

Looking to Civil Rights to Save the Planet

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In the early 1960s, the scientific community began to criticize the damage humans were doing to the environment. With the publication of shocking books such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, passage of the Clean Air Act in 1963, and creation of the Environmental Protection Agency in 1970, concern for the natural world moved quickly from the scientific community to the political stage. Since the 1960s and 70s the environmental movement has changed significantly. In her paper from 2016 titled *Climate Disobedience*, Maxine Burkett, a Law professor at the William S. Richardson School of Law at the University of Hawai'i, details the growth of a new "climate movement" from the broader environmentalism of past decades. Burkett analyzes the parallels between the climate movement since the 1970s and the anti-slavery movement and the civil rights movement in the United States. With these past movements as an archetype for how a successful climate movement could grow, Burkett then proposes a "conceptual blueprint for the climate movement," in order to further strengthen its legitimacy (Burkett 37). In evaluating Burkett's analogies and considering ultra-recent changes to the political movement against climate change, especially the growth of the Sunrise Movement and Swedish activist Greta Thunberg's "school strike" movement, it is clear that the climate movement has made significant progress in meeting the goals Burkett established. These recent developments have further shifted the climate movement to a social justice approach, and have strengthened the support for environmental policy.

Burkett's analysis is based around a key distinction between what she deems the "mainstream" environmental movement which includes groups such as the Environmental Defense Fund, the Natural Resources Defense Council, the National Wildlife Federation, and the Sierra Club, and the "Environmental Justice" or "Climate Movement" approach which is more grassroots oriented. According to Marshall Ganz, an organizer from President Obama's 2008 campaign, who is cited in Petra Bartosiewicz and Marissa Miley's *The Too Polite Revolution*, "civic organizations such as the green groups have effectively become 'bodiless heads'—professionally staffed, Washington-based organizations that are largely disconnected from the public they purport to represent" (Bartosiewicz 71). These groups' approaches felt too distant and non-representative, and some "Big Green" groups were even criticized for having investments in fossil fuels (Burkett 12).

In contrast, "the environmental justice movement worked to realign notions of the environment and make the movement relevant to and for all races and classes" (Burkett 13). According to Majandra Rodriguez from the organization 350.org, an early leader in the climate movement, "a climate justice approach places at its center populations that are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change..." (Rodriguez). This distinction between arguments to "save the whales" or other distant animals and appeals to the environment in relation to human rights, represents a divide in the environmental movement. Because of a growing frustration with the ineffectiveness of "big green" tactics to create change, a grassroots movement emerged and

became what Burkett deems the “climate movement” (Burkett 13). This new form of grassroots organizing shifted the narrative of why we need policy to reduce climate change by utilizing a human rights lens and calling for nonviolent civil disobedience tactics to disrupt the status-quo. This new “Climate Movement” recognizes the connection between issues like water in Flint Michigan and toxic waste dumped in majority minority neighborhoods, and systemic racism and inequality.

Within the climate movement, there are significant similarities to past political movements such as the anti-slavery and civil rights movements in the United States. While Burkett acknowledges that “burning fossil fuels...will never be morally tantamount to the enslavement of millions of human beings,” the economic conditions of both the abolitionist movement and the climate movement are similar (Burkett 19). Marc Davidson analyzed the similarities between opposition to abolition and opposition to the 1997 Kyoto Protocol which called on industrialized countries to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to slow the effects of global warming. Davidson uses language from congressional hearings against the abolition of slavery, and congressional hearing against ratifying the Kyoto Protocol to demonstrate the rhetorical similarities in opposition to both groups (Davidson 72). Because abolishing slavery challenged a major part of the economy in the same way ending fossil fuel use does today, the anti-slavery movement and the climate movement have strikingly similar arguments. Burkett also finds a clear similarity between the emergence of civil rights “sit-ins” as a rejection of approaches taken by organizations such as the NAACP and the use of civil disobedience in grassroots climate activism to reject “Big Green” efforts (Burkett 25). As Christopher Schmit, a law professor at the Chicago-Kent College of Law writes in his article *Divided by Law* “the sit-in tactic was at once an expression of frustration with the older generation and their approach to civil rights and with the continued injustices of life in Jim Crow America.” (Schmidt 114). As the youth who initiated the sit-ins were rejecting prior approaches to civil rights efforts, the climate movement now rejects the efforts of “big green.” According to Burkett these parallels lend legitimacy to civil disobedience and protest by the current climate movement; by pointing to past movements which people now see as essential and just, grassroots leaders can justify their own acts of disruption (Burkett 18). However, this justification is only effective so long as the climate movement is viewed in the same way historical movements are. Burkett thus identifies five areas in which the climate movement must strengthen its similarities to past movements: creating a diverse coalition of interests, focusing on the threats to humanity, looking to spiritual leadership or values, emphasizing economic justice, and finding a simple unified message. In each of these categories, since Burkett’s writing in 2016, new advances have been made, however these are likely to be areas of continued struggle for the climate movement.

Burkett challenges the emerging climate movement to embrace a diverse set of tactics in pushing for climate change. She acknowledges that the more mainstream approaches of the “Big Green” and the disruptive environmental justice movement are both important tactics to create meaningful change, suggesting that the climate movement should build broad coalitions to address the issue from multiple angles (Burkett 43). Looking to the analogy between the climate movement and civil rights, Burkett adds “the impact of bridge-building between groups such as the NAACP and the student protests was exponential” (Burkett 43). The civil rights movement brought together many grassroots movements and consisted of a diverse set of approaches ranging from legal appeals in courts to sit ins and marches in order to create change; similarly the climate movement cannot ignore that there are many different tactics and interests within their movement.

As the climate movement has grown since 2016, united coalition building seems to be a common goal. 350.org, one of the original climate justice organizations that led the growth of this new climate movement published on their website “We are stronger when we collaborate... The only way we will be strong enough to put pressure on governments and stand up to the fossil fuel industry is if we all work together. That means bringing people together and building diverse coalitions” (“About 350”). The Sunrise movement, a radical youth led organization founded in 2017 which is known for several disruptive protests including sit-ins at Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi’s Office and at the Democratic National Committee’s headquarters, lists one of their ten principles as “We stand with other movements for change” (“Our Principles”). They explain; “When it makes sense, we work with other movements who share our values and are also working to win political power,” (“Our Principles”). The “Global Climate Strike” movement, which was inspired by Swedish teen Greta Thunberg who began protesting outside the Swedish Parliament building in 2018, has also partnered with a diverse range of organizations. Under the “partners and allies” section on their website, Global Climate strike lists environmental justice groups such as 350.org, and the Sunrise Movement, as well as groups Burkett considers “Big Green” such as The Sierra Club, The National Wildlife Federation, and the World Wildlife Fund (“Partners and Allies”). These partnerships and commitments to working together show that the growing climate activism organizations recognize the importance of a diverse approach.

Still, because the climate movement embodies so many different groups, approaches, and interests, they won't always align. While the Sunrise movement may value diversifying tactics used to create political change, that does not mean they will support “Big Green” efforts- especially if groups working to address climate issues still hold investments in fossil fuels. The group has shown that they have no tolerance for anyone who takes money from big fossil fuel corporations as evidenced by their “National Heat Week” in 2018 where protestors “put pressure on politicians corrupted by the influence of the fossil fuel industry,” including prominent democrats who have been known to support environmental policy such as New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo (“Our Principles”). Their willingness to criticize even prominent democrats, and radical disruptive techniques have alienated some political leaders in the conversation about climate policy. Despite the efforts to recognize the diverse range of groups working to address climate and environmental concerns, as the climate movement grows, organizations are likely to continue to clash in some areas with disagreements about what is the best approach.

The second of Burkett’s recommendations for the climate movement is to focus its messaging around the threat climate change poses to human dignity. Burkett argues “emphasizing the contemporary impacts on human communities and livelihoods is honest and strikes a balance with the perception of the environment as divorced from the lived experience. It may also ignite empathy for the challenges to human dignity that climate issues impact presently,” (Burkett 44). Just as the civil rights movement was about valuing human dignity, and was based upon ideals of freedom, equality, and democracy, the climate movement needs to focus a message around the very real threat climate change poses to peoples’ ways of life. In order to inspire popular support and build significant political pressure, as with any argument, an emotional appeal is key.

Simplicity is also key, as Burkett says in her fifth recommendation (Burkett 48). Recently, the climate movement has achieved both these goals in creating the emotional narrative around climate change that clearly connects it back to people’s lives. One student at the Global Climate Strike in

Philadelphia told the Philadelphia Inquirer that “If we don’t speak about it now, we might be dead later,” highlighting the personal fear and emotion which the climate movement is embracing (Orso). As Emily Witt highlights in her coverage of the Sunrise Movement’s protest in Speaker Pelosi’s office for The New Yorker, young activists have shifted the narrative away from a hypothetical future generation who will suffer from effects of climate change, to a current reality where they are that future, and the effects of climate change are already harming them (Witt). One Sunrise Movement protestor who participated in the sit-in in Speaker Pelosi’s office in 2018 said, “I fear the fires in the summers and the sun that stirs up the local fracking pollution and big car exhaust... It leaks into my home, my lungs, sneaking in with the heat, there is no escaping its choke” (Witt). Another claimed, “my nightmares are full of starving children and land that is too sick to bear food, of water that poisons that which it should heal, and of seas that are ever more creeping on our shores,” (Witt). The Sunrise Movement website explains that they “are ordinary young people who are scared about what the climate crisis means for the people and places we love,” and they are “united by the shared vision of a government that fights for dignity and justice for all” (“Our Principles”). Clearly, through the leadership of young people and the growth of more radical groups like the Sunrise Movement, the Climate Movement has created an urgent, clear, and emotional call to action which directly connects climate change to human lives.

In paralleling the Climate Movement to the Civil Rights Movement, Burkett also pushes the Climate movement to embrace spirituality. She points to the fact that in the civil rights movement, as well as the anti-slavery movement, many of the leaders were religious leaders and thus gathering places and organizing tactics were also based in religion (Burkett 45). While it is notable that Pope Francis called on Catholics to fight climate change in 2015, the Sunrise Movement, 350.org, and the Global Climate Strike all remain unaffiliated with any organized religion (“Pope Francis”).

The value of organized religion in the climate movement, however, may be less than Burkett suggests. According to a Pew Research survey conducted in 2018 and 2019, fewer Americans are associated with any religion; 26% of people identified as “religiously unaffiliated in 2018 and 2019, while only 17% did so in 2009. 64% of Millennials report attending church only a few times a year or less, and one third of democrats report having no religious affiliation (“In U.S.”). This departure from religious identities among millennials and democrats, means that the people most commonly supportive of the climate movement are less connected to organized religion. The Sunrise Movement highlights the diversity and inclusion of their movement, including diversity in religious beliefs on their website; “We are of many colors and creeds, from the plains, mountains, and coasts. A wealthy few want to divide us, but we value each other in our differences, and we are united in a shared fight to make real the promise of a society that works for all of us” (“Our Principles”). In this time of youth organization and diversity in the climate movement, an affiliation with organized religion like Burkett calls for, may not be helpful and might even create distrust or disdain for the climate movement among those who do not have religious affiliations.

Burkett’s final recommendation for the Climate Movement is to focus its message around economic justice. Economic justice - a restructuring of wealth and recognition of structural economic barriers- was a key goal of the civil rights movement and the anti-slavery movement, but Burkett acknowledges that it is “perhaps the final summit” which many prior movements have failed to fully achieve (Burkett 48). For the anti-slavery movement especially, economic restructuring was essential in their movement; in the US, abolition meant restructuring the

economy which was previously supported by slavery. According to Burkett, “climate change poses the same challenge to society that slavery posed, forcing it to confront the moral costs of the underlying economic structure” (Burkett 23). Naomi Klein writes in her book *This Changes Everything* that the reason we have failed to take the actions necessary to stop the dangerous effects of climate change, is that it directly conflicts with the capitalist economic system in place today. “Our economic system and our planetary system are now at war,” Klein writes, “Or, more accurately, our economy is at war with many forms of life on earth, including human life. What the climate needs to avoid collapse is a contraction in humanity’s use of resources; what our economic model demands to avoid collapse is unfettered expansion” (Klein 19). While ineffective Big Green efforts in the past have pursued climate policy that did not disrupt the economic systems, it is impossible to separate climate change from the economic structures in place.

The Green New Deal, a resolution which is supported by the Sunrise Movement and was submitted in Congress in 2019 by Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Senator Ed Markey shows how new climate activists recognize the need for economic justice in the response to climate change. In 2018, the Sunrise Movement protestors who occupied Speaker Pelosi’s office delivered a draft resolution for the Green New Deal, calling for the United States’ Economy to transition to a “greenhouse gas neutral economy” (Sweeney). According to Sean Sweeney of the Murphy Institute in New York, the Sunrise Movement protest “displayed a clear grasp of the fundamental connection between climate, class, and inequalities under capitalism, [and]showed that they understood the need for a radical program that can deal with these challenges simultaneously,” (Sweeney). On the Sunrise Movement Website, they clearly state that their goal is to change the economic and political structures which have led to climate change, and look to creating economic justice in the process of combating climate change (“Our Principles”). 350.org has also promoted an economic response to climate change through the “Fossil Free Divestment” movement which has spread primarily across college campuses and pushes divestment from the fossil fuel industry (“About 350”). The growing climate movement has become increasingly linked to calls for better jobs, better access to healthcare, access to education, and worker protections, all of which seek to address the flawed economic system that influences the US, and much of the world. The connection between an economy insistent on constant growth and profit over anything else and the damage we are doing to our environment has become painfully clear as the climate movement pushes for economic justice and a sustainable future.

The Sunrise Movement and the Green New Deal are frequently criticized for pushing radical economic change, and the resolution does set lofty goals for the US economy that would affect nearly every part of peoples’ lives. As Burkett warns, “critics may well employ words such as ‘unreason, impatience, implacability,’ all used to describe abolitionism, to deride the climate movement today” (Burkett 22). According to Klein however, this kind of radical change is the only option. Big Green tried for a decade to find solutions which would reduce emissions without disrupting capitalism, but the economic “free market system” will never allow for the kind of sacrifices necessary to save the planet (Klein 18). The Green New Deal now has 95 co-sponsors in the House of Representatives and 14 co-sponsors in the Senate, which is a significant increase in support since it was first introduced, but is nowhere near enough to see it actually passed (“Our Platform”). Notably, Speaker Pelosi is not a supporter of the resolution. Pushing an economic reform platform as radical as the one necessary for the climate movement will not be easy, and it is unfortunate that the climate movement also faces a ticking clock of climate change. While it is

inspiring that the climate movement has embraced the economic justice approach that Burkett recommends and which is essential in actually addressing the climate crisis, the magnitude of having to shift an entire way of thinking and economic structure is a significant challenge to the movement.

Maxine Burkett's five directives to the climate change movement (create a diverse coalition, focus on the threats to humanity, look to spiritual leadership or values, emphasize economic justice, and craft a simple message) are inspired by the similarities between the climate movement and the past civil rights and anti-slavery movements. In these past movements, grassroots organizing used civil disobedience to push for massive moral and economic shifts- just as the climate movement is doing today. Since 2016 when Burkett published her writing, the climate movement has grown significantly and has in fact adopted many of the recommendations Burkett makes. Going forward, the climate movement still faces significant political challenges in trying to recognize the range of interests and people affected by climate change, creating political support for the revolutionary changes necessary, and actually implementing the structural changes to reduce carbon emissions globally. The immense threat of climate change calls for an equally massive and historic response. As Klein writes, "during extraordinary historical moments—both world wars, the aftermath of the Great Depression, or the peak of the civil rights era—the usual categories dividing “activists” and “regular people” became meaningless because the project of changing society was so deeply woven into the project of life. Activists were, quite simply, everyone” (Klein 395). While the threat of global warming is new and unprecedented, history is full of examples of large movements daring to call for massive social, political, and economic change. As the climate movement seeks to address this new threat, continuing to learn from and model efforts after similar social movements from the past will help build the power and unity necessary to tackle such an enormous challenge.

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Reflection

In writing my paper “Looking to Civil Rights to Save the Planet,” which was a final paper for my Writing 106 class, I put together all the research skills and strategies I had learned in various classes my first year at AU and was able to use library’s databases to find a variety of sources to support a nuanced and detailed argument. I found myself diving into rabbit holes deeper than were probably necessary for the class assignment but came out the other side excited about my project and eager to read more. It was rewarding to be able to navigate research databases and academic writing, and to be able to develop an interesting argument on a topic I care about because it showed that my class time did help me improve as a writer and researcher.

When I began this assignment, my idea was to compare youth climate activism to the anti-Vietnam War movement and civil rights movements in the 1960s and 1970 – especially in terms of their rhetoric. I used the library’s search tool to find academic journal articles analyzing youth climate activism, using key words such as “youth activism” and “climate change” and “rhetorical analysis.” I then repeated these searches with “civil rights” and “Vietnam War” instead of climate change, hoping to find research I could synthesize in my paper. As a member of the School of Public Affairs Leadership program, I have worked with Olivia Ivey and learned techniques for navigating the library’s data bases, which made my search much more efficient. I remembered to look not only at sources cited by articles I found but also at sources which cited the article to find the most recent academic conversations on the subject. I also used the search tool to look for newspaper article, especially to find primary source coverage of rhetoric from activism in the 1960s and 70s.

It was through this initial searching that I came across Maxine Burkett’s article, “Climate Disobedience” and hit a wall. Burkett’s article effectively laid out the parallels and arguments I was planning to draw in my own paper, except hers was fully published, 50 pages long, and far more detailed than I would be able to write for class. I felt completely defeated: why do any research when it seems like everything worth researching has already been done? How was I supposed to write something new and interesting when practically everything there is to write about has already been written?

In talking it out with my professor and reading more of Burkett’s article, I decided to build off and critique Burkett’s writing rather than echo her arguments. I dove into Burkett’s article, reading and rereading it, tracking down her sources from the footnotes and reading them, and then connecting the major points to more recent sources – including to popular sources and books required in the assignment. I got so excited about this analysis that I talked my family’s ears off about it at dinner – since I was now doing class from home due to the pandemic. Each time I found something in Burkett’s writing that connected with another source I had read or a current event I knew, I got extremely excited. It was rewarding to be able to understand and pick apart Burkett’s argument and then have the tools and skills to find sources I needed to support my own position

As a student learning to research and write it is hard when it feels like everything has already been written. This research paper, and the process of developing my argument, was a great reminder that I am actually learning valuable things. I was able to put into practice skills I learned in seemingly tedious class exercises and overcame a moment when it seemed like all my research was pointless and I would have to start over. I am grateful to know how to use the library's search tools to access so many databases, journals, and books, and to have been able to use these resources to explore an issue I am excited about.