

“Politics as Usual” Will Never Be A Solution To The Current Climate Threat



Richard Falk

There is an ever-growing consensus that the climate crisis represents humanity's greatest problem. Indeed, global warming is more than an environmental crisis — there are social, political, ethical and economic dimensions to it. Even the role of science should be exposed to critical inquiry when discussing the dimensions of the climate crisis, considering that technology bears such responsibility for bringing us to the brink of global disaster. This is the theme of my interview with renowned scholar Richard Falk.

For decades, Richard Falk has made immense contributions in the areas of international affairs and international law from what may be loosely defined as the humanist perspective, which makes a break with political realism and its emphasis on the nation-state and military power. He is professor emeritus of international law and practice at Princeton University, where he taught for nearly half a century, and currently chair of Global Law at Queen Mary University London, which has launched a new center for climate crime and justice; Falk is also the Olaf Palme Visiting Professor in Stockholm and Visiting Distinguished Professor at the Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies, University of Malta. In 2008, Falk was appointed as a United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967. He is the author of some 50 books, the most recent of which is a moving memoir, titled *Public Intellectual: The Life of a Citizen Pilgrim* (2021).

C.J. Polychroniou: The climate crisis is the greatest challenge of our time, but, so far, we seem to be losing the battle to avoid driving the planet to dangerous “tipping points.” Indeed, a climate apocalypse appears to be a rather distinct possibility given the current levels of climate inaction. Having said that, it is quite obvious that the climate crisis has more than one dimension. It is surely about the environment, but it is also about science, ethics, politics and economics. Let’s start with the relationship between science and the environment. Does science bear responsibility for global warming and the ensuing environmental breakdown, given the role that technologies have played in the modern age?

Richard Falk: I think science bears some responsibility for adopting the outlook that freedom of scientific inquiry takes precedence over considering the real-world consequences of scientific knowledge — the exemplary case being the process by which science and scientists contributed to the making of the nuclear bomb. In this instance, some of the most ethically inclined scientists and knowledge workers, above all, Albert Einstein, were contributors who later regretted their role. And, of course, the continuous post-Hiroshima developments of weaponry of mass destruction have enlisted leading biologists, chemists and physicists in their professional roles to produce ever more deadly weaponry, and there has been little scientific pushback.

With respect to the environmental breakdown that is highlighted by your question, the situation is more obscure. There were scientific warnings about a variety of potential catastrophic threats to ecological balance that go back to the early 1970s. These warnings were contested by reputable scientists until the end of the 20th century, but if the precautionary principle included in the [Stockholm Declaration on the Human Environment](#) (1972) would have been implemented, then certainly scientists bore some responsibility for continuing to work toward more capital-efficient means of finding technological applications for oil, gas and coal. As with adverse health effects, post-Enlightenment beliefs that human progress depended on scientific knowledge inhibited regulation for the benefit of the public good. Only when civil society began to sound the alarm were certain adjustments made, although often insufficient in substance, deferring to private interests in profitability, and public interests in the enhancement of military capabilities and governmental control.

Overall, despite the climate change crisis, there remains a reluctance to hamper scientific “progress” by an insistence on respecting the carrying capacity of the

Earth. Also, science and scientists have yet to relate the search for knowledge to the avoidance of ecologically dangerous technological applications, and even more so in relation to political and cultural activities. There is also the representational issue involving the selection of environmental guardians and their discretionary authority, if a more prudential approach were to be adopted.

The climate crisis also raises important ethical questions, although it is not clear from current efforts to tame global warming that many of the world's governments take them seriously. Be that as it may, how should ethics inform the debate about global warming and environmental breakdown?

The most obvious ethical issues arise when deciding how to spread the economic burdens of regulating greenhouse gas emissions in ways that ensure an equitable distribution of costs within and among countries. The relevance of "climate justice" to relations among social classes and between rich and poor countries is contested and controversial. As the world continues to be organized along state-centric axes of authority and responsibility, ethical metrics are so delimited. Given the global nature of the challenges associated with global warming, this way of calculating climate justice and ethical accountability in *political space* is significantly dysfunctional.

Similar observations are relevant with respect to *time*. Although the idea of "responsibility to future generations" [received some recognition at the UN](#), nothing tangible by way of implementation was done. Political elites, without exception, were fixed on short-term performance criteria, whether satisfying corporate shareholders or the voting public. The tyranny of the present in policy domains worked against implementing the laudatory ethical recognition of the claims of [future generations] to a healthy and materially sufficient future.

Taking account of the relevance of the past seems an ethical imperative that is neglected because it is seen as unfairly burdening the present for past injustices. For instance, reparations claims on behalf of victimized people, whether descendants of slavery or otherwise exploited peoples, rarely are satisfied, however ethically meritorious. There is one revealing exception: reparations imposed by the victorious powers in a war.

In the environmental domain, the past is very important to the allocation of responsibility for the atmospheric buildup of greenhouse gas emissions. Most

Western countries are more responsible for global warming than the vast majority of the Global South, and many parts of Africa and the Middle East face the dual facts of minimal responsibility for global warming yet maximal vulnerability to its harmful effects.

These various ethical concerns are being forced onto the agendas of global conferences. This was evident at the 2021 COP-26 Glasgow Climate Summit under UN auspices. The intergovernmental response was disappointing, and reflected capitalist and geopolitical disregard of the ethical dimensions of the climate change challenge.

Politics also figures prominently in the climate crisis, with questions being raised as to whether our current system of government, both at the national and international level, is adequate to meet the greatest challenge of our time. What are your thoughts on this matter?

As suggested, addressing the global challenge of climate change with the tools developed for problem-solving in a state-centric world possessing weak institutional mechanisms for the effective promotion of the global public good is the organizational root of the problem. The UN was established with the ahistorical hope that the great powers of international relations would cooperate for peace as successfully as they cooperated for war between 1939 to 1945. Despite lofty rhetoric, the UN was designed to be a weak global mechanism. Why else disempower the UN by giving the victors of World War II a right of veto, which in effect was a recognition of the primacy of geopolitics?

Besides geopolitics, there were other obstacles to global-oriented problem-solving as a result of the persistence and expansion of statism after the collapse of European colonialism. This dominance of statism was reinforced by rigid ideological adherence to nationalism on the part of political leaders, shaping relations with other countries even if disguised somewhat by alliance diplomacy, “special relationships” ([such as the U.S.’s relationship with] Israel) and neoliberal patterns of globalization.

The core political issue is upholding the indispensable need for unprecedented degrees of globally oriented cooperation to address effectively climate change challenges that were being stymied by the continuing dominance of statist and geopolitical tendencies in international relations. These tendencies favor the *part*

over the *whole* in multilateral forms of problem-solving. This structural reality has recently been accentuated by the rise of autocratic hyper-nationalist leaders in many important states, and by recent preoccupations with overcoming the COVID pandemic and containing its negative economic spillovers.

Until a robust mechanism for the promotion of global public goods is established, the political potential of present structures of world order do not seem capable of fashioning prudent and effective policies to cope with climate change. For such a mechanism to be established will require [either] the shock effect of future climate catastrophes, or a powerful, widely supported, militant transnational civil society movement dedicated to the protection of the Earth.

The climate crisis also reflects the failure of economics, with the argument being made that capitalism is actually the cause of the problem and climate change merely a symptom. Given where we are, and with the window of opportunity rapidly closing, should the fight against global warming be also a fight against capitalism?

David Whyte ends his book on ecocide with these stark words: “[W]e have to kill the corporation before it kills us.” The guiding idea of contemporary capitalism is to maximize short-term profitability, a posture that contradicts the kind of approach that would protect the natural habitat against the ravages wrought by contemporary capitalism.

However, the issue may be broader than capitalism. Actually existing socialist governments, exercising greater state control over the economy, have exhibited no better record when it comes to environmental protection or taking responsible account of longer-term threats to the natural habitat. State-dominated economies may be less concerned about profitability, but their preoccupation with maximizing economic growth and susceptibility to corruption is as dangerous and destructive.

Until economic and political policies grounded upon a new kind of citizenship [prioritizing] humanity gain political traction, it seems highly improbable that ecological threats will be addressed responsibly.

From your own perspective, how do we move forward in the fight against global warming? Indeed, what might be possible approaches to overcome climate inaction?

You saved the most difficult question for last! I do think education in the broad sense is key, including rethinking citizenship and activist civic participation. It is also essential that efforts be made to enable the UN to act more independently of geopolitical and nationalist manipulations, which have prevented the UN from playing an influential role throughout the COVID pandemic. This regressive interaction with states was highlighted by the hostility of Trump's presidency to any kind of meta-nationalist approach to the control of the virus, including his disgraceful decision to defund and disengage from the World Health Organization.

A more credible UN requires independent and increased funding by way of an international tax, as well as curtailing of the right of veto by the five permanent members of the Security Council. Such global reforms will not happen without substantial pressure from civil society mobilizations coupled with the emergence of more enlightened leadership in important countries.

As suggested above, a reconstituted world order responsive to the magnitude and character of climate change challenge would seem to require the radical transformation of economic activity. This seems as though it could happen only through a revolutionary process, either as something that took the unprecedented shape of a transnational movement or spread from state to state as did the Arab Spring of 2010-2011, but without sparking a counterrevolutionary backlash.

Because there is no currently visible transition strategy to move from where we are to where we need to be, indulging the utopian imagination is a political act, envisioning futures attuned to the climate change agenda.

I believe that our escape from present entrapment depends on "a politics of impossibility." Our leaders say, and the general consensus is, that politics should be conceived as "the art of the possible," which assesses the play of forces to discover what is feasible. My argument has been that what is understood by the political class as feasible is insufficient to produce satisfactory policies and practices with regard to climate menaces. That is, the politics we know lacks the capacity to generate a solution.

It is evident that the impossible happens. This was manifested in recent international experience by the victories of national resistance movements in several major 20th-century anti-colonial wars, the collapse of the Soviet Union,

the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa. In each instance, before the impossible happened, experts deemed the outcome utopian or impossible, not worthy of the attention of serious persons. What seems clear is that the impossible happens only when the mobilization of people is great enough to produce outcomes that defy the perceptions of those forces committed to the permanence of the status quo.

This leads me to view the future as uncertain and unknowable. For this reason, whatever future we believe necessary and desirable can unfold, defying current expectations. This makes it rational and justifiable for patriots of humanity to engage on behalf of this better future. There are many signs that a green vision of the future is gaining support throughout the planet, especially among youth who have most to lose, and hence to gain. Youth may be the vanguard among those demanding ecologically responsible patterns of humane governance for the planet.

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Urgent Need for Radical Change (an anthology of interviews with Noam Chomsky, 2021); and *Economics and the Left: Interviews with Progressive Economists* (2021).