FOREWORD

Ten years ago, Simon Bushell, a Cambridge NatSci alumnus by then working at Imperial College London, argued that the world needed to develop a single strategic narrative about climate change. Together with colleagues with a background in war studies, Bushell et al. believed that such a narrative "would provide a unifying message under which all of the other work in areas such as climate change communication, strategy, policy, framing and messaging can effectively operate".[1] Only then would the world unite to tackle the problem effectively.

A few weeks after he published this, in December 2015, the Paris Agreement was signed at COP21 by nearly all nations. It committed the world to stabilising global temperature at between 1.5 and 2°C above the preindustrial level. This was hailed as a great success. The surge of optimism and campaigning vigour thus released over the following few years resulted in declarations of a 'climate emergency' by thousands of institutions around the world, ranging in scale from the very great—the United Nations Secretary-General—to the very small—for example, Channing School in Highgate, London. Some perhaps believed that the Paris Agreement and widespread declarations of a climate emergency would provide the "strategic narrative" that Bushell and colleagues had called for.

But now, ten years on from Paris, the world is further away than ever from a unified understanding of climate change, one that would galvanise and orchestrate policy action. There is no agreement on what sort of problem climate change is; there is even less agreement about what an adequate 'solution' to climate change would look like. If we are in a 'climate emergency', then we certainly don't seem to know how to bring the emergency to an end.

Why do I say this?

Bushell's hopes for a unifying strategic narrative on climate change were doomed from the start, for reasons that I explained years ago in my 2009 book *Why We Disagree About Climate Change*.[2] The aspirational Paris target of limiting warming to 1.5°C is clearly unattainable, as it was always going to be, and there is now growing disillusionment with the intergovernmental process embodied in the annual climate negotiations, or COPs.[3] And all this was even before we had Trump undermining climate change research and policy in the USA.

One very visible manifestation of this confounding impulse is the continuing proliferation of different 'solutions' to climate, proposals for radically different exit routes from the so-called climate emergency. For example, there is the recent upswing of interest in developing solar geoengineering technologies, bolstered by the claims of people like Sir David King that radical solutions are called for: "We Passed the 1.5°C Climate Threshold. We Must Now Explore Extreme Options",[4] by which he

[1] Bushell, Simon, et al. "A Unified Narrative for Climate Change." *Nature Climate Change*, vol. 5, 2015, pp. 971-973.
[2] Hulme, Mike. *Why We Disagree About Climate Change*. Cambridge University Press, 2009.
[3] "Global Climate Leaders Want COP29 to Succeed but Call for Urgent Overhaul of the Process." *Club of Rome*, 15 Nov. 2024.
[4] King, David. "We Passed the 1.5°C Climate Threshold. We Must Now Explore Extreme Options." *The Guardian*, 7 Apr. 2025.

means solar geoengineering. Then there are those whose faith is placed in 'nature-based solutions', such as massive global reafforestation or the stimulation of other carbon sinks. Others place their faith in energy technology breakthroughs, such as hydrogen or nuclear fusion or else, like Mark Z Jacobsen, hold to the belief that simply rolling-out existing renewable energy technologies at scale can arrest climate change.[5]

And then there are very different voices being raised that the 'climate emergency' will never be brought to an end by solar geoengineering, carbon dioxide removal or through energy technology transitions. For them, climate salvation can only be delivered through system change. As examples of this, we have the Spanish ecological economist Cati Torres saying that "solving climate change has to involve reversing the current socio-economic system",[6] and the German sociologist Fritz Simon stating that the only sure way to arrest climate change is "to abandon the commitment to economic growth".[7] Or in a similar vein, Frederike Otto in her recent book *Climate Injustice: Why We Need to Fight Global Inequality to Combat Climate Change* moves from thinking about climate solutions in terms of physics and engineering—her area of training—to now arguing that solving climate change requires solving injustice in the world.[8]

This proliferation of different interpretations of 'solving climate change'—that there may be different ways of exiting the 'climate emergency'—occurs because the idea of climate change is inherently malleable. It means different things to different people in different situations around the world. *Contra* Bushell et al., there is no unifying narrative around which the world will unite; there cannot be such a single narrative in a world which thinks, understands and acts so very differently.

Rather than thinking about climate change either as a crisis to be solved or an emergency to be defeated, it is perhaps better—as political scientist Jason Maloy has suggested—to think of it as a political epic.[9] This better captures the very long timescales involved in changing socio-technical systems, and thus climate system behaviour. It calls for the 'epic' virtues of patience, persistence and endurance, and it confutes the notion that there is a single narrative and a single resolution to climate change. Climate change as political epic undermines the idea that, at some point in the future, we will be able to declare climate change 'solved'.

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[5] Jacobsen, Mark. *No Miracles Needed: How Today's Technology Can Save Our Climate and Clean Our Air*. Cambridge University Press, 2023.
[6] Forrester, Nikki. "Meet the Researchers Pioneering Spanish Climate Solutions." *Nature Spotlight*, 16 Apr. 2025.
[7] Simon, Fritz. "Climate Change and the Descent into Authoritarianism—A Worst-Case Scenario." *Die Rettung des Planeten: Wie Reagiert die Gesellschaft auf die Klimakatostrophe?*, edited by Dirk Baecker et al., Campus Verlag, 2025.
[8] Tucker, Ian. "Climatologist Friederike Otto: 'The More Unequal the Society Is, the More Severe the Climate Disaster'." *The Guardian*, 19 Apr. 2025.
[9] Maloy, Jason. "Beyond Crisis and Emergency: Climate Change as a Political Epic." *Ethics & International Affairs*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2024, pp. 103-125.