

SILENT SPRING TO STRIDENT SUMMER: THE POLITICS OF GLOBAL HEATING

Paul Rogers



SUMMARY

This briefing tracks the evolution of the ecological movement since the 1960s and of scientific and direct action to respond to the catastrophic threat of climate disruption. While the issue has largely overcome concerted, well-funded opposition to move from a niche concern into the global scientific and political mainstream, systemic political and economic blockages remain to achieving rapid decarbonisation.

Introduction

Three months ago ORG published a briefing [Tipping to Rebellion: Action and Reaction on Climate Science](#), one of a series of publication on the theme. It analysed two major trends and explored their political significance. One was the increased urgency of the issue as frequently highlighted by climate scientists and the other was the upsurge in public reaction as expressed by the *Extinction Rebellion* movement and by the youth activism inspired by the Swedish student Greta Thunberg.

In summary, the briefing argued that:

The breakdown of the global climate is happening faster than most models have predicted and the consequences are likely to be physically and economically ruinous on a global scale. Yet, as the *Extinction Rebellion* protests demonstrated, there remains a gulf of expectation between an increasingly informed and activist public and established political, security and economic interests.

The aim of the present briefing is to explore that final element. After forty years of an increasing awareness of the potentially catastrophic impact of global heating and of the rigorous scientific evidence that it requires rapid decarbonisation, why is it proving so difficult to enact the changes needed?

Some answers are straightforward and include the sheer size of the task and the extent of the socio-economic changes that will be required. A second is the need to take action in the immediate future to avoid catastrophe perhaps two decades hence. Both of these require political action at a national and international level and will incur considerable short-term costs which do not easily fit into an electoral cycle measured mainly in four- and five-year terms.

Even so, these do not seem adequate answers to what is increasingly recognised as the greatest common security risk to the global system. As [Oliver Scanlan's research](#) for ORG has shown, G7 states spend nearly 12 times more on their militaries than on mitigating and adapting to climate change, despite current trajectory global heating and a major war posing similar levels of catastrophic risk. More light can be thrown on the problem by examining the more general political history of responses to environmental issues over a timescale of more than fifty years starting with one person and one book.

Silent Spring

The origins of the modern concern with global environmental issues and the emergence of groups such as *Greenpeace* and *Friends of the Earth* go back to the 1960s. They were prompted in part by the effects of industrialisation on the human environment as exemplified by problems of air and water pollution, land dereliction and some specific disasters such as the Aberfan landslide catastrophe in 1966, the *Torrey Canyon* oil spill a year later and several disastrous pollution episodes in European rivers, especially the Rhine. Before these, though, a single book had already had a near-transformative effect.

In the early post-war years, a gifted American fisheries biologist, Rachel Carson, developed an adjunct to her research career in the shape of books on the marine environment written for a wider audience. Her first was *The Sea Around Us* in 1951 and this was followed by *The Edge of the Sea*, three years later. Both were bestsellers and helped establish her as one of the leading writers on the environment of the twentieth century.

In the late 1950s she became increasingly concerned at the impact that new generations of potent pesticides, especially DDT, were having on wildlife and in 1962 she published the seminal study [Silent Spring](#). The reaction of the agrochemical industry was one of outrage with bitter and aggressive opposition, many attempts at denigration, threats of legal action and determined lobbying to limit governmental action to regulate the industry.

Because Carson's work was thoroughly researched and supported by many leading environmental scientists it came to form part of a wider recognition of environmental impacts. Even so, the opposition was formidable and sustained and it was notable that when governments in states in the Global North were forced through public opinion to bring in controls, transnational agrochemical companies focused on developing markets across the Global South where regulation was far less vigorous.

Limits to Growth, Neoliberalism and Climate Change Denial

Silent Spring was hugely significant in stimulating widespread environmental concern which culminated in the UN Conference on the Human Environment at Stockholm in 1972. That, in turn, was greatly influenced by the publication the same year, under the leadership of Donella Meadows at MIT, of the world's first popularised account of early systems studies of the entire global ecosystem, *Limits to Growth*. As the title implies, the broad conclusion was that the increasing impacts of human activity were not sustainable and that huge problems of environmental limits would emerge in many different forms including food production, shortages of water and energy resources and pollution.

By the mid-1970s there were further developments. Two seminal texts were *Only One Earth: The Care and Maintenance of a Small Planet* (1972) by Barbara Ward and Rene Dubos, and *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered* (1973) by E.F. Schumacher, with both becoming bestsellers. There was also an unexpected and considerable rise in oil prices (over 400% in nine months) following the 1973 Arab-Israeli War and the 1974 World Food Crisis, both contributing to a perceived need for rapid change centred on limiting human environmental impact.

However, as with *Silent Spring*, these much wider concerns were largely discounted, with the very idea of limits to growth being forcefully opposed by mainstream economists and politicians as sheer "doom watch" scaremongering. Any such concerns that might turn out to be genuine would surely fade as technological solutions driven by competitive markets responded to any needed changes.

This was further heightened by the rise, during the late 1970s, and then the dominance, since the 1980s, of the neoliberal economic approach. This focuses on growth, shrinking the state, privatisation, market deregulation, control of labour and an emphasis on shareholder capitalism. Although centred on Reaganomics in the United States and Thatcherism in the UK this had a much wider impact, not least through the IMF, the World Bank and the “Washington Consensus” promoting – and, indeed, often imposing – this approach across much of the Global South.

The strong political opposition to acknowledging or acting on climate change, boosted by neoliberal thinking, developed throughout the 1980s even as further evidence from climate, oceanographic and polar research provided abundant information on trends and analysis of impending dangers. Even as this was happening, though, the neoliberal approach became a genuinely world system in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet centrally planned economic system.

More specifically, US-dominated energy multinationals, wealthy foundations and oil and gas-producing states in the Middle East were at the centre of the opposition to action on climate change. This denial of any human role was deep-seated and well-funded, not least because there was the deeply held belief that the power of states and of intergovernmental cooperation must always be secondary to market forces. The central problem was that the market mechanisms implicit in neoliberal shareholder capitalism were entirely unsuited to responding to the impact of fossil carbon release. The neoliberal market-based system simply could not handle the necessary rapid decarbonisation of economies.

Progress of a Sort

In spite of this entrenched opposition, the pressure from activists and the growing scientific evidence of potential danger meant that there was some progress from the late 1980s, when the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was formed. The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) of 1992 and the Kyoto Protocol agreement of 1997 are the most notable examples. Throughout the 1990s much more climate-related research was undertaken, and there were major technological developments in the fields of renewable energy and energy conservation.

However, the momentum was lost after 9/11 with the Bush Administration, very strongly connected to the US oil industry, being particularly strong in opposing any action on climate change. After Obama took office in 2009 there was at last further action especially with the 2015 COP21 summit in Paris. Momentum was again lost with the election of Donald Trump in late 2016 along with continued opposition to radical decarbonisation in oil-rich Gulf States, Russia, Brazil and Australia.

Against this, the sheer number of indicators reported each month powerfully illustrates the urgency of the issue. In July 2019, for example, the latest data showed that 2019 is on track to be one of the three warmest years – along with 2016 and 2017 – since

accurate records began over 150 years ago, and the month of July is likely to be the hottest month recorded for the planet as a whole.

Even more striking was the report that ocean heat content has set a new record since measurements began in 1940. Given the capacity of water to store heat, this means that curbing temperature increases is an even greater task than most people realise.

Further evidence comes from the polar regions. In the Antarctic sea ice hit record lows earlier in the year and there has been an acceleration in emissions of methane – a climate change gas far more powerful than CO₂ – since 2014, primarily from melting of sub-Arctic permafrost. From Siberian, Alaskan, even Greenlandic wildfires, through extraordinary heatwaves in South Asia and Europe to the increased breakup of glaciers in Antarctica, the evidence of rapid change is becoming overwhelming.

Although international negotiations have resulted in partial agreements to curb carbon emissions, far more radical and rapid decarbonisation of economies is required within a decade and this must be on a global scale. That is not to discount the existing moves towards renewables and energy conservation, but the rate of decarbonisation required must massively exceed all current plans. The neoliberal market-based system, which demands continuously high levels of output and consumption, combined with entrenched political conservatism simply cannot handle this even if the two very positive developments in recent years cited above – intensive activism and technical progress – do point the way.

Conclusion

A broad historical review over sixty years shows that there have been two parallel processes evolving in relation to global heating. The first is the slow but steady recognition of environmental limits on human activity, first indicated by studies such as *Silent Spring* and *Limits to Growth* and leading on to persistent environmental campaigning and considerable research, development and investment in alternatives. The second has been the equally persistent political and economic denial of the problem exacerbated by the dominance of neoliberal thinking and its refusal to countenance the essential need for effective governmental and intergovernmental leadership.

The potentially catastrophic consequences of uncontrolled global heating are now apparent and there are daily indicators of the accelerating change, yet this is not yet enough to bring about the transformation we need as fast as we need it. That rate of change will come faster if there is good political leadership backed by a strong public determination. It will be even further enhanced if the need to restructure the failing global economic system is seen as essential for radical decarbonisation. It will not happen rapidly enough without it.

Following on from Theresa May's belated and inadequate commitment to make the UK carbon neutral by 2050, the incoming British Government has a unique position to lead

on global mitigation efforts, given that it expects to host the UNFCC's crucial COP26 summit next year. A [recent briefing](#) in this series made some proposals of how the UK could rise to this challenge, and the idea of a Green New Deal, [within](#) or [without](#) consumer capitalism, is firing debate on both sides of the Atlantic. Preserving a climate that can sustain humanity into the next centuries is surely a big idea worthy of 'Global Britain' and perhaps even a vote-winner, as recent Nordic elections suggest. Yet the chances of a Johnson government challenging the neoliberal economic system remain at net zero.

Image credit: [Paul Appleyard/Flickr](#).

About the Author

Paul Rogers is Oxford Research Group's Senior Fellow in international security and Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford. His '[Monthly Global Security Briefings](#)' are available from our website. His latest book *Irregular War: ISIS and the New Threats from the Margins* was published by I B Tauris in June 2016.

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Autocratic states without electoral cycles may have the potential for rapid change planned and, if necessary, imposed from the centre, and China has certainly recognised the danger of climate breakdown to its own society and acted through a range of green initiatives, even if they barely keep up with the state's current rate of economic growth. The more common culture of autocracies is to maintain the power of the elite through traditional economic growth with little regard for radical decarbonisation.

Even so, these answers do not seem adequate responses to what is increasingly recognised as the greatest common security risk to the global system. As [Oliver Scanlan's research](#) for ORG has shown, G7 states spend nearly 12 times more on their militaries than on mitigating and adapting to climate change, despite current trajectory global heating and a major war posing similar levels of catastrophic risk. More light can be thrown on the problem by examining the more general political history of responses to environmental issues over a timescale of more than fifty years starting with one person and one book.

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