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From Occupy to Climate Justice

There's a growing effort to merge economic-justice and climate activism. Call it climate democracy.

by [Wen Stephenson](#)



(Photo: Reuters/Kevin

Lamarque)It's an odd thing, really. In certain precincts of the left, especially across a broad spectrum of what could be called the economic left, our (by which I mean humanity's) accelerating trajectory toward the climate cliff is little more popular as a topic than it is on the right. In fact, possibly less so. (Plenty of right-wingers love to talk about [climate change](#), if only to deny its grim and urgent scientific reality. On the left, to say nothing of the center, denial takes different forms.)

Sometimes, though, the prospect of climate catastrophe shows up unexpectedly, awkwardly, as a kind of non sequitur—or the return of the repressed.

"I don't know anyone who has all the answers, but I do know a few people who are at least asking the right kinds of questions, starting the necessary conversations and actually working to connect climate and economic-justice organizing across the country."

I was reminded of this not long ago when I came to a showstopping passage deep in the final chapter of anarchist anthropologist David Graeber's *The Democracy Project: A History, a Crisis, a Movement*, his interpretive account of the [Occupy Wall Street](#) uprising, in which he played a role not only as a core OWS organizer but as a kind of house intellectual (his magnum opus, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, happened to come out in the summer of 2011). Midway through a brief discourse on the nature of [labor](#), he pauses to reflect, as though it has just occurred to him: "At the moment, probably the most pressing need is simply to slow down the engines of productivity." Why? Because "if you consider the overall state of the world," there are "two insoluble problems" we seem to face: "On the one hand, we have witnessed an endless series of global debt crises...to the point where the overall burden of debt...is obviously unsustainable. On the other we have an ecological crisis, a galloping process of climate change that is threatening to throw the entire planet into drought, floods, chaos, starvation, and war."

These two problems may appear unrelated, Graeber tells us, but "ultimately they are the same." That's because debt is nothing if not "the promise of future productivity." Therefore, "human beings are promising each other to produce an even greater volume of goods and services in the future than they are creating now. But even current levels are clearly unsustainable. They are precisely what's destroying the planet, at an ever-increasing pace."

Talk about burying the lead. Graeber's solution—"a planetary debt cancellation" and a "mass reduction in working hours: a four-hour day, perhaps, or a guaranteed five-month vacation"—may sound far-fetched, but at least he acknowledges the "galloping" climate crisis and what's at stake in it, and proposes something commensurate (if somewhat detached from the central challenge of leaving fossil fuels in the ground). That's more than can be said

for most others on the left side of the spectrum, where climate change is too often completely absent from economic and political analysis.

It's unclear what explains this reticence about the existential threat facing humanity, beginning with the poorest and most vulnerable people on the planet—unless it's that the implications of climate science, when you really begin to grasp them, are simply too radical, even for radicals.

Two years ago, the International Energy Agency reported that corporations and governments must shift decisively away from new long-term investments in fossil-fuel infrastructure—such as Keystone XL and any number of other projects—within five years, meaning by 2017, in order to avoid “locking in” decades of carbon emissions that will guarantee warming the planet, within this century, far more than 2°C above the preindustrial average, the internationally agreed-upon red line. But on December 3, the eminent climate scientist James Hansen, recently retired as head of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies, and seventeen co-authors released a study in the journal *PLOS ONE* confirming that the United Nations–approved 2°C ceiling has no real basis in science, only politics, and would itself set in motion “disastrous consequences” beyond humanity's control.

Instead, according to Hansen and his co-authors, we should do everything we can to stay as close as possible to a ceiling of 1°C. Given that we've already warmed about 0.8°C in the past 100 years (with still more “baked in” as a result of the climate system's lag time), you would be correct in concluding that the time frame in which to act is vanishingly short—and that the scale of action required is epically large. On our current trajectory, with global emissions still rising, we're headed to at least 4°C this century. Even to have a shot at the 2°C goal, global emissions must peak by, say, 2020, and then plummet to near zero by mid-century. That may appear unlikely, but as Hansen et al. write, “There is still opportunity for humanity to exercise free will.”

Anyone who is committed to the hard work of bringing deep structural change to our economic, social and political systems—the kind of change that requires a long-term strategy of organizing and movement-building—is now faced with scientific facts so immediate and so dire as to render a life's work seemingly futile. The question, then, becomes how to escape that paralyzing sense of futility, and how to accelerate the sort of grassroots democratic mobilization we need if we're to salvage any hope of a just and stable society.

A lot of people I know in the climate movement think the left, and the economic left in particular—pretty much the entire spectrum from mainstream liberals to Occupy radicals—has not yet taken on board the scale and urgency of the climate crisis. Not really. Not the full, stark set of facts. At the same time, mainstream climate advocates, wanting to broaden the climate movement, are told that they have too often been tone-deaf on issues of economic justice and inequality. How to reconcile these? How to merge the fights for economic justice and climate action with the kind of good faith and urgency required to build a real climate-justice movement?

I don't know anyone who has all the answers, but I do know a few people who are at least asking the right kinds of questions, starting the necessary conversations and actually working to connect climate and economic-justice organizing across the country. As it happens, more than a few of them were engaged in Occupy. (David Graeber should be proud.) They point to a convergence of movements for economic democracy and climate justice, and show us what a trajectory from Occupy to something new—call it climate democracy—might look like.

Equally important, they're acting with the kind of urgency, and commitment to civil resistance, that the crisis demands. They know there can be no climate justice without economic justice, but they also know there won't be any economic justice—any justice at all—without facing up to our climate reality, simultaneously slashing emissions and building resilience. They know the “climate” part of “climate justice” cannot be an afterthought, some optional add-on to please “environmentalists.” Because this shit is real. And the game is far from over. No matter what happens in terms of climate policy in the next few years—and the prospects are not pretty—current and future generations have to live through what's coming.

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Rachel Plattus was speaking to a roomful of college students and recent grads at the David L. Lawrence Convention Center in Pittsburgh, where they'd gathered for a weekend in late October along with some 8,000 other young activists at Power Shift, the biannual national convergence of the youth climate movement. Rachel is the 26-year-old director of youth and student organizing for the New Economy Coalition, based in Cambridge, Massachusetts. By her side was 35-year-old Farhad Ebrahimi, who serves on the NEC board and who founded and runs the Boston-based Chorus Foundation, which supports grassroots climate and environmental-justice organizing in communities around the country.

I know Rachel and Farhad from the Boston-area climate movement, and I was tagging along with them and their colleagues at Power Shift. It was strange to see the two of them in front of a room at a high-tech convention center; in the past year I've been more apt to see them in church basements and community-organizing spaces, leading nonviolent direct-action trainings, or on the streets leading protests against tar sands pipelines and coal-fired power plants.

“I met Farhad at Occupy Boston,” Rachel told the hundred or so young people who’d come to hear about the intersection of climate and economic justice (a strong showing, given the dozens of concurrent breakout sessions offered at Power Shift). “We spent a lot of time there a couple years ago, and it was a transformative experience for a lot of us.”

Two important things came out of her Occupy experience, Rachel explained. First, she and several friends who had been “radicalized on climate issues,” including Farhad and her NEC colleague Eli Feghali (who was also in the room), decided to form an organizing collective “to do resistance work around climate justice.” At the same time, she began thinking seriously about the central question raised by Occupy but never really answered: “If you’re so angry at this system, if all the people here have been wronged by the system, what are you proposing that we do instead?” While she and her friends wanted to keep organizing resistance, she said, “I found myself looking for a way to have an answer to ‘What do you want instead?’” She dove into the worker-ownership movement in Boston and tried unsuccessfully to start a worker co-op with some friends.

“We have to be willing to tell the truth about what the dangers of [climate change](#) are and how we balance immediate economic survival with longer-term survival. We have to be willing to be honest about those things. But we also have to recognize when we’re building power toward addressing the climate crisis—even if people aren’t calling it the climate-justice movement.” —Rachel Plattus

It was around this time, in late 2011 and early 2012, that she started talking with Bob Massie, a longtime social-justice and environmental activist, ordained Episcopal priest with a doctorate from Harvard Business School and, among other things, the initiator of the Investor Network on Climate Risk. Massie had recently been hired to head the New Economics Institute, which merged early last year with the New Economy Network to form the NEC. Rachel began to realize, she told her Power Shift listeners, that the kind of work going on in the “new economy” or “solidarity economy” movement—with things like cooperatives and worker-owned businesses, community-development financial institutions, community land trusts, local agriculture and community-owned renewable energy, as well as efforts to reconceive corporations and redefine economic growth—is challenging the dominant and unsustainable corporate capitalist system. And not simply rejecting that system, she emphasizes, but “creating new economic institutions that are democratic and participatory, decentralized to appropriate scale so that decisions are made at the most local level that makes sense and, rather than only prioritizing one thing—the maximization of profit—prioritizing people, place and planet.”

“New-economy innovations are occurring all over the country, bubbling up,” Massie told me. “What they lack is mutual awareness, mutual support and mutual connectivity.” There’s potential for real transformation, he believes, in providing those connections. “As people become aware of each other, their frame of reference about what’s happening, and what could happen, changes. They realize all these problems are linked—but all these solutions may also be linked.” He points to what happened recently in Boulder, Colorado, where voters approved a grassroots energy initiative, by a two-thirds landslide, to move the city from a big, corporate, coal-dominated utility, Xcel Energy, to a publicly owned municipal utility that will expand renewables at the same or lower rates.

When I followed up with Rachel back in Cambridge, I pressed her to explain how she connects the new-economy work—which seems to represent real progress, at least in pockets around the country—with her work organizing nonviolent resistance to the fossil-fuel industry. First, she pointed out, “in a civil society that is essentially owned by multinational corporations, driven to maximize profit over all else, to engage in building these parallel economic institutions is to engage in civil resistance.”

But even more, she suggested, in the merging of climate justice and economic democracy, it’s the democracy part that may ultimately matter most. Rachel understands that the kind of deep, systemic change envisioned by the new-economy movement is no doubt a long-term, evolutionary process, on a time scale out of sync with our climate emergency. But she argues that grassroots economic democracy, actually organizing to create those alternative institutions, can also build a base of political power in the near term, at the local level, which is not only where all politics has to start but all resilience as well—something we’re going to need plenty of in the years ahead.

Rachel told me that she knows a lot of people who are focused primarily on the economic-democracy piece—and yet, she added “almost all of them recognize the level at which that also plays into climate issues, how we build resilient communities.” She pointed not only to something like the community-owned energy initiative in Boulder, but to projects like the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative in the Roxbury/North Dorchester neighborhood of Boston, which has brought a racially diverse, low-income community together around fair and affordable housing, community economic development, food justice, education and youth empowerment. The initiative, she said, is “building relationships, making sure the community is there, people interacting with each other in the kinds of ways we need people to be interacting with each other.... Occupy did that, too. Being part of participatory democracy, in all its forms, does that: it gives people the skills and capacities they need” to help build a social movement. Rachel

noted that NEC will launch an initiative this year to expand and strengthen organizing among its coalition members around racial and economic justice.

And yet, I asked, where's the climate crisis in that picture? What happens to communities like Roxbury and Dorchester, where people are already struggling, if we don't urgently build the kind of grassroots power we need to shift the politics of climate and deal head-on with the crisis?

"We have to be willing to tell the truth about what the dangers of [climate change](#) are," Rachel said, "and how we balance immediate economic survival with longer-term survival. We have to be willing to be honest about those things. But we also have to recognize when we're building power toward addressing the climate crisis—even if people aren't calling it the climate-justice movement."

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Farhad Ebrahimi stood in front of the room at Power Shift wearing a gray hoodie with the words Kentuckians for the Commonwealth printed across it. He was talking about what he'd learned since diving into climate work in 2006 and seeing even the most inadequate national legislation die in Congress in 2009 and 2010. What was missing, he and others began to see, "was any sense of building political power, any sense of a social movement, and the intersectionality of climate justice and other social-justice movements." Through his young foundation, Chorus, he decided to start supporting grassroots organizing in frontline communities, those already bearing the brunt of the fossil-fuel industry. One of the first places he went was Kentucky.

"We went to look at the extraction stuff going on, mountaintop removal," he said, "and we saw that the folks who were trying to fight the coal companies, stop them from blowing up their mountains, were also doing great work around energy efficiency and renewables—and when it was tied together with this resistance work, it was actually much more effective."

He learned about Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, a statewide independent grassroots group that's been working for more than thirty years on democratic reform and economic and environmental justice. KFTC does far more than work on coal and environmental health issues, central as those are in eastern Kentucky, where the group has its strongest base. Confronting climate change is the first plank of the KFTC platform, but much of its work is on local and regional economic development, tax-justice issues, mass incarceration and voting rights, as well as worker cooperatives, local agriculture, and community-owned and -distributed renewables.

The folks at KFTC frame all of these as essential parts of a "just transition" from the old, extractive, exploitative economy to a new, more democratic clean-energy economy. The idea is that even as they build grassroots political power, they're also creating real economic alternatives to fill the void left by the coal industry. KFTC has established its presence in state politics. In 2010, as part of its strategy to move rural electric cooperatives away from overdependence on coal, the group helped prevent the East Kentucky Power Cooperative from building a new coal-fired plant and reached an agreement with the utility to explore energy efficiency and clean-energy alternatives. Last year, KFTC convened the Appalachia's Bright Future conference, which influenced the agenda of a major Eastern Kentucky "summit" in December, called by Governor Steve Beshear, a Democrat, and Republican Congressman Hal Rogers, to jump-start an economic transition in a region reeling from the loss of coal-industry jobs.

In the face of our climate reality, Farhad told me back in Boston, "economic transition is inevitable." In Appalachia, as coal declines, it's already happening. The question is: "Will the transition be just or not?"

Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, he noted, is part of the recently formed Climate Justice Alliance, a national collaborative effort among more than thirty-five organizations committed to grassroots organizing in frontline communities, especially communities of color. Its recently launched Our Power Campaign focuses on three "hot spots": in the Black Mesa region of the Navajo Nation, led by the Black Mesa Water Coalition; in Detroit, led by the East Michigan Environmental Action Council; and in Richmond, California, led by the Asian Pacific Environmental Network and Communities for a Better Environment. Each of these groups is not only fighting the local impacts of fossil-fuel extraction and infrastructure—coal mines and power plants in Arizona, a coal plant and oil refinery in Detroit, and the massive Chevron refinery in Richmond—but just as much, applying principles of economic democracy to work toward more sustainable and resilient local economies in struggling communities.

Jihan Gearon, executive director of the Black Mesa Water Coalition, grew up on the Navajo reservation in Arizona. She told me that their approach to climate is "holistic," addressing not only emissions as they move away from coal but also adaptation—especially as water becomes scarce—and economic transition. "We are not content with parts per million of CO₂ reduced," she said. "We also want to ensure that we protect health, water and jobs as we reduce CO₂."

In any likely scenario, Farhad asked, "what are we going to need, no matter what? Local political power and local resilience." We won't get where we need to be politically on climate change, at the national and international levels, "without real local base-building," he added. And if we don't get anywhere at the national and international levels,

“well, then, we’re going to need the local work in place so that we can take care of each other as the old way of doing things slips away.”

Farhad and Rachel both like to think of this work as having three essential pieces. The first is resistance: saying “no” to a corrupt, oppressive, extractive system, whether through legislation and litigation, at one end of the spectrum, and nonviolent direct action or mass protests at the other. The second is “replacement”: creating the alternatives, which can itself be a form of resistance, as Rachel noted. And the third essential piece is resilience.

“So we’re trying to go from ‘no’ to ‘yes,’” Farhad said, “but it’s gonna be a really fuckin’ rough ride. It’s gonna be a rough ride because of climate change. But it’s also gonna be a rough ride politically and economically.”

Resilience becomes crucial, but so does social justice, because the two are intimately linked. Resilience requires strong communities—and there’s no real community without social justice.

“We have this journey, this transition, that we have to make,” Farhad told me. “And we have to figure out how to organize so that we’re not only going toward ‘yes,’ but we’re doing it in a way that’s equitable.” Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, he pointed out, is important right now because of how it intervenes in Kentucky politics, organizes communities and fights the big coal companies. “And when the climate changes and what grows there changes and how they can live there changes—they’re going to need that ability to act collectively to deal with all of that as well.”

Farhad thought of another example. “Occupy Sandy happened not because people responded to Sandy really well; it was because the relationships and tool sets were already built through Occupy Wall Street.”

David Graeber argues in *The Democracy Project* that Occupy reawakened the radical imagination in this country. To the extent that’s true, it’s possible that the merging of climate justice and economic democracy can matter in a similar way—reawakening the sense of democratic possibility and grassroots power in our communities. But Occupy did something else, too: it reminded us of the sheer speed and unpredictability with which unrest can explode across the country, taking everyone (including the organizers) by surprise.

In Cambridge, I asked Rachel if she agreed that much of the economic left has yet to take on board the full magnitude and urgency of the climate crisis. “I mean, the climate movement has barely taken it on board,” she replied. “There are a lot of folks, even in the climate movement, and certainly in the economic left, who haven’t even made the decision to take on the reality of it—and to recognize that this fight, [which] for them was never really about survival, all of a sudden is.”

When that recognition finally comes, anything could happen.

“It’s interesting,” Rachel said, “because there certainly are parts of the left, not the liberal elite, but parts of the left”—like those, she pointed out, who have fought their whole lives for racial justice—“for whom being engaged has always been about survival.”

“There is a deep, rich tradition of organizing for survival,” Rachel said. “In fact, it’s the only thing that’s ever worked.”

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Climate Activists Can Learn a lot From Black Lives Matter

By **Kate Aronoff** - December 30, 2015 | Op-Ed



Changing anything means building a big, brash movement. And doing that means talking about people, not statistics.

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Yesterday afternoon, Cuyahoga County Prosecutor Tim McGinty told a cramped room of reporters that no officers would be tried for the killing of Tamir Rice. The announcement came just over a year after the 12-year-old was gunned down by police for waving around a toy rifle in a Cleveland park. Within two seconds of arriving at the scene, officer Timothy Loehmann had fired two very real bullets at Rice — including the one that killed him.

Calling Rice’s death a “perfect storm of human error, mistakes and miscommunications by all involved that day,” McGinty spent several minutes laying out the ways in which the child should have known better than to play in a park while being black. It was “indisputable,” he said, “that Tamir was drawing a gun from his waist.” McGinty added that the boy’s “size made him look much older” and that he “had been warned that his pellet gun might get him

into trouble that day.”

Before the press conference was over, Twitter had issued its own verdict. One of the most popular (and representative) came from “Selma” filmmaker Ava DuVernay, who [posted a photo](#) of Tamir smiling in a restaurant with a one-word caption: “Innocent.”

As the movement for black lives has pointed out over the last year, the fact that police can kill a 12-year-old boy with impunity is grounds for moral outrage and disobedience. Organizers are already channeling that outrage into protests in Ohio, New York and elsewhere. The non-indictments of the officers that killed Mike Brown and Eric Garner drove thousands into the streets last year. The rallying cry Black Lives Matter was birthed in similar environs two years prior, when George Zimmerman was acquitted of murder after shooting Trayvon Martin dead on a sleepy Sanford, Florida street. Continued police shootings around the country have prompted further escalation, with protesters moving to shut down business as usual in shopping malls, airports and highways from coast to coast, most recently in a series of actions known as BlackXMas.

These efforts have catapulted a conversation about police brutality and systemic racism into the mainstream. [Sixty percent of Americans](#) — compared with just 43 percent the year before — now believe that black Americans’ fight for equal rights isn’t over. The movement has also racked up a [string of legal and political victories](#), including California Gov. Jerry Brown’s decision to ban the use of grand juries in cases of excessive police force.

Central to the movement’s success has been its ability to outline the appropriate public response to killings and non-indictments. On top is a call for empathy, with the families of victims and the countless others who have experienced similar losses.

Alongside it is a sense of justified anger. Nearing 2016, law enforcement’s ability to kill unarmed children and walk free isn’t shocking. As Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote of Rice’s case last year, “Convicting an officer of murder effectively requires an act of telepathy.” The anger that the movement for black lives has articulated, then, is not for specific incidents or errant prosecutors; it’s for a system that was designed to fail large chunks of the people living in it. Events like Monday’s non-indictment are reminders to keep fighting.

Samaira Rice, Tamir’s mother, said as much in [her statement](#) on the grand jury’s decision:

“I don’t want my child to have died for nothing and I refuse to let his legacy or his name be ignored. We will continue to fight for justice for him, and for all the families who must live with the pain that we live with.”

The facts of her son’s case were all part of the discussion Monday — no less so than among legal analysts — but they served mostly to bolster the movement’s larger narrative that “the whole damn system is guilty as hell,” and shutting down business, as usual, is the only way to change it.

Of the many lessons, the climate movement can draw from the one for black lives, this might be the most valuable. Building on a scaffolding erected by Al Gore and his ilk, mainstream climate activists have for years billed their battle as one for the truth, believing that if they tell the truth, the people (and the politicians) will follow. But faced with disappointments like the Paris agreement, more environmentalists are coming to realize what many organizers in the movement for black lives already knew: that changing anything means building a big, brash movement. And doing that means talking about people, not statistics.

To be fair, climate denial is a colossal problem. There are still plenty of truths to be told. The GOP’s party line is to disagree with 97 percent of scientists, and its 2016 hopefuls range from quiet skeptics to [dues-paying members of the Flat Earth Society](#). A year-long investigation by *Inside Climate News* revealed that ExxonMobil funded cutting-edge research into climate change starting in the 1970s, only to spend millions covering up its findings over the next 40 years. Republican obstinacy provided an easy excuse for U.S. negotiators to excise the Paris agreement’s few binding sections, on the grounds that any agreement that had to pass through a GOP-controlled Congress would be dead on arrival at American shores.

Only sheer stupidity, the argument goes, could obscure the links between [devastating floods](#) in the United Kingdom, a nearly 70 degree Christmas in New York and the impotence of the climate deal reached in Paris a few weeks back. “If only they knew better,” goes the thinking of mainstream climate activists.

Content explaining how stupid Republicans are on climate is its own renewable resource — just look at the climate change tab of any major progressive news outlet. A cottage industry

has cropped up to generate rapid-fire fact-checks on Republican presidential debates and just about anything Donald Trump says.

But what good does caring about the truth really do? Trump's resilience against reality is a case in point. As journalist Paul Waldman [recently explained](#), "Not only does [Trump] refuse to be held to any standard of truth, he refuses to act ashamed when he gets caught in a lie, or even grant that he might have been mistaken. And his supporters go right along — if Donald says it, it's true, and no bunch of media jerks are going to tell them otherwise." For Trump supporters, facts are irrelevant. The same might well be said of many Americans — not because they're ill-informed, but because stories do more work than a slideshow ever can. And most people generally don't like being called stupid. Trump and the climate deniers are telling one story, and the media jerks another. Movements have to up-end them both.

As the movement for black lives already understands, dismantling racism is not about proving racists wrong. Climate change will not be solved by convincing climate deniers of their own idiocy. Each are about power and affecting near-tectonic shifts in national values and priorities: Whose lives matter? Who controls our future? What does security mean amidst rising tides, and who deserves it?

The point here is not to draw a hokey analytic comparison between the movement for black lives and the one against climate change. For one, the links between climate and racial justice aren't abstract. Reducing that relationship to "links" at all belies how deeply interwoven the two really are. It was Cleveland's polluted Cuyahoga River, after all, which [sparked national outrage](#) when it caught fire one June morning in 1969 — a scandal that led to both the Clean Water Act and the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency. Additionally, some of this country's longest-running fights against pollution and extractive industry have taken root in the communities of color that are first to feel their worst impacts. It's no secret, either, that the nations currently feeling the blunt force of climate change tend to be poorer and browner than the ones that contributed most to it.

These connections aren't just facts. They're lived reality. Necessarily, the movement for black lives has always been a struggle for life and death. The climate fight — for many — is no different. As protesters respond to yesterday's grand jury decision, environmentalists should be taking notes and joining in.

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