

“Hope vs Hopium:” whose interests are served by the dichotomy of climate hope and doom?

Nick Gottlieb¹

¹Simon Fraser University

¹nick_gottlieb@sfu.ca

Keywords: climate communication, political economy, political ecology, capitalism

The dichotomy of climate hope versus climate “doomism” that dominates the climate communication world tends to involve, on the one hand, highlighting market-driven trends towards energy transition and incremental but woefully insufficient political victories, and on the other, asserting that there is an increasingly significant political force that has “given up” on climate mitigation – “doomers” – who must be deplatformed. Whose interests are served by this frame? This paper works through a series of examples to examine what these discursive tactics accomplish from a political economic perspective.

The emphasis on hope drives two problematic trends in climate communication. First, it encourages communicators to couple troubling information about new climate research — for example, on phenomena like tipping points (Herr, Osaka and Stone, 2023) and the possible acceleration of global heating (Hausfather, 2023) — with assurances of progress and of the economic inevitability of energy transition. But the energy transition is far from inevitable, and what little progress has been made could easily be undone. Rather than encouraging political action, this form of hope risks downplaying the need for transformative change and the committed politics that might realize it. Second, it creates a paternalistic attitude towards information-sharing that manifests as both self-censorship and censorship: reporters, scientists, and even journals (Hansen, 2023) deliberately moderate language to avoid scaring “the public.” This technocratic paternalism risks accelerating the rise of far-right climate anti-politics by (further) establishing climate politics as a realm of undemocratic neoliberal governance prone to attack by reactionary populism.

Hope comes coupled with a call to denounce so-called climate doomism. In one notable example, the writer Rebecca Solnit (2023) went so far as blaming “climate doomers” for the potential future loss of “the climate battle.” But does this narrative of doomism as the new denialism hold water? The behavioral science appears far from settled (and the discipline itself tends to naturalize capitalist subjectivity and the broader social context that are, themselves, driving the climate crisis). Furthermore, there is little evidence to suggest that the kind of doomism we are warned against represents a serious political obstacle to climate action. So, what does this discursive tactic accomplish? I argue it serves primarily to neutralize calls for more transformative global change — calls that question the feasibility of mitigating the climate crisis under capitalism. The accusation of doomism shuts down debate over the need for more radically transformative approaches to climate change, helping to reproduce capitalism in the face of its own growing ecological contradictions.

Together, these twinned calls for hope and against doomism are limiting the space of acceptable climate discourse through a carrot and stick approach that amplifies voices that tacitly presume the continued operation of capitalism and proscribes those that identify capitalism itself as the proximate cause of the climate crisis. A more powerful and durable approach to engendering hope through communication should seek to explain the political economic drivers of the climate crisis and to communicate what leverage points are available through historically grounded analysis.

References

Hansen, J. (2023) 'To Understand and Protect the Home Planet', Climate Science, Awareness and Solutions, 27 October. Available at: <https://mailchi.mp/caa/to-understand-and-protect-the-home-planet?e=215896d834> (Accessed: 1 April 2024).

Hansen, J., Sato, M. and Kharecha, P. (2024) 'Global Warming Acceleration: Hope vs Hopium', Climate Science, Awareness and Solutions, 29 March. Available at: <http://www.columbia.edu/~jeh1/mailings/2024/Hopium.MarchEmail.2024.03.29.pdf> (Accessed: 2 April 2024).

Hausfather, Z. (2023) 'Opinion | I Study Climate Change. The Data Is Telling Us Something New.', The New York Times, 13 October. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/13/opinion/climate-change-excessive-heat-2023.html> (Accessed: 1 April 2024).

Herr, A., Osaka, S. and Stone, M. (2023) 'The 7 climate tipping points that could change the world forever', Grist, August. Available at: <https://grist.org/climate-tipping-points-amazon-greenland-boreal-forest/> (Accessed: 1 April 2024).

Solnit, R. (2023) 'We can't afford to be climate doomers', The Guardian, 26 July. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/jul/26/we-cant-afford-to-be-climate-doomers> (Accessed: 1 April 2024).