

Reactivity to Climate Change

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For many years, public discourse concerning climate change seems to have been divided into two main camps: those who did believe it was occurring and cited experts and years of research that proved the planet was warming up, and those who did not believe that these indicators were anything more than isolated events. A subtopic of the former position also divided into two camps: those who thought climate change was due to human causes and those who thought it was just a natural cycle. These debates have preoccupied attention, polarized local and global consideration, and failed to contribute to any coordinated responses. Instead, they seem to have prevented or at least distracted a process in which such responses could be initiated. The structure of these arguments has largely been conceptual and factual.

Once connections were made between tsunamis, Katrina, wild fires, floods, droughts, ice storms and undeniable changes in weather patterns, a picture of the whole constellated. The discourse eventually moved from conceptual and factual arguments to lived experience and pattern recognition. It seems that a “tipping point” in public recognition of climate change has been reached. At least from my North American observations, during the middle of 2007, a profound shift in public discourse has been occurring. It indicates an acceptance that climate change is really happening now, and that it is growing exponentially due to human activity. General public sentiment seems to have landed on the side of agreeing that we have a very real problem that needs to be faced collectively. The discourse has moved well beyond its former argumentative positioning to a place where shared meaning is possible.

This new shared meaning might herald a take-off point that could support a comprehensive societal response. However, within just weeks or months of the development I described above, I have noted the formation of yet another polarity in the discourse. Both poles share the characteristic of faulting the other. One camp is faulting those who present forecasts of climate change as being too alarmist and too negative with potential to cause people to be overwhelmed and then shut down. The other camp is faulting those who present positive images of the future and human capacity to make a difference as being too soft, and not really dealing with the incredible challenges we are facing. The fault-finding voices have replaced conceptual and factual arguments.

I have also observed a subtopic of that debate arising: the question of whether those who espouse the need to take action are themselves “pure.” For example, Al Gore, recent winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, has been publicly criticized for his large house and its energy usage. David Suzuki, Canada’s environmental guru and geneticist, is criticized by people who check out his grocery cart in the line to the teller, and then announce publicly that some of his food choices are not as wholesome as they “should” be.

My observation is that the topics have shifted but the style or structure of public discourse underlying the topics may have remained the same. In each of the cases noted above, the structure was dualistic, one set of arguments or judgments pitted against another.

These dynamics have consequences. Embedded in this apparent need to categorize, label, and judge is the framing of climate change as an “out there” thing. When put “out there,” that “thing” seems to motivate a narrowing of public attention to focus on which camp one belongs to with respect to the “thing.” This distances *us* from *owning* the issue, which happens to be *our* issue. It interferes with the necessary exploration of the full gamut of concerns and responses that are naturally arising. So our discourse can become perilously reduced to talking about others talking about the “thing” without addressing the thing itself.

The kind of thinking behind this discourse does not help us make vital connections, such as seeing the whole picture *and* seeing ourselves in that picture *and* seeing the causal links to the ecological challenges we face. When we do not recognize that our own thinking and behaviour is contributing to the issue—i.e., has causal links to the very development of the issue—we ourselves, by our limited perspective, hinder adequate responses to the issue. I see these dynamics as splitting apart things that already form a whole. This then blocks the whole from being in our line of vision just when we need most to see it.

The . . . world begins by making splits, then drawing boundaries, then solidifying these boundaries. Then we fool ourselves into believing what we have made ourselves see. Solidifying boundaries is very comfortable, because it allows us to deny our experience . . . We miss the whole system. (Bateson, 1978, as quoted in Campbell, 2006)

I have been considering these observations through the lens of developmental dynamics. In particular, I have been categorizing these as transitions from tasks at one stage of hierarchical complexity to another (Commons, Rodriguez, Miller, Ross, LoCicero et al., 2007). Commons et al. describe steps that range from thesis to antithesis to relativism and then through a chaotic “smash” to an eventual synthesis. Earlier arguments, described above, were thesis-antithesis ones, e.g., from there is no climate change problem to yes, there is a climate change problem. And, from it not being human caused to yes, it is human caused. A movement seems to have occurred but are we now sidetracking ourselves, procrastinating, in a hidden relativistic either/or phase, e.g., either we will or we will not step up to the plate and tackle this problem? Does this pattern of drawing boundaries and labelling camps suggest a reticence to move out of the reactive phase of relativism, into the chaos stage?

The chaos stage brings with it recognition of unknown outcomes. In the case of climate change, it also includes the need to commit to engage the issues enough to understand their multiple layers (including personal and cultural values and behaviours), to create and sort options, and to consider all the various responses. This represents a movement *toward* the issue, and *toward* synthesis. By contrast, to frame the topic as a debate of “us and them” and “for and against” camps keeps the discourse at a superficial, possibly more distant, and thus more comfortable level. Such approaches represent a movement *away from* the issue, and *away from* synthesis. They take us back to the antithesis phase of transition instead of forward into the chaotic stage of working things out.

In summary, my observations suggest that at present, intense focus on climate change and pent up concerns seem to be milling around in the comfortably familiar territory of dualistic dynamics rather than moving forward. More complex styles of thinking are needed to shape public discourse and to bump up our attention to climate change to a higher level so we can get focused on effective cultural engagement to address it. Such forward momentum may allow us to move beyond the seemingly natural slide to comfortable dualisms. While these are natural, even necessary parts of the transitions process, they are unproductive on their own for addressing such a complex and pressing issue as climate change. By naming these dynamics and reflecting on their impact, perhaps we can see our way into that forward momentum—and maybe even to addressing climate change with the complexity of engagement and coordination it demands of us.

References

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