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Abstract

Responsibility for Radical Change in Emission of Greenhouse Gasses

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In order to achieve a radical reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, it is necessary to realise that it is not enough to modify the manner in which we act while keeping the same paradigms on how we think about humanity, the world, its climate and the way we are responsible towards this all.

When we want change, we need to distinguish between modification and radical change. A modification is a reshuffling of pawns on the chessboard that keeps almost everything comfortably unchanged. Lots of policies involving climate change are modifications of the same, occupying themselves with re-arranging of deck chairs on the Titanic. Modification is the type of change that does not address fundamental issues and allows us to continue thinking within the same frameworks. It is the type of change that Kevin Anderson described as taking place “**within** the political and economic hegemony.”¹

This in contrast to what we will try to delineate here, a ‘radical’ change, something related to what Anderson has referred to as “revolutionary change **to** the political and economic hegemony”². When we are looking for a ‘radical’ (in the sense of extreme, far-reaching, all-encompassing) reduction of emissions, we are actually searching for ‘radical’ change. In this paper, we look at why and how radical change differs from modifications and what is necessary at the level of the structures of paradigms and underlying epistemic notions regarding human nature to achieve this radical change. We discuss what it means to desire radical change, using contemporary philosophy as a method to create an understanding of the nature and character of the problem of climate change. In doing so, we outline how radical change means more than a superficial change (a modification) but instead changes the ‘episteme’ (Foucault), the ‘world’ (Badiou) in which we find ourselves.

Applying this to the present manner in which climate change negotiations takes place, brings about several concerns when it comes to reaching radical change. One is the influence our desire to change has on the possible outcomes of the process of change that institutions and individuals are seeking to start and implement. Another is the problem of how we structure the required outcome of the process of change. Generally it is acceptable to frame scenarios of climate change in terms of cost-

¹ Quoting Kevin Anderson, 2013, by Naomi Klein, “How Science is Telling Us All to Revolt”, *New Statesman*, 29th October 2013, <http://www.newstatesman.com/2013/10/science-says-revolt>.

² Kevin Anderson as quoted by Naomi Klein, *idem*. Emphasis by Anderson.

efficiency, percentages of emission reduction or the target atmospheric CO₂ concentration. Yet we develop the argument that predefining the outcome of any change limits the possible processes leading to this change. In fact, when we already know the necessary outcome, the change that is necessary cannot be considered radical at all.

As one of the main problems concerns the framing of the problem and the solution, we will refrain from adding one more alternative solution to the problem of climate change. Instead we will discuss one of the foundational attitudes of individuals and institutions alike that shapes the structure within we find ourselves: namely responsibility. We propose a different perspective on responsibility that can lead to creating an environment in which the event of radical change could be possible.

We argue that radical change needs a commitment that is not fear-driven, but is based upon an understanding that it is detrimental to put any limit on the manner in which deliberation takes place. Implementing an environment in which radical change can happen requires openness towards that what is considered impossible in the given episteme.

When one agrees that radical change in emission of greenhouse gasses is necessary, we need to become responsible to make this radical change happen, instead of being responsible to reach the delineated emission-rate that would solve the problem as we conceive it in the present-day understanding, such as the 2° target. It is, in the words of Derrida, the need to look for the impossible. The outcome of a radical change is “un-predictable, an event worthy of this name... The event must announce itself as im-possible... An event or an invention are only possible as im-possible”³.

For the radical change in greenhouse gas emissions the responsibility towards the radicalness of change means that those involved in the climate change negotiations and policy-making need to let go of their preconceived notions of climate, change, and general structure of cause and effect, science and human life.

It is as Albert Einstein already warned us some 60 years ago. “Today we must abandon competition and secure cooperation. This must be the central fact in all our considerations of international affairs; otherwise we face certain disaster. Past thinking and methods did not prevent world wars [and climate change]. Future thinking must prevent wars [and climate change].”⁴

Our proposed ‘recipe’ for moving toward radical change is that both individuals and institutions manifest a different understanding of the concept of responsibility and thereby committing themselves to the process of bringing about of radical change. Only when individuals and institutions themselves feel the need to respond to the call to bring about radical change, not because of a fear of punishment but due to an inner need, we can start building an environment in which radical change can come about.

We argue that one cannot desire radical change without acknowledging that we (individuals and institutions) may be swept off our feet, that we may lose influence and control. We need to accept that modifications are not going to bring about radical emission reductions. What we need is radical change, including radical change in our own backyard, our understanding of leadership and in our own epistemic notions of what change means.

³ Jacques Derrida, *Voyous* (Paris: Galilée, 2003), p.198.

⁴ Albert Einstein, “Only Then Shall We Find Courage”, *New York Times Magazine* (23 June 1946).