

What Does it Mean to Take Direct Action for Climate?

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For the New Left and counter-culture of the 1960s, direct action meant a hands-on grassroots challenge to the status quo. Direct action groups used non-violent civil disobedience to achieve political ends. The key feature of direct action was personal responsibility and engagement – and the exercise of power was from the ‘ground up’. This was implied in the title of the old Australian socialist newspaper *Direct Action*. But after three decades of neoliberalism, things have changed.

Today, direct action may mean top down state regulation designed to counter the ‘indirect action’ of market processes. In the last issue of *Chain Reaction*, James Goodman and Stuart Rosewarne of the Climate Action Research Network use the term for proposed government interventions to build a low carbon economy. These include progressive taxes to facilitate the introduction of renewables and government incentives to change land use patterns through reforestation and organic agriculture.

The authors frame this call for direct action by the state inside an overarching goal: ‘... we need to direct the economy and society to regenerative sufficiency, away from the productivist exploitation of natural resources (in particular fossil fuels)’. But in Australia right now there is a serious gap between the ‘we’ of citizens who want this transformation and the government ‘we’ who is asked to take ‘direct action’.

In a capitalist or market-based society, entrepreneurs exploit natural resources in order to manufacture commodities for sale at a profit. Accumulated profit is re-invested in further nature consumption and leads to further profit. Economists describe this escalating cycle of accumulation as growth. Neoliberal governments, including federal Labor in Australia, are obliged to obey World Bank and World Trade Organisation mandates not to interfere with this growth – generated by supposedly ‘free markets and free trade’.

For this reason, when it comes to protecting the environment, such governments find themselves ‘tied up’ by the principle of ‘open competition’. In this context, the argument for regulative climate measures by Goodman and Rosewarne is politically radical. Moreover, they go on to say: ‘New norms of development are required to shift to forms of regenerative growth, growth that enhances ecology rather than exploiting and diminishing it’ [my italics].

Can economic growth enhance ecological growth?

Can economic growth enhance ecological growth? It is important not to confuse economic growth with growth of an ecological kind. Too often, public discourse on climate change slip-slides from the language of economics to the language of ecology, without appreciating that where production is geared to accumulation, the two kinds of growth are antithetical.

Mainstream perspectives on climate change from Stern to Garnaut continually promote ‘economic’ solutions for ‘ecological’ problems. But it is misguided to assume that imputing a dollar value to units of CO₂ and manipulating these figures through taxes, trading, and even derivatives, can affect environmental functions in any way.

The regeneration of biospheric relations involves the maintenance of complex material interconnections between solar energy, soil, water, vegetation, and air. The earthly environment with its atmospheric climate is a web of functional transactions – and ultimately, the summer floods in Queensland and Victoria can be traced to human disruptions of this web. The retreat of these waters will influence groundwater, soil mineralisation, and plant colonies – whose interaction in turn, will determine future climate patterns. Governments need to adopt this ‘principle of reciprocity’ as the first premise of their reconstruction effort.

Looking back over the history of humanity–nature relations, hydrologists Juraj Kohutiar and Michal Kravcik from the People and Water NGO in Slovakia describe the activities that have destabilised global climate patterns like this: “... it is deforestation, industrial agriculture, and urbanisation that determine climate by draining land, so that more solar energy re-enters the atmosphere as sensible heat, rather than latent heat of evaporation. Human made ‘hot plates’ lead to irregular precipitation and other climate destabilisation effects, but these can be mitigated through rainwater conservation and re-vegetation.”¹

Moreover, the rise of urban consumer lifestyles, the industrial division of labour, bureaucratic governments, and abstract forms of scientific expertise, disconnect people from direct sensuous understanding of how nature works and how their own bodies



Climate Camp, Muswellbrook, NSW, December 2010. Photo by Falk Hermenau.

are a material part of it. Few understand that water evaporation is the single most important cause of energy movement and temperature control in the biosphere. Holding on to water is essential to recovery of the global climate.

Typically and sadly, a day or so after the recent Victorian floods, ABC Radio played the voice of a farmer saying that ‘as soon as the water drops enough, we’ll be able to bring the machines on to the property to pump the rest away’. The irony will not be lost on those who can link dessicated soils, unhinged climates, and raging floods, on the one hand, with the human fetish for carbon emitting machines, on the other.

Keeping water and carbon cycles in sync

Holding water is not only essential to the recovery of climate, it is equally essential to the recovery of soil fertility. The farmer who would pump water off his land is not only ‘mining carbon’ – but effectively burning money. Human interference with landscape vegetation causes erosion and pollutes streams. The loss of fertile carbon matter to the sea is entropic, collapsing the energy transformations by which climate is regulated.

According to the eminent limnologist Wilhelm Ripl from the Technical University of Berlin: “Under natural conditions order is created by interactions between water, temperature, chemical gradients, ground surface, and organisms. However, in the ‘developed’ landscape, order is replaced by randomness ... dissipative structures balance terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems, returning short water cycles to the atmosphere. This ecosystem integrity benefits food production as well as climate.”²

Australian farmer Peter Andrews agrees, and in his view, good farming is about keeping the earth’s water and carbon

cycles in sync. Together with landscape manager Duane Norris, he points out that: “Early settlement of the continent by people with European cultural assumptions disrupted established interactions of water, soil, and plants resulting in lost fertility. Moreover, agricultural practices such as clearing, burning, ploughing, draining, and irrigation, have implications for global warming. Soils hold twice as much carbon as the atmosphere, and three times as much as vegetation. But carbon in exposed soil oxidises releasing CO₂ into the atmosphere.”³

These pioneers of Natural Sequence Farming techniques suggest that farmers on the oldest, driest continent on earth, are well placed to become agents in the mitigation of unstable climate patterns. The key is planting, restoration of Australia’s unique hydrological systems, and groundwater recharge. If these practices were widely adopted, communities in the threatened Murray River Basin might have a vibrant future.

Why the single-issue focus on carbon?

The international climate debate has been colonised by a reductionist, single-issue focus on carbon. This is not surprising because it is fairly easy to measure emissions, and therefore, for economists to attach a price to them. But as noted, the carbon cycle and the water cycle are actually intertwined, so the question arises – what is the material referent of this notional price?

Equally, CO₂ emissions are interconnected with environmental impacts such as run-off from paved urban areas or toxic chemical releases from factories. Agro-industrial meat production results not only in methane emissions, but exorbitant water use, vegetation loss, and soil compaction. Cash crop development projects from rosebuds to biofuels – ideas exported by the EU or US to the

'Two Thirds World' – clear fell tree cover, dry out land, and set regional warming in train, by breaking down local evaporation–precipitation cycles. If water in its multiple phases – gas, liquid, and solid – is invaluable to both climate stabilisation and soil fertility, the mediation of groundwater, soil, and atmospheric conditions is managed by another 'invaluable' which is vegetation.

Czech plant physiologist Jan Pokorny explains the micro-physics of this: "Ecosystems use solar energy for self-organisation and cool themselves by exporting entropy to the atmosphere as heat. These energy transformations are achieved through evapotranspiration, with plants as 'heat valves' ... While global warming is commonly attributed to atmospheric CO₂, the research shows water vapour has a concentration two orders of magnitude higher than other greenhouse gases. It is critical that landscape management protects the hydrological cycle with its capacity for dissipation of incoming solar energy."⁴

For a proactively regulating federal Labor government, this analysis of nature's functional complexity, and the need to protect and enhance it as Australia's primary asset, suggests a rationale for the creation of new 'green jobs' – that is to say, 'real' green jobs. Mining and manufacture for the sale of renewables do not involve green jobs because these activities dis-integrate the metabolic web of water-soil-plant transfers that hold an environment together.

Conversely, in Europe, the People and Water NGO is modelling real green jobs by restoring local water (and carbon) cycles through catchment rehabilitation programs. This provides training and employment, eco-sufficient community development, cultural identity, and self-worth for those who have been economically marginalised by industrial production and the accumulation society.

Could there be scope in Australia for something like this – a bipartisan, hands-on, 'direct action' response to climate change? Some time ago, the leader of the Liberal Opposition Tony Abbott called for 'a green corps'. Surely this must appeal right across the blue-red-green political spectrum? Nature is after all, the basis of material survival for all classes; an intact ecosystem is the real economic bottom line. Yet if Abbott was prepared to steal a leaf from Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps, neither ecologists nor economists are talking to the public about the potential of post-flood reconstruction. Asked for a media comment on the governments proposed flood levy, Professor Warwick McKibben from the ANU did not envisage social, economic, and ecological benefits accruing from the 'free gift' of rainwater; rather, it was just 'an economic slow down coming from mother nature'.⁵

And so to a further meaning of 'direct action': maybe the deepest and most radical sense of the word exists in overcoming the humanity versus nature split that 'we' westerners, carry inside ourselves. The dominant global culture is built on a profound dissociation from its material core, and this lack of integration shows up in the gap between ecological and economic reason.

Economics is ill-equipped for dealing with long evolved dissipative structures in the interplay of sunshine, water, soil, and plants. Humans taught to think of themselves as 'over and above nature' look right past its complex regulative orders; capacities that make ecosystems active agents in climate control. It is



Climate Camp, Muswellbrook, NSW, December 2010. Photo by Tessa Dowdell.

not easy to speak of nature as an 'independent variable' in the equations of physics or the economic models that echo them.

The climate crisis calls 'us' to discover and address the root source of human dissociation from nature – and that invites not only hands-on direct action, but self-searching in relation to our own taken for granted reliance on an irrational and destructive economic system. Strong sustainability will mean empowering local communities and the natural flows that nurture them.

While business-as-usual promotes the climate crisis as a chance to sell more 'stuff' (www.storyofstuff.com), including carbon derivatives, many climate justice advocates see the crisis as a chance for people to reconnect their humanity with nature by inventing ways of living eco-sufficiently.

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