

“HOPE VS HOPIUM:” WHOSE INTERESTS ARE SERVED BY THE DICHOTOMY OF CLIMATE HOPE AND DOOM?

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ARE DISCOURSES OF HOPE AND DOOM NATURALIZING CAPITALISM AND UNDERMINING CALLS FOR MORE RADICAL TRANSFORMATION?

BACKGROUND

- Ideas of “climate hope” range from a narrow strategy for inducing behavioural change to a more expansive utopianism (including at this conference)
- Attempts to communicate hope in the wild are often paired with or juxtaposed against a supposed rising tide of “climate doomism”

OBJECTIVE

This work asks whether these twinned calls for climate hope and against doomism are, in practice, limiting the space of acceptable climate discourse, amplifying voices that tacitly presume the continued operation of capitalism and proscribing those that identify capitalism itself as a cause of the crisis

REFERENCES



https://tinyurl.com/hopevshopium

Discourses of climate hope

“Energy transition is inevitable”

- Popular communication of new developments in climate science are frequently paired with unrealistic assurances about the degree to which an energy transition is already underway and inevitable

“There is some reason for cautious hope. The world is on the brink of a clean energy transition. Prices of solar, wind and batteries have plummeted over the past 15 years, and for much of the world, solar power is now the cheapest form of electricity.”

This article opens by describing recent temperature records as “Absolutely gobsmackingly bananas” and establishes that we have experienced an abrupt and largely unexpected acceleration of global heating (Hausfather, 2023)

“Social tipping points are hard to measure, and even harder to predict. But there are signs that they may be slowly approaching. In 2009, a new solar farm cost 223 percent more than a new coal plant. Today, those numbers have roughly flipped. That means that one of Otto and her colleagues’ key thresholds is within reach.”

This comes at the end of an article detailing new developments in the science of biophysical climate “tipping points.” It seeks to counter the “bad news” with this strong implication that “social tipping points,” including most prominently the cost profile of renewables, will ensure an imminent energy transition (Herr, Osaka, and Stone, 2023)

- Risks *demobilizing* by creating false sense that “things seem like we’re moving in the right direction,” as Greta Thunberg put it (Wallace-Wells, 2023)
- Falling cost of renewables does not guarantee reality or speed of energy transition (Christophers, 2024)

“The truth will scare the public into inaction”

- “Scientific reticence” (Hansen, 2007) has caused self-censorship in climate science and a bias towards “erring on the side of least drama” (Brysse et al, 2013)
- Instances of direct censorship of climate research by journals (Hansen, 2023)
- Antilla (2010) identified media avoidance of covering tipping points research, attributed to fear of “alarmism”

“too much focus on tipping points could backfire...Tipping points are so scary that they could feed into a narrative of hopelessness”

A call for downplaying the science of tipping points expressed clearly by a popular climate communicator in an article on tipping points (Herr, Osaka, and Stone, 2023)

- Scientific censorship may be caused by a wide range of factors, but the imperative to communicate hope encourages “erring on the side of least” alarm — i.e. withholding information and downplaying risks
- There is some evidence from COVID-19 (i.e. Zubčić and Giacomini, 2024) that suggests by analogy that this kind of epistemic paternalism can fuel far-right anti-climate politics

“Doomism is the new denial”

“Some days I think that if we lose the climate battle, it’ll be due in no small part to this defeatism among the comfortable in the global north”

This op-ed asserts that doomers — “people searching harder for evidence we’re defeated than that we can win” — are bordering on the same level of responsibility for climate change as denialism. (Solnit, 2023)

“Doomist thinking is dangerous because it breeds paralysis and disengagement. . .No wonder a growing number of scientists now compare climate doomists with the climate deniers”

The language of “doomism as the new denialism” has become widespread in recent years, promoted by prominent climate communicators (Clark, 2023)

- Anti-doomism discourse assumes but never demonstrates that doomism — as in, climate nihilism — is a significant political force. Evidence presented is limited to anecdotes, fringe figures (e.g. Roy Scranton, Guy McPherson), and an equation of climate anxiety with “doomism”
- Communicators branded “doomers” based on their insistence that climate science writ large has tended towards conservatism or that progress on climate change has been insufficient
- Even when not directed specifically, this creates a chilling effect that feeds into self-censorship

WHAT DO THESE DISCOURSES ACCOMPLISH, AND WHOSE INTERESTS DO THEY SERVE?

- Coupling “bad news” climate science with optimistic forecasts of energy transition communicates that nothing has to fundamentally change, naturalizing the continuation of capitalism in the face of its epochal ecological crisis
- Construction of “doomism” functions as a tool for the dismissal and deplatforming of voices arguing that mitigating climate change requires a more complete transformation of society
- These disciplinary processes restrict communications that question the feasibility of mitigating the climate crisis under capitalism; they produce and are produced by capitalist realism (Heron, 2023)

TOWARDS A MORE CONSTRUCTIVE DISCOURSE OF CLIMATE HOPE?

- Hope should be engendered through communications focused on the possibilities of a world defined by climate justice — a climate utopianism — not a paternalistic insistence that everything is fine



KC Green, “On Fire”

“only a return to explicitly utopian thinking can clarify the minimal conditions for the preservation of human solidarity in the face of convergent planetary crises” (Davis, 2010)