San Luis Obispo Counties). There are members of this network who have long been active in supporting both the cause of climate justice and Black Lives Matter, so in June of 2020, when C3JN penned a "Letter of Support and Solidarity re: Black Lives Matter," that was only the latest effort to articulate a convergence. That letter began as follows:

"There is no climate justice without racial justice. We, the Central Coast Climate Justice Network (C3JN) affirm that the lives, dreams, guidance, wisdom, lived experiences and futures of Black people and peoples of African descent in the U.S. and the world matter. We write these words with great conviction and solidarity: Black Lives Matter. They matter to Black communities and they matter to all of us because there can be no freedom while any of us is oppressed."

In the U.S. under the reign of racial terror associated with centuries of white supremacy and the most recent amplification of that brutal system under the Trump regime, to even utter the words "Black Lives Matter" can be judged to be an act of sedition and an embrace of "terrorism" (see, for example, BLM co-founder Patrisse Khan-Cullors' book *When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir*). Trump and much of the political and media establishment could not bring themselves to even perfunctorily utter these words without expressing open contempt, ridicule, and invoking threats of state-sanctioned racist violence directed against those who would dare to support the right of Black people to exist, let alone thrive. Thus for climate justice organizers to do so and to explicitly and cogently articulate support of the aims of BLM is bold and significant. That move is also a welcome step forward considering the long history of exclusions, erasures, and anti-Black racism that have characterized the traditionally white, middle-class environmental movement. Going further, the C3JN continued in its statement of solidarity and offered a critique of the narrative of "existential threat" we hear so much in the mainstream climate movement:

“As climate justice activists, it is imperative that we bring the same level of urgency to the struggle for racial justice that we bring to our efforts to address climate change. Much of the climate emergency discourse from environmentalists assumes that climate disruption is the first time that humans have been threatened with an existential crisis. Nothing could be further from the truth. As the experiences with genocide, colonialism, enslavement, and other forms of state and institutional violence that Black communities have endured amply indicates, we must acknowledge that our Black brothers and sisters have always had to fight for their existence.”

This portion of the statement really speaks for itself, but it must also be noted that it is a powerful correction to the “emergency” narrative that implicitly centers white lives and experiences and ignores the centuries of racist violence directed at peoples of African descent. And since Black people have endured and survived such pain and brutality for generations, we are urging the world to look to those communities for leadership and wisdom with respect to how one might push through times of crisis and remain intact. This is a point that many others have made with respect to the depth of experience and knowledge that frontline, fenceline, and BIPOC communities can offer the world in our collective efforts to address and confront climate disruption (see, for example, Sarah Krakoff’s article in *Environmental Justice* on “Radical Adaptation, Justice, and American Indian Nations”).

C3JN’s letter of support also endorses the national demands of the Movement for Black Lives while explicitly calling for allyship with Indigenous peoples as well, underscoring the exceedingly important point that just focusing on the struggles and aspirations of any single population will limit our overall efforts, since this is and must be a “big tent” movement that is opposed any form of domination wherever and whenever it rears its head. Going a necessary step further, C3JN is integrating many of the demands Movement for Black Lives into its proposed Green New Deal framework for the region. That is all to say that this is but one of many clear indications and examples of public support for—if not a convergence between—BLM among climate justice movements (source: <https://www.cecsb.org/c3jn-letter-support-solidarity-black-lives-matter/>)

1. You have been very active in bridging community activism and academic work around issues of environmental and climate justice. Can you tell us something about your experience? Did it work? Which kind of resistance did you encounter from the academic side and also from the community?

I have been extremely fortunate to have always had a wonderful group of students, faculty, staff, and community activists as collaborators and colleagues. One of my earliest projects involved supporting the launch of the International Campaign for Responsible Technology—a group of environmental justice and labor rights activists and scholars around the world who have succeeded in building and supporting movements to advocate for workers in electronics/IT industries and the fenceline communities impacted by that sector’s anti-labor practices and its manufacture and use of an enormous volume of toxic materials. The ICRT has successfully pushed some of the world’s largest IT companies, along with the European Union and many

other governments and university systems, to adopt its proposals for environmental stewardship and labor protection. While there are many drawbacks and loopholes in these efforts, they are important for demonstrating that grassroots movements—supported by scholars and the research we produce—can produce meaningful change on multiple scales in the service of environmental, climate justice, and labor justice. But this movement is also urgently needed because it reveals that levers and targets of change can include and extend beyond the nation state. For example, the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition—a lead organization in the founding of the ICRT—has long used the practice of developing “score cards” to publicly name and shame corporate environmental offenders and move them toward greater accountability and behavioral changes. And they have succeeded in doing so numerous times, particularly with corporations that have little incentive to do otherwise since government regulators and existing legislation do not require such changes. While SVTC and ICRT certainly invest energy in pushing for states to change and enact policy, this is but one approach to environmental justice they embrace.

I am also privileged to have worked with the Ecuadorian NGO DECOIN (Defensa y Conservacion Ecologica de Intag/Intag Defense and Ecological Conservation group) to develop a written guide to support activists seeking to defend their communities against extractivist practices. DECOIN is based in the Intag cloud forest region of northwestern Ecuador, which is home to numerous low-income, rural communities and dozens of endangered animal and plant species. Prior to our collaboration, DECOIN had successfully worked to push back and even expel mining companies that had begun devastating parts of their communities and critical ecological habitats. At the time, there were few written resources for activists wishing to address these challenges, so we produced one, *Protecting Your Community against Mining Companies and Other Extractive Industries: A Guide for Community Organizers*, which is downloadable for free from the Cultural Survival organization’s website. This guide was translated into several languages and has been used by advocates in many countries. I was proud of my involvement in this work but was not prepared for the threat of repression that my colleagues in Ecuador soon faced. That nation’s president at the time, Rafael Correa, took to national television and denounced our guide and us—the authors—during a press conference. He referred to us as threats to national security and, for a while, it was unclear what would happen to our colleagues on the ground there. Ultimately, they were allowed to continue their work but under a heightened sense of (in)security and with the possibility of increased state repression. I would say that while I tend to be concerned about the backlash or lack of support for my activist-scholarship work from *academic* colleagues and institutions, as a North American scholar with tenure, I rarely have had to worry about risks to my physical safety in response to my writings and activism. That is a luxury that many of my colleagues in the global South do not have, and I will keep that at the top of my consciousness from this day forward.

2. Lately, you have been reflecting on the agency of the State in environmental injustices, uncovering the contradictions of demanding justice to the very actor who has produced injustice in the first place. If climate change is not a mistake in the system, but it is the way racial capitalism works, what does this imply for the climate justice movement?

While there is increasing focus on capitalism and support for anti-capitalism among scholars and movements focused on climate and environmental justice, I find it curious that there is only a nascent engagement with equally rigorous and strident critiques of state power from those same quarters. If I can say (and I certainly have) that capitalism requires calculated brutality and is fundamentally incompatible with the goals of improving and sustaining human and environmental health, then I can most definitely also say the same for that form of governance that uphold and constitute the modern nation-state. I am certainly sympathetic to those observers and scholars who rightly point to critical progress we have made on human and civil rights and specific environmental protection efforts as a result of urging governments to deliver on those demands over the years. Those arguments are legitimate for particular places and moments in time, but, unfortunately, they conveniently disregard three uncomfortable truths: 1) social inequality within and between nation states is at its most extreme ever in the current era; 2) the enslavement and trafficking of human beings today is far more extensive than has occurred ever before in human history; and 3) anthropogenic climate disruption and the present-day massively destructive consumption of land animals and marine life are unparalleled in the course of our collective histories. Given this indisputable evidence of decline, despoilation, and the sixth mass extinction during the reign of modern nation states, what indicators or data could possibly give any climate or environmental activist or scholar even a shred of confidence that the same system could somehow reverse course, undo these harms, and shed its skin to morph into something entirely different? And yet the climate justice, environmental justice, and racial justice movements continue to press forth with this assumption. Each of these formations—and the scholarly literatures that parallel them—fervently support the notion that we can and will secure some semblance of justice and equitable futures through the mechanisms set up precisely to deny us those things. I understand that it makes sense to look to those structures and institutions that contain such enormous power and potential, but I think we ought to be far more cautious and imaginative about this quest.

Let us consider the so-called “climate insurgency.” Jeremy Brecher’s trilogy on this topic is, in many ways, compelling and inspiring and reflects the widely held view among environmentalists that we can address the climate crisis through existing institutional and legal frameworks. I certainly agree that we can work to *slow the rate* of damage and destruction caused by state and corporate global socioecological violence, but there is little evidence to suggest that we can reverse these trends using these “master’s tools.” However, I take a pragmatic approach to this challenge by borrowing from scholars like James Scott and Arturo Escobar, and I agree that *for now* we can occasionally work through the state to achieve gains and to blunt the worst of the traumatic consequences of the system, but I see no reason to imagine that this will be a sustainable or just long term strategy, and scholars like Laura Pulido have concurred in far more eloquent language than I can offer up here.

Even during the recent resurgence of BLM mobilizations around the U.S. and the world, that movement continues to articulate a firm reliance on the state. One might think this is not the case, considering the popularized call to “defund the police,” which seems to have a heady anarchist aura about it. However, even this seemingly far-reaching proposal is clearly state-centric because activists are not calling for the abolition of policing or the state apparatus that supports it; they are simply pushing for a re-allocation of some state resources from policing to other urgently needed sites—healthcare, educating, housing, etc. I certainly agree that we need

more resources for those critical goals, but I am concerned that BLM is firmly of the view that the same state that is extinguishing the lives and dreams of Black people can be commandeered to do the opposite for a sustained period of time.

What I *am* in favor of and excited about is the extraordinary rise of mutual aid networks around the world, mobilizing to deliver critical resources to marginalized and vulnerable populations. While I could point to any number of such efforts around the globe, I will again quote from the California Central Coast Climate Justice Network's BLM solidarity statement as an example of this transformative work:

"In recent weeks, many of us have been working to provide mutual aid to people in need of food and basic services in the absence of a functioning federal government and health care system; protesting in the streets for racial justice in a nation that perpetuates unrestrained violence against many of its citizens simply because of their racial-ethnic heritage; and sending support to communities around the U.S. and the world during this time of great need and deprivation. We will continue that work, taking our lead from Black community activists whose voices and knowledge must be centered in this struggle."

Continuing with the theme of state engagement, one of my favorite and least favorite names of a climate movement group is Extinction Rebellion. It is one of my favorite names because it explicitly underscores what is at stake for so many of us humans and our more-than-human relations—extinction versus survival—and that what we need is in fact a rebellion to ensure our continued existence on earth. But it is my least favorite name of a climate movement endeavor precisely because it is *misnamed*. As much as I applaud and support their work of raising the alarm, pushing institutions to be more accountable to the realities of climate disruption, and making these concerns more visible to larger audiences and potential supporters, Extinction Rebellion is anything but a *rebellion*; it is, rather, a very important protest movement. First, speaking to the question of the role of the state, Extinction Rebellion is wholly reliant on a state-centric set of tactics and strategies. Their top three demands each begins with the word "Government." Namely, they are: 1) "governments must tell the truth..."; 2) "governments must act now..." and 3) "governments must create..." There is little room in this framework for understanding how ordinary people can lead and make change in the absence of the overwhelming and inherently authoritarian presence of nation-states, and that gives me great pause. Second, as an African American, I must say that when I heard the word "rebellion" I think of my ancestors who, during the era of formal chattel enslavement in the Americas, rebelled not by asking the slave masters to provide them with better working conditions while ensuring the maintenance and survival of the system of human bondage. Rebellion in that context meant a vision and practice of *overthrowing* the system and liberating people from its intrinsically oppressive functions. Extinction Rebellion might take a page from that history book, because while it is, as I say, an important protest movement, the extent of its actions, strategy, and vision are to clamor for change and reform from the states and corporations that drive and profit from socioecological and climate harm.

To conclude on a more positive and forward-leaning note, I am delighted that a number of scholars and activists are now articulating the ideas of abolitionist climate and environmental justice—a multi-issue politics and analysis that addresses historical harms through a decolonial

and anti-capitalist framework while investing in an ethic of care for those populations most affected by environmental and climate injustices. In that vein, I propose fusing the insights of abolitionists and multispecies justice scholars to offer a vision of what I call *multispecies abolition democracy*, which I define as those practices, institutions, and structures that enable and facilitate justice for humans and nonhumans in the context of recognizing that since our societies have always been multispecies in character and membership, our systems of decision-making should be as well. And since abolition democracy was a framework intended for humans only, multispecies abolition democracy builds on that inspiring vision and extends and deepens it so as to allow for all beings and things to be recognized as members of our societies and that collaboration rather than exclusion and domination are practices and ethics that will strengthen our communities in ways that are truly and “deeply intersectional” because they involve and include the vulnerable and the privileged within and across the human and species boundaries. When I use terms like “decision-making” and “democracy” I eschew the state as the most desirable embodiment of these practices; rather, I see these terms as signaling a set of values, practices, processes, and actions rather than primarily an institutional or organization form. This is a vision that will require commitment and labor from advocates across many social movements who have thus far only taken modest steps in that direction. But I believe there are important opportunities and a clear and urgent rationale for pursuing that project.

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