The Perils of Climate Alarmism

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Climate Crisis

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How does regime type shape climate action? Global developments are unfortunately producing the conditions of a natural experiment that could answer this question. Accelerating climate change is already occurring in parallel with escalating democratic breakdown. Although there were technically two more democracies on the planet in 2023 than the year before,[1] overall the prognosis for self-rule is grim: Almost half the world's population lives in a democracy, but few of these are counted as "full" democracies, and many are sliding into some form of hybrid authoritarianism rather than becoming more democratic. These trends reflect and reinforce a public malaise. In the places that do have some form of representative government, public-opinion polls register widespread dissatisfaction with how democracy is working and a deepening concern that democratic channels of deliberation and legislation are not up to the task of governance.[2]

As the atmosphere heats up and democracies falter, will masses of people clamor for "eco-authoritarian" leaders to provide a pathway to climate safety? Will expanded emergency powers, concentrated decisionmaking authority, and popular quiescence enable state agencies to adopt sweeping climate policies, effectively dismantling fossil capitalism and constructing a zero-emissions economy in its place? That the answer is so clearly and obviously *no* makes one wonder what the fuss is all about in the first place.

The notion that the climate crisis requires swift, authoritative decisionmaking that can cut through the noise of messy deliberation, squash the political influence of incumbent economic interests, and

collectively mobilize the population toward a shared, and existential, goal is compelling—if a bit frightening—in the abstract. But Nomi Lazar and Jeremy Wallace deftly deflate the rather mechanical logic of this eco-authoritarian temptation. Despite the appeal of populist-cum-authoritarian projects that pit the people, and their shared interest in climate stabilization, against a recalcitrant elite, the authors assert that there is no bright line between a "sustainability-interested *demos* and a narrow set of oil executives."

While not denying the formidable economic and political power of fossil elites, Lazar and Wallace point out that the reality is more complex. Most people own carbon-polluting assets, which, in combination with broadly felt economic anxiety, can lead to a status quo bias that complicates the pathway to a rapid energy transition and dilutes the democratic majority for climate action. But even if an authoritarian leader could rise to power on the promise to build what Daniela Gabor and Benjamin Braun call a "big green state," there are additional reasons to question an antidemocratic solution to global warming. According to Lazar and Wallace, this is because democracy offers three key resources to manage complex crises such as climate change: dynamic information flows, vertical accountability, and a multiplex "political temporality."

The first two resources recall Amartya Sen's classic argument that, due to a combination of freedom of the press and political responsiveness, famines do not occur in democratic contexts.[3] The third resource marks a more novel contribution. Crucially, the authors distinguish between "emergencies" and crises. They note that the former is a legal category that enables specific forms of government action, and is invoked in situations both "urgent and dangerous" and "sudden and temporary." The climate *crisis*—a rhetorical rather than legal construct—admits of the first set of characteristics, but not the second. Lazar and Wallace state that we ought to be suspicious of declarations of emergency. These are, after all, a common authoritarian tactic. Not only do they suspend contestation and expand executive authority, they also evince an affinity with the temporality of Carl Schmitt's sovereign decisionism: an anti-iterative finality.

Notwithstanding the fantasies of technological determinists and anticivilizational doomsdayers, there are no final solutions to the climate crisis. Ongoing yet accelerating, already painfully here yet poised to get unimaginably worse, historically cumulative yet increasingly nonlinear, and punctuated by threshold effects and tipping points: This is the multiplex temporality of climate change. And democracies, with their iterative, open-ended, and multiscalar modes of decisionmaking, are uniquely positioned to navigate it.

This is in theory, of course. In practice, decades of neoliberalism eviscerating the public sector combined with polarization, gridlock, and, yes, incumbent fossil power, have sapped democracies of their temporal dynamism, instead forestalling needed action while congealing institutions and

elites in place, as the weather grows ever stormier and hotter. Research shows that democracies plagued by corruption—which both waters down climate legislation and impedes enforcement of existing policies—perform no better in reducing emissions than do authoritarian regimes.[4] But if actually existing democracies fall short of their climate potential, the vast majority of dictatorships are even more disappointing. This very fact calls into question the "siren song" of eco-authoritarianism that the authors warn us to resist.

This does not mean that climate change cannot potentially create fertile ground for antidemocratic power grabs. There are numerous reasons to suspect that authoritarian political projects might thrive amid climate disasters and associated economic shocks. Under such conditions, top-down governance can feel like a form of stability or safety—and the scapegoating that is so often an ideological resource for such leaders can provide comforting, if dangerous, narratives that blame climate chaos on recent immigrants, racialized groups, or crude conspiracies. In short, the climate crisis will likely increase what the authors call the "authoritarian temptation"—but that is a different argument than asserting that it will occur *because* ordinary people around the world *believe* such leaders will be more likely to implement climate policies than their democratically elected counterparts. Indeed, if the road to green totalitarianism were paved by invocations of "climate emergency," the thousands of such declarations issued by governments at all levels around the world would have already provided clearer evidence for such a trajectory.

I am more convinced by the almost opposite risk that the authors rightly note: Proliferating declarations of climate emergency could desensitize ordinary people to government announcements, exacerbating already familiar dynamics in which individuals may simply ignore life-or-death evacuation warnings. That danger is more palpable than the notion that a small-town mayor declaring a "climate emergency" will inevitably lead to the installation of eco-authoritarianism.

What Is Climate Action?

Zooming out, part of the difficulty emanates from the focus of climate change as an abstraction of sorts—a tendency shared across the spectrum of the climate–regime-type debate. But, more concretely, "climate action" is not best defined as the issuing of official statements or even the ratification of climate agreements, as important as both may be to the broader politics of climate change. Instead, as Wallace has astutely addressed elsewhere,[5] lofty "climate action" is in fact the nitty-gritty political economy of transforming the built environment of everyday life.

This means everything from rapidly deploying zero-emissions energy and stationary storage to upgrading the grid to handle massive amounts of electricity from intermittent sources; slashing the emissions

from transportation by encouraging electric-vehicle (EV) adoption or, even better, mass transit, walking, and cycling; retrofitting the guts of buildings' heating and cooling systems while making them vastly more

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energy efficient; rethinking agricultural systems and making essential crops more resilient to climate change while also shifting away from planet-warming meat and dairy diets; and adapting all these critical infrastructures to the increasingly turbulent weather. Each of these involves clashes of interests, power imbalances, and distributional dilemmas; each requires institutional capacities and fiscal firepower that are often in short supply; and each is an opportunity to cultivate forms of social organization and political consciousness that can generate enduring constituencies for further change—or to the contrary, trigger backlash and negative policy-feedback loops.

The most challenging counterpoint to the authors' arguments about the advantages of democracy in fighting climate change is, of course, China. This is not to say that the Chinese regime is "eco-authoritarian": The country is the world's top emitter (emissions that are increasingly tied to domestic consumption) and is building more coal-fired power plants than anywhere on earth. But it is also clearly the case that the central government has prioritized the manufacturing and deployment of renewable-energy technologies, and has achieved both at a scale and pace unrivaled anywhere in the world. Meanwhile, these developments are finally feeding into domestic climate progress—China's emissions from electricity are set to start declining next year.[6]

The question is whether these green decisions are the result of authoritarianism or occurred despite authoritarianism—or some mix of the two. There is a rich and ongoing debate over the factors that led China to become a green-manufacturing and renewable-deployment powerhouse. Relevant factors include dependence on oil imports (with renewables providing domestic energy security); a longstanding developmentalist industrial policy that identifies and promotes strategic sectors using both carrots and sticks; state control over key levers of capital investment and reduced vulnerability to the whims of private finance; a history of joint ventures with foreign multinationals and contractually enforced technology transfers to encourage upgrading; enormous domestic markets enabling massive economies of scale, high levels of human-capital formation, and public research and development investments; and, yes, some measure of political responsiveness—namely, political elites' desire to quell local protests over pollution.[7]

Institutionalized features of the political-economic system also played a major role: high levels of administrative capacity (including enforcement), iterative policy improvisation, fierce interfirm competition, and multidirectional communication between levels of government.[8] None of these make China a democracy—on the contrary, the system is increasingly autocratic. But all mark deviations from the typical autocratic portrait of rigid, top-down policymaking, insulated and self-serving elites, and, especially, "decisionist" finality.

From my perspective, the key question for climate social scientists and theorists is how the institutional features noted above could be adapted for democratic contexts. For example, long-term economic planning has played a key role in China's green achievements. This planning requires administrative capacities that many governments lack, including empirically grounded forecasting of near-future trends and credible commitments to binding decisions. Ironically, given the Cold War ideological legacy that sharply opposes planning and markets, in China such planning has generated the political certainty that enables market signals to function, resulting in famously cutthroat domestic competition in the solar and EV sectors.

Although there is no inherent incompatibility between planning and democracy—and indeed, democratizing the economy while also confronting climate change would likely involve something like planning[9]—there are surely tensions between planning and electoral turnover. How can governments demonstrate credible commitments to economic plans when a functional democracy entails "bounded uncertainty"[10] about which parties and politicians will be in office in the future? For this reason, building popular support for energy-transition policies is essential: Key to their durability is their popularity among voters, which in turn hinges on ordinary people seeing concrete improvements in their daily lives. This fact turns the multiplex temporality of democracy on its head. Collective self-rule is surely open-ended and iterative, which aligns well with the uncertainty (tipping points and threshold effects) and *longue durée* features of climate change.

However, in order to sustain public support for rapid, holistic climate action while also creating and consolidating political constituencies that demand faster and more comprehensive projects, benefits need to occur in the here and now. This is especially the case in the challenging context of a highly salient cost-of-living crisis and resurgent, ever more violent right-wing political forces. To save the planet, we do need to defend democracy—but that means a new approach to climate politics that connects planetary well-being to material improvements in everyday life, and does so through the sinews of grassroots social organization, electoral and legislative campaigns, and positive policy-feedback loops. This is no small task, but it is the fundamental task of this decade**.**

NOTES

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3. Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), ch. 7.

4. Marina Povitkina, "The Limits of Democracy in Tackling Climate Change," *Environmental Politics* 27 (May 2018): 411–32.

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