



# **COUNTERFUTURES**

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# Communicating for systemic change: Perspectives from the New Zealand climate movement

Jonathan Oosterman

The ideological parameters of the extra-parliamentary Left have, currently, next to no overlap with the conceptual space of parliamentary politics and, by extension, with much of ‘public opinion’. To acknowledge such is not to reject engagement with this domain. It does, however, highlight the gaps that Left ideas have to cross before they can take root more broadly in society.<sup>1</sup>

**T**HE CLIMATE CRISIS significantly magnifies the urgency of implementing systemic change. Globally, we have little time remaining in which to bring about the social, political, and economic transformation needed to avoid triggering amplifying feedbacks and runaway climate chaos. In this context,

1 The Editorial Board, ‘Beginnings,’ *Counterfutures* 1 (2016): 12.

a core challenge is how to mobilise people and inspire widespread action to create this transformation. Understanding current approaches to climate communication is crucial for ensuring that our communication practices play the vital role they will need to in the coming decades. As Jonathan Rowson and Adam Corner write: ‘there is no shortage of bright ideas for climate policies that would keep us within a safe carbon budget. . . . The bigger challenge is how do ‘we’ . . . go about persuading people [so] that policies like these happen’.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, and more broadly, there is no shortage of systemic critiques and ideas for systemic change, and attention to how these are communicated is essential. In this article, I therefore aim to further develop our understanding of current approaches to communicating for systemic change. In doing so, I take up the implied challenge from the first *Counterfutures*’ editorial, quoted above: if the gap between movement framing and public framing is large, how can we truly engage with the domain of public opinion, bridge this gap, and thereby catalyse the systemic change we see as necessary?

There is no simple answer to what constitutes effective climate communication.<sup>3</sup> Research participants identified a number of contextual influences: a campaign’s focus; the type of activity during which the communication takes place;<sup>4</sup> the degree of engagement the activity allows for; and the audience addressed. In this article, I do not aim to provide a comprehensive set of

2 Jonathan Rowson and Adam Corner, *The Seven Dimensions of Climate Change* (RSA and COIN, 2015), 28, accessed March 8, 2017, <https://www.thersa.org/discover/publications-and-articles/reports/the-seven-dimensions-of-climate-change-introducing-a-new-way-to-think-talk-and-act/>.

3 Susanne Moser, ‘Communicating Climate Change: History, Challenges, Process and Future Directions,’ *WIREs Climate Change* 1, no. 11 (2010), 33.

4 For example, a street stall, public talk, or workshop.

guidelines that define effective climate communication.<sup>5</sup> My primary aim is to understand current communication practices.<sup>6</sup> To achieve this, I take a movement-centred activist-scholarship approach to research on climate communication decision-making via in-depth semi-structured interviews with 14 members of the New Zealand climate movement. My intent is to synthesise the perspectives and experiences of New Zealand climate movement participants. Through this, I hope to offer a useful analysis of significant dynamics in climate communication and shed light on dynamics in systemic change communication more broadly.

Research participants variously contended that the climate crisis is caused by our current political and economic system, and that systemic change is urgently required in order to cease fuelling the climate crisis. Katherine Peet (Network Waitangi Ōtautahi, Sustainable Ōtautahi Christchurch) spoke of the ‘crisis that we face, brought on by the economic system and manifesting itself in climate’. Other research participants described the need for a ‘paradigm shift’ in society, and for ‘major structural changes to the economy’. Niamh O’Flynn (350 Aotearoa) commented:

Climate change [is] the symptom of a society that’s really dysfunctional. . . . We have a pretty sick society and a pretty sick way of living and dealing with economics that has to change . . . and I think

5 See, for example, Jessica Thompson and Sarah Schweizer, ‘The Conventions of Climate Change Communication’ (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the NCA 94th Annual Convention, TBA, San Diego, 2008), accessed June 23, 2017, [http://citation.allacademic.com/meta/p\\_mla\\_apa\\_research\\_citation/2/5/7/4/1/p257413\\_index.html](http://citation.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/2/5/7/4/1/p257413_index.html); Adam Corner, Tom Crompton, Scott Davidson, Richard Hawkins, Tim Kasser et al., *Communicating Climate Change to Mass Public Audiences* (Climate Change Communication Advisory Group, 2010), accessed June 23, 2017, <http://psych.cf.ac.uk/understandingrisk/docs/cccag.pdf>; Adam Corner and Jamie Clarke, *Talking Climate: From Research to Practice in Public Engagement* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

6 With a particular focus on face-to-face communication.

slowly . . . we need to be pushing people to say this. . . . And obviously [climate change is] happening fast so we do need to stop the carbon emissions first and foremost, but [we do] have to eventually change the whole system.

In line with the comments of research participants, I take the immediate goal of climate communication to be behavioural change centred on reducing carbon footprints and increasing political participation, building public capacity to engage with climate issues, and increasing public demand for adequate climate policy. I take the ultimate goal to be social and political transformation, via changed social norms and mass political mobilisation, building on behavioural change ‘from the ground up’ to embed this transformation culturally and politically.

Tim Jackson notes that, globally, we need not only to decarbonise and ‘fix the economy’, but also to address ‘the social logic of consumerism’.<sup>7</sup> Research participants similarly described ‘systemic change’ as requiring changes in both political economy and culture. These can be addressed in communication through economic and moral framing—communication that, in the words of research participants, ‘highlights’ or ‘foregrounds’ economic or moral aspects of the climate crisis. Given the centrality of morality and economics to decision-making around climate action, this article focuses primarily on moral and economic framing within climate communication.

Here, I use a broad conception of framing, consistent with George Lakoff’s description of frames as ‘mental structures that shape the way we see the world’.<sup>8</sup> I assume that it is impos-

7 Tim Jackson, *Prosperity Without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet* (London: Earthscan, 2009), 143. Similarly, we need to address the social logic of capitalism.

8 George Lakoff, *The All New Don’t Think of an Elephant* (Vermont: Chelsea Green, 2014), xi-xii.

sible to avoid framing,<sup>9</sup> and that framing is both expressive and strategic: it articulates a worldview or ideology, and may also act to convince and inspire.<sup>10</sup> I approach framing ‘as part of a process of participatory public engagement’,<sup>11</sup> whereby climate movement participants engage with people and communicate their understanding of climate action, and undertake actions that draw attention to this framing. If successful, they influence the public’s own ways of framing the issue, inspiring new ways of thinking, feeling, and acting.<sup>12</sup>

Two principal bodies of work address climate framing: climate-communication literature,<sup>13</sup> and climate-movement literature.<sup>14</sup> To date, there has been little communication between these two bodies of work.<sup>15</sup> Further, as Susanne Moser observes, there has been a ‘lack of exchange among those doing the communicating and those researching it’.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, there is a lack of detailed climate-communication literature that takes a movement-centred perspective, a gap I seek to address in this

9 Ibid.

10 Cf. David Westby, ‘Strategic Imperative, Ideology, and Frame,’ *Mobilization* 7, no. 3 (2002).

11 Corner and Clarke, *Talking Climate*, 60.

12 See, for example, Robert Benford, ‘An Insider’s Critique of the Social Movement Framing Perspective,’ *Sociological Inquiry* 67, no. 4 (1997).

13 See, for example, Moser, ‘Communicating Climate Change’; Susanne Moser, ‘Reflections on Climate Change Communication Research and Practice in the Second Decade of the 21st Century,’ *WIREs Climate Change* 7, no. 3 (2016); Victoria Wibeck, ‘Enhancing Learning, Communication and Public Engagement about Climate Change,’ *Environmental Education Research* 20, no. 3 (2014).

14 See, for example, Matthias Dietz and Heiko Garrelts, eds., *Routledge Handbook of the Climate Change Movement* (Oxford: Routledge, 2014); Jennifer Hadden, *Networks in Contention: The Divisive Politics of Climate Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Peter North, ‘The Politics of Climate Activism in the UK: A Social Movement Analysis,’ *Environment and Planning A* 43, no. 7 (2011).

15 Cf. Moser, ‘Reflections,’ 351.

16 Moser, ‘Communicating Climate Change,’ 33.

work.<sup>17</sup> In addition, this research is intended to complement previous work on framing by giving attention to ‘the multi-layered complexities of frames and framing activities’.<sup>18</sup> In doing so, I seek to create a dynamic model of climate communication that avoids static conceptions of frames that are theorised in isolation from, or in simple opposition to, each other.

This article adds to the limited body of academic work on the New Zealand climate movement. It is part of a broader project I have undertaken on communication practices in that movement,<sup>19</sup> this being the first extended piece of academic research in this area that draws on perspectives from across the movement. Research participants included campaigners, educators, permaculturalists, community-project co-ordinators, protesters, and politicians. They were involved with campaigns and projects based around coal mining, oil drilling, fracking, transport, food and farming, divestment, community-building, and broader sustainability issues. All research participants spoke in an individual capacity in the interviews; however, organisational affiliations are noted to provide context.

I have grounded my work in the idea that activist research should not be ‘about’ social movements but rather ‘from and for’ them.<sup>20</sup> To this end, I undertook two interviews with each

17 The interview material could also valuably be brought into discussion with the literatures on other forms of communication for systemic change (feminist communication, socialist communication etc.); however, this is beyond the scope of this article.

18 Benford, ‘An Insider’s Critique,’ 422. See also, David Snow, Robert Benford, Jolly McCammon, Lyndi Hewitt and Scott Fitzgerald, ‘The Emergence, Development, and Future of the Framing Perspective: 25+ Years Since “Frame Alignment”’, *Mobilization* 19, no. 1 (2014).

19 Jonathan Oosterman, ‘Making Climate Action Meaningful: Communication Practices in the New Zealand Climate Movement,’ (Master’s thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 2016); Jonathan Oosterman, ‘Making Climate Action Meaningful: Communication Practices in the New Zealand Climate Movement,’ *New Zealand Sociology* 31, no. 5 (2016); see also [www.climatevoicesaotearoa.wordpress.com](http://www.climatevoicesaotearoa.wordpress.com)

20 Mayo Fuster Morell, ‘Action Research: Mapping the Nexus of Research and Political Action,’ *Interface* 1, no. 1 (2009): 41.

research participant and integrated multiple feedback processes into the research. I have foregrounded the voices of activists, in the belief that detailed attention to the ‘socially lived theorizing’ of movement participants is a crucial component of developing nuanced analyses of social movements,<sup>21</sup> and offering ‘a way of grappling with those real, immediate questions that emerge from a transformative project’.<sup>22</sup> In what follows, I build from this movement knowledge with active choices of description and interpretation,<sup>23</sup> offering back the analysis I develop ‘to activists, scholars and others for further reflection and debate’.<sup>24</sup>

I begin by discussing the balance communicators strike between ‘speaking their own truth’ and ‘meeting people where they are at’.<sup>25</sup> I describe the communication ‘gap’ that makes climate communication so challenging, before considering elements of how movement participants respond to this challenge. In examining the communication of climate ‘solutions’, I describe the risks inherent in the balance between ‘speaking your own truth’ and ‘meeting people where they are at’, and consider the

- 21 María Isabel Casas-Cortés, Michal Osterweil and Dana Powell, ‘Blurring Boundaries: Recognizing Knowledge-Practices in the Study of Social Movements,’ *Anthropological Quarterly* 81, no. 1 (2008): 47.
- 22 David Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2004), 9.
- 23 Through my work, I seek to give voice to climate movement participants; however, I also see it as important to acknowledge the active role I have necessarily played in choosing both the perspectives I ‘give voice to’ and the manner in which I do this (cf. Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, ‘Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology,’ *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 (2006): 80). These choices were based in my own ‘prior knowledge and theoretical preconceptions’ (Kathy Charmaz, ‘Constructionism and the Grounded Theory Method,’ in *Handbook of Constructionist Research*, eds., J.A. Holstein and J.F. Gubrium (New York: Guilford Press, 2008), 402) and developed through my engagement in the research.
- 24 Jeffrey Juris, ‘Practicing Militant Ethnography with the Movement for Global Resistance in Barcelona,’ in *Constituent Imagination: Militant Investigation*, Collective Theorization, eds., Stephen Shukaitis and David Graeber (Oakland, California: AK Press, 2007), 173.
- 25 For a more detailed exploration of this theme, see Oosterman, ‘Making Climate Action Meaningful’ (thesis); Oosterman, ‘Making Climate Action Meaningful’ (article).



emotional elements of this balance. This balance is central to understanding the role of moral and economic framing in climate communication, which I address in the remainder of this article. I then introduce several important elements of moral and economic framing before discussing the communication of what I term ‘moral economic critiques’ and ‘moral economic solutions’. I address the importance of both diagnostic (problem-focused) and prognostic (solution-focused) framing in climate communication, considering how moral and economic framing can be combined in the communication of both systemic critiques and the ‘real alternatives’ that make up systemic change.<sup>26</sup>

## Making climate action meaningful

To describe the dynamics underlying how climate communicators balance and blend moral and economic framing, I discuss how communicators seek to bridge the communication ‘gap’ and ‘make climate action meaningful’ through balancing ‘speaking their own truth’ and ‘meeting people where they are at’.<sup>27</sup> A version of this dynamic was expressed by Dayle Takitimu (Te Whānau-ā-Apanui, Ngāti Porou) when she spoke of ‘trying to get as broad support as possible . . . while still remaining true to ourselves’.

We need a ‘social consensus’ on climate action.<sup>28</sup> Instead,

26 Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2014), 343.

27 The term ‘speaking your own truth’ is a slightly altered version of a comment made by research participant Steve Abel (Greenpeace), while ‘meeting people where they are at’ is a phrase commonly used in discussions of communication. Both phrases were introduced into later research interviews to verify their usefulness.

28 Andrew Hoffman and P. Devereaux Jennings, ‘The Social and Psychological Foundations of Climate Change,’ *Solutions* 3, no. 4 (2012): 59.

we have ‘climate silence’:<sup>29</sup> ‘people literally don’t like to think or talk about the subject’.<sup>30</sup> The climate movement confronts an increasingly urgent problem, combined with an unpromising mix of active resistance, lukewarm concern, low engagement, and a lack of hope. Research participants described the public’s disconnection from, and confusion about, the climate issue. Matt Morris (Edible Canterbury, Soil & Health Association) commented, ‘I don’t think most people understand the scale of the crisis’.<sup>31</sup> Adding to this, Gary Cranston (Climate Justice Aotearoa) observed that ‘People become less open to hearing that structural change is necessary [when] they’ve already been told something that sounds easier to them, and they prefer that’. Jeanette Fitzsimons (Coal Action Network Aotearoa, previously co-leader of the Green Party) described how communication efforts must be made ‘against the clamour’ from business, politicians, the media, and mainstream society: ‘We can flog ourselves about [how] “Our communication isn’t good enough”, and sometimes it isn’t, but sometimes it’s just that the noise coming in the other direction is huge, you know, you’re fighting into a hundred-miles-an-hour gale going the other way’.

Opposition to climate action involves ‘counter-framing’. Several research participants suggested that most climate counter-framing is economic in nature, and supported by powerful vested interests. I identified two common forms of economic counter-framing in comments by research participants: (i) ‘benefits of the status quo’ framing that involves comments around

29 Rowson and Corner, *The Seven Dimensions*, 4.

30 John Immerwahr, ‘Waiting For a Signal: Public Attitudes Toward Global Warming, the Environment and Geophysical Research,’ *Public Agenda*, American Geophysical Union (1999), 13, accessed March 8, 2017, <http://research.policyarchive.org/5662.pdf>.

31 Cf. Kari Norgaard, *Cognitive and Behavioral Challenges in Responding to Climate Change* (Policy Research Working Paper 4940, World Bank, 2009), 18, accessed March 8, 2017, <http://pages.uoregon.edu/norgaard/pdf/Cognitive-Behavioral-Climate-Change-Norgaard-2009.pdf>

'how fossil fuels have enabled us this standard of living'; and (ii) 'environment versus the economy' framing that highlights the costs of climate action (in terms of standard of living, money, and jobs). Counter-framing often depicts supporters of the status quo 'as rational realists . . . and political detractors as extremists out of touch with economic and political reality'.<sup>32</sup> The current lack of adequate climate action suggests that such counter-framing resonates with a wide audience. Underpinning the strong resistance to adequate climate action are people's hopes and fears around being able to live satisfying, happy, and prosperous lives. These hopes and fears are tied into beliefs about economics, which are strongly influenced by the current political economy.<sup>33</sup> Thus, Jeanette Fitzsimons spoke about people's fear of losing jobs, and Robina McCurdy (Institute of Earthcare Education Aotearoa) described the 'fear . . . of not having your current lifestyle'.

The flipside of this is the systemic issue of political disempowerment, which may manifest as apathy or cynicism.<sup>34</sup> Niamh O'Flynn suggested that people do not recognise that 'we have the power to make the changes that need to happen now'. Research participants also spoke about how the emotional weight of the climate crisis may threaten people's identity and elicit feelings of hopelessness or despair, thereby further impacting upon people's sense of social and political efficacy. Jeanette Fitzsimons stated: 'I think the biggest reason why people turn off and don't

32 Michael Bourk, Jennifer Rock and Lloyd Davis, 'Mediating the Science: Symbolic and Structural Influences on Communicating Climate Change through New Zealand's Television News,' *Environmental Communication* (2015): 9.

33 Many commentators refer in various ways to the 'stranglehold' of 'market logic'. See, e.g., Klein, *This Changes Everything*, 17.

34 See, for example, Kathleen Cross, Shane Gunster, Marcelina Piotrowski and Shannon Daub, *News Media and Climate Politics: Civic Engagement and Political Efficacy in a Climate of Reluctant Cynicism* (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2015), 35, accessed March 8, 2017, [https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/BC%20Office/2015/09/CCPA-BC-News\\_Media\\_Climate\\_Politics.pdf](https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/BC%20Office/2015/09/CCPA-BC-News_Media_Climate_Politics.pdf).

engage is that it's just too big. Once you take it seriously, it's overwhelming'.

These comments from research participants make it clear that effective climate communication is immensely difficult. New Zealand climate-movement participants respond to this challenge through attempting to 'meet people where they are at'. A core element of this is making an emotional connection and an emotional impact. Climate communicators seek to speak about climate action in a way 'that people can relate to', avoiding jargon and 'sounding like an academic'. Paul Young (Generation Zero) spoke of the importance of 'speaking to values that the people you're trying to convince have, not just your own values'. In Nicole Masters' (Integrity Soils) words, 'I've got to kind of meet them halfway and then take them on a journey to somewhere they weren't expecting to go'. Specific approaches to 'meeting people where they are at' described by research participants included dialogue and ongoing engagement, and linking the local and the global.

While 'speaking your own truth' and 'meeting people where they are at' can be complementary, there is also the risk that they will conflict. If movement participants do not go far enough towards meeting people where they are at, there is the risk of having 'no effect, or a negative effect on your listener'; there is the potential for either making no emotional impact, or, alternatively, emotionally overwhelming people with the weight of the climate crisis. On the other hand, if movement participants go too far from 'speaking their own truth', the integrity of their message will be undermined, and once again nothing will be achieved, or the underlying drivers of the climate crisis may even be reinforced. In my analysis, these risks are central to climate communication decision-making.<sup>35</sup>

35 Cf. Tom Crompton, Common Cause: *The Case for Working with our Cultural Values* (WWF-UK, 2010), 68-9.

One way communicators strike a balance between making an emotional impact and avoiding emotionally overwhelming people is through blending what might be considered the unavoidably fear-inducing aspects of the climate crisis with a focus on empowerment and active hope. In the words of Mike Smith (Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Kahu; Greenpeace), ‘You’ve got to have a balance between the fear element of it and the hope for the future’. Consistent with this, many research participants suggested that at least some attention to solutions (prognostic framing) is necessary:<sup>36</sup> ‘[If you don’t] leave them with what’s possible, you’d just have some depressed people who’d continue doing what they’re doing’ (Nicole Masters). Gary Cranston spoke of the Beautiful Solutions Aotearoa project, which is compiling climate solutions from around New Zealand.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, Robina McCurdy spoke about her documentary-film work with the Localising Food Project,<sup>38</sup> stating: ‘I wanted to make these initiatives known from one area to another . . . so people could know . . . what’s possible’. Kathleen Cross and colleagues describe the value of such forms of communication: ‘As one’s awareness and understanding of examples and forms of political success grow, so too does one’s capacity not only to resist cynicism in oneself but also to intervene and disrupt its hegemonic presence in everyday political discourse’.<sup>39</sup>

As described in this section, the balance between ‘speaking your own truth’ and ‘meeting people where they are at’ includes consideration of the communication ‘gap’, communication risks, and the emotional elements of communication.

36 Cf. Sarah Pralle, ‘Agenda-setting and Climate Change,’ *Environmental Politics* 18, no. 5 (2009): 793; Wibeck, ‘Enhancing Learning,’ 398-9.

37 [www.beautifulsolutions.org.nz](http://www.beautifulsolutions.org.nz) – The solutions presented on this website are consistent with those discussed later in this article.

38 [www.localisingfood.com](http://www.localisingfood.com)

39 Cross et al., *News Media*, 30.

It is this dynamic that provides the necessary framework for understanding the use of moral and economic framing in climate communication.

## Moral and economic framing

Given the centrality of morality and economics to decision-making around climate action, the balance communicators strike between ‘speaking their own truth’ and ‘meeting people where they are at’ can be seen in the ways they balance and blend moral and economic framing. In this section, I discuss core elements of moral and economic framing, the balance climate communicators strike between the two, and the risks inherent in these forms of framing.

Central to moral framing are appeals to people’s moral values. Gareth Hughes (Green Party) commented:

In history, all successful campaigns have appealed to people’s hearts, have been morally based, and have really played on values. With climate change, we’re not speaking to specific values, but universal values: the planet we live on, which is a universal experience . . . it’s future generations. . . . It’s not hard to speak to a values-based framework when it comes to climate change.

In addition to this, research participants spoke of a moral transformation as an important, or essential, element of an adequate response to the climate crisis.<sup>40</sup> Niamh O’Flynn stated: ‘I see it as changing the culture around fossil fuels, changing what’s

40 Cf. Jennifer Hadden, ‘From Science to Justice: What Explains Framing Shifts in Climate Activism,’ *Mobilizing Ideas*, May 4, 2015, accessed March 8, 2017, <https://mobilizingideas.wordpress.com/2015/05/04from-science-to-justice-what-explains-framing-shifts-in-climate-activism/>.

okay and what's not okay, and getting fossil fuels to a point where we see them . . . on a par with weapons and bombs'.<sup>41</sup> Part of such a moral transformation is 'question[ing] the dominance of today's individualistic and materialistic values'<sup>42</sup> and normalising the articulation of 'intrinsic and self-transcendent values . . . in public discourse'.<sup>43</sup>

Research participants described the use of both social-justice and ecological forms of moral framing. An example of an ecological form of systemic framing that has moral elements comes from Steve Abel (Greenpeace), who spoke about the importance of addressing 'the root of the problem', calling the climate crisis 'the latest, most obvious' example of the separation of humans from nature. The connection of such issues with the current political economy was clear in research participants' comments; however, it was also clear that participants chose at certain times to put the emphasis elsewhere in communication.

As with other research participants, Mike Smith (Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Kahu) and Dayle Takitimu (Te Whānau-ā-Apanui, Ngāti Porou) spoke in a manner that indicated the use of moral framing. Magnifying this, however, is the way using such framing is embedded in the Māori cultural context, reflecting a strong sense of identity (in Dayle Takitimu's words, 'connecting right through into the core of who we are'). This appears to better enable both the use and active reception of such framing, potentially allowing it more successfully to prompt action once cultural values have been linked with the climate crisis. Making it clear how much the Māori cultural context was present in Te Whānau-ā-Apanui's climate activism, Dayle Takit-

41 See also Hadden, *Networks in Contention*, 175.

42 Tom Crompton, *Weathercocks & Signposts: The Environment Movement at a Crossroads* (WWF-UK, 2008), 5.

43 Tom Crompton and Tim Kasser, *Meeting Environmental Challenges: The Role of Human Identity* (WWF-UK, 2009), 34; see also Crompton, *Common Cause*.

imu described how ‘we’d always anchor it in our worldview’: ‘I can’t think of one single hui we had at home that didn’t start with our discussions about Rangi and Papa and Pou and Tangaroa and our connection to the sea’.

Turning to economic framing, it can be seen that changing the political economy requires climate-movement participants to engage with economics as it is currently practised, and to speak in some manner to economic elements of the climate crisis. Economic framing also has an emotive power in capitalist societies. All research participants spoke of the importance of economic drivers of the climate crisis. As John Peet (Sustainable Aotearoa New Zealand, Engineers for Social Responsibility, Sustainable Ōtautahi Christchurch), speaking of climate change and interrelated issues, maintained, ‘virtually all of it has to do with the way we do economics’.

Both the ‘economics of greed’ and the ‘economics of need’ could be seen in comments by research participants. As noted earlier, people’s hopes and fears around their future social and economic wellbeing can manifest in economic counter-framing and opposition to climate action; however, if taken into consideration, they can be incorporated into pro-mitigation economic framing and thereby ‘meet people where they are at’. Such framing involves making ‘the economic case for action’:<sup>44</sup> communicating the financial costs of inaction (for example, damage from adverse weather events) and the economic co-benefits of climate action (for example, the likelihood of the renewable energy industry providing more jobs than the fossil fuel industry). Economic framing may therefore also be a way to gain public legitimacy and distance from ‘anti-economy’

44 Cf. Matthew Nisbet, ‘Communicating Climate Change: Why Frames Matter for Public Engagement,’ *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development* 51, no. 2 (2009): 18.



perceptions associated with environmental advocacy.<sup>45</sup>

The balance between economic and moral framing is also an important element in social-change communication. There was wide variation among research participants in this regard. This is also a situation where ‘speaking your own truth’ and ‘meeting people where they are at’ may not always align. Catherine Cheung (Climate Justice Taranaki) stated that, for her personally, ‘climate change is an ethical issue . . . money doesn’t even come into it’. However, she also described how she addresses economic issues, such as through using the ‘down-turn’ in dairy and fossil fuels to say: ‘This is the time to look for options’.<sup>46</sup> Niamh O’Flynn spoke of the importance of ‘not letting economics play the central role in the discussion’: ‘We’re not economists, no one’s going to listen to the green movement for economics. . . . We need to change hearts and minds and that’s what we’re good at, and we need to stop framing things in a language that we don’t win in’.<sup>47</sup>

Resonating with this, Tom Crompton observes that Martin Luther King Jr did not start his famous speech by saying ‘I have a cost-benefit analysis’,<sup>48</sup> but rather ‘drew upon people’s sense of justice, equality, and empathy’.<sup>49</sup>

Gordon Campbell notes that Green Party co-leader James Shaw ‘uses market language primarily for tactical rea-

45 Myra Gurney, ‘It’s the Economy, Stupid: Ethics and Political Discourse in the Australian Climate Change Debate’ (ANZCA conference, Adelaide, South Australia, 2012), 7, accessed March 8, 2017, <http://www.anzca.net/documents/2012-conf-papers/602-anzca-2012-gurney-1/file.html>.

46 Interviews took place in mid-2015.

47 Cf. John M. Gowdy, ‘Behavioural Economics and Climate Change Policy,’ *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 68 (2008): 642.

48 Quoted in Matilda Lee, ‘Campaign Hero: Tom Crompton, Change Strategist at WWF-UK,’ *Ecologist*, 8 February, 2011.

49 Tom Crompton, ‘Finding Cultural Values that Can Transform the Climate Change Debate,’ *Solutions* 2, no. 4 (2011); cf. Klein, *This Changes Everything*, 401.

sons'.<sup>50</sup> Shaw states: 'Because over on the right, they don't give any credibility to left wing arguments. . . . You've got to go into their territory to engage with them'.<sup>51</sup> Two different perspectives are worth considering here, both of which were expressed by research participants. First, one might choose not to engage with such audiences at all, and instead concentrate on those more likely to be mobilised.<sup>52</sup> Second, it may be possible to 'go into the territory' of the Centre-Right using moral framing.<sup>53</sup>

Two risks are commonly stated in relation to moral framing. First, that it will be too slow. Tom Crompton notes that this is a legitimate concern, but highlights that not prioritising the necessary moral transformation may itself 'help defer ambitious action until it becomes "too late"'.<sup>54</sup> Second, moral framing may annoy or intimidate people.

There are also further risks related to economic framing. First, speaking about 'the economy' may 'just feed into people's pre-existing stereotypes of what an economy is'.<sup>55</sup> Second, various authors suggest that economic framing may have the 'perverse effect' of undermining both 'moral sentiments' and efforts for broader change, by reinforcing individual self-inter-

50 Gordon Campbell, 'Climate of Opportunity: An Interview with the Greens New Co-leader James Shaw,' *Werewolf* 58 (2015).

51 Ibid.

52 James Jasper, 'A Strategic Approach to Collective Action: Looking for Agency in Social-Movement Choices,' *Mobilization* 9, no. 1 (2004): 10; Cross et al., *News Media*, 7.

53 Corner and Clarke, *Talking Climate*, 45; Adam Corner, *A New Conversation with the Centre Right about Climate Change* (COIN, 2012), 2, accessed March 8, 2017, <http://climateoutreach.org/resources/a-new-conversation-with-the-centre-right-about-climate-change/>.

54 Crompton, *Common Cause*, 72.

55 Rupert Read, 'Let's Build a Post-Growth Economy that Works for the 99%,' *Ecologist*, 16 May, 2014, accessed 3 August, 2017, [http://www.theecologist.org/blogs\\_and\\_comments/commentators/2397606/lets\\_build\\_a\\_postgrowth\\_economy\\_that\\_works\\_for\\_the\\_99.html](http://www.theecologist.org/blogs_and_comments/commentators/2397606/lets_build_a_postgrowth_economy_that_works_for_the_99.html).

est.<sup>56</sup> However, as Elena Blackmore writes, “This approach does not suggest that any and all talk of questions of cost (say) must be dispensed with’.<sup>57</sup> This is a more nuanced position than the complete avoidance of economic framing, and therefore also in line with the approach of research participants. Steve Abel, for example, spoke of how you have to speak about jobs: ‘Livelihoods and jobs is a touchstone value for people, a touchstone concern, so . . . you’re on a hiding to nothing if you don’t address that question of “*but we need jobs*”’.

While it is useful to analyse moral and economic framing both in isolation from and in opposition to each other, as discussed earlier, a central element of my analytical approach is the avoidance of static conceptions of frames and framing. It is, therefore, important to recognise how climate-movement participants blend moral and economic framing in the communication of what I term ‘moral economic critiques’ and ‘moral economic solutions’.

## The communication of moral economic critiques

If our values mandate action on climate change, then we must also recognise that the political and economic forces that are arrayed against such action are violating those values.<sup>58</sup>

56 See, for example, Samuel Bowles, ‘Policies Designed for Self-interested Citizens May Undermine “the Moral Sentiments”’: Evidence from Economic Experiments,’ *Science* 320 (2008); Crompton, *Common Cause*.

57 Elena Blackmore, ‘Are You Saying We Shouldn’t Talk About Things in Economic Terms?’, *Common Cause Foundation* (2011), accessed March 8, 2017, <http://valuesandframes.org/faq/are-you-saying-we-shouldn%E2%80%99t-talk-about-things-in-economic-terms/>.

58 Stephan Lewandowsky, ‘Review: *Don’t Even Think About It: Why Our Brains Are Wired To Ignore Climate Change*, by George Marshall,’ *Reports of the National Center for Science Education*, 35, no. 4 (2015).

In communicating ‘moral economic critiques’, climate communicators critique the values that underpin status-quo economics and consequently drive the climate crisis: ‘profit over people and the planet’ and ‘profit at all costs’. Several research participants expressed the importance of highlighting the values and morals behind the actions of businesses, institutions, and governments, often via ‘public shaming’. Niamh O’Flynn spoke of this as ‘a real kind of stigmatisation of the fossil fuel industry’. More broadly, research participants critiqued neoliberalism, consumerism, economic growth, and capitalism. I discuss the latter two here.<sup>59</sup>

Resonating with the earlier comments about the communication ‘gap’, Gareth Hughes observed that: ‘Economic growth has been placed on the altar of the most important thing in politics. . . . To talk about not having growth, it almost feels treasonous’. Addressing similar challenges, Jeanette Fitzsimons stated that the need to move beyond economic growth ‘has been the hardest political message I have ever had to sell in my whole life, and it still is, and it’s the one I feel I’ve made very little progress with’.

A number of research participants said that they regularly question economic growth with audiences, with Katherine Peet describing an exercise that she uses to evoke ‘how “silly” . . . GDP is as a value of measuring success’. Other participants spoke of actively avoiding the promotion of economic growth. Gareth Hughes stated: ‘I guess I avoid those exact words [‘economic growth’], but try to get around it by talking about other things that people will find important, which in some cases are analogous to economic growth. So jobs, prosperity, economic development in the regions, for example’. Research participants differed in their beliefs about whether economic growth can be

59 For an overview of perspectives in the academic literature, see Servaas Storm, ‘Capitalism and Climate Change: Can the Invisible Hand Adjust the Natural Thermostat?’, *Development and Change* 40, no. 6 (2009).

decoupled from carbon emissions.<sup>60</sup> Jeanette Fitzsimons commented: ‘In my view, green growth is an oxymoron, green growth is nonsense. There are, of course, some things that need to grow, that need very badly to grow, but overall economic growth cannot be green. We have to find a stable state’.

With such a critique in mind, however, Jeanette Fitzsimons reaffirmed the importance of the public being addressed and suggested that questioning economic growth may be useful with some audiences but not with others. Asher Miller and Rob Hopkins comment on related issues:

Perhaps it seems too radical to publicly challenge the economic growth paradigm. It may be that many environmental organizations understandably make the strategic decision not to do so. But we believe that the environmental community must at least *internally* name the elephant in the room [that is economic growth] and adjust its strategies and programs based on an understanding [of this].<sup>61</sup>

As with economic growth, research participants varied in the strength of their critiques of capitalism, ranging from critiques of neoliberalism and the profit motive through to seeing moving beyond capitalism as a crucial element of responding to the climate crisis. However, as Boone Shear writes, ‘The desires for another economy besides capitalism . . . can be made to seem laughable and unimaginable by capitalism’s symbolic authority’.<sup>62</sup> While Paul Young spoke of the need for ‘major structural changes to the

60 See, for example, Jackson, *Prosperity Without Growth*.

61 Asher Miller and Rob Hopkins, *Climate after Growth: Why Environmentalists Must Embrace Post-Growth Economics and Community Resilience* (Post Carbon Institute and Transition Network, 2013), 20, accessed March 8, 2017, <http://www.postcarbon.org/publications/climate-after-growth/>.

62 Boone Shear, ‘Making the Green Economy: Politics, Desire, and Economic Possibility,’ *Journal of Political Ecology* 21 (2014), 200-201.

economy', he suggested that 'smash capitalism' approaches that seek to 'tear down the system and . . . replace it with something new' can be 'a barrier to engagement'. Steve Abel suggested that there are ways to express anti-capitalist or similar ideas that will connect more strongly with people than speaking directly about capitalism: 'I just think that if you talk about what people care about, and what we're really talking about in a different way, you can actually cut through all that resistance, and you can actually win the fight more effectively'. In step with the need to connect with people, but offering a contrasting opinion, Gary Cranston suggested that: 'There are very simple things about capitalism . . . that everyone can understand'. He also spoke of the value of further radicalising those already involved in activism, indicating that after conversations about capitalism and the climate crisis with climate activists they 'change the work that they do in a really good way'.

The communication of systemic critiques, as in the examples described above, can be considered in relation to the negotiation of the communication risks discussed earlier. A useful way of approaching this is through reflecting on the balance struck in communication between a focus on 'co-risks'/'co-benefits' and the climate crisis. In the context of the climate crisis, co-risk/co-benefit framing relates to communicating about issues such as the risk of an oil spill, issues that are not climate change as such, but are connected with it.<sup>63</sup> Research participants' perspectives on this topic are echoed in recent work on the New Zealand deep-sea-oil movement by Gradon Diprose, Amanda Thomas, and Sophie Bond. These researchers write that, while their interviewees 'saw [the risk of oil spills] as a useful, tangible threat to mobilise public concern, they also felt

63 For further detail, see Oosterman, 'Making Climate Action Meaningful' (thesis); Oosterman, 'Making Climate Action Meaningful' (article).

that it limited the ability to talk about climate change more broadly'.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, Tim Rayner and Asher Minns note that 'While such an approach may indeed be effective [in the short term], it comes with a danger of "bright-siding", which underestimates the extent of change needed'.<sup>65</sup>

Applying this to systemic issues more broadly, we can consider how the climate crisis itself might be a 'useful, tangible threat to mobilise public concern' (at least with some publics), while discussion of capitalism, for example, may act as a barrier, blocking off some of those who might support strong climate action (or, in other contexts, action against inequality etc). On the other hand, a focus on climate change, understood in a narrow fashion, might limit the ability to talk about capitalism more broadly, and the extent of change needed. A number of writers touch on these and related issues. Jennifer Hadden suggests that 'connecting individual issues to larger structural critiques' can help grow the climate movement.<sup>66</sup> However, she notes that 'other research suggests that it may not help the movement achieve engagement with individuals outside the [broader] activist community'.<sup>67</sup> Describing the risks involved here, Stuart Rosewarne, James Goodman, and Rebecca Pearse suggest that directly stating the need for the degree of social change required to face up to the climate crisis may stop mass mobilisation, but not stating this might lead to a 'meaningless' movement.<sup>68</sup>

64 Gradon Diprose, Amanda Thomas and Sophie Bond, "It's Who We Are": Ecnationalism and Place in Contesting Deep-Sea Oil in Aotearoa New Zealand,' *Kōtuitui* 11, no. 2 (2016): 169.

65 Tim Rayner and Asher Minns, *The Challenge of Communicating Unwelcome Climate Messages* (Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research Working Paper 162, 2015), 8, accessed March 8, 2017, [http://www.tyndall.ac.uk/sites/default/files/twp162\\_0.pdf](http://www.tyndall.ac.uk/sites/default/files/twp162_0.pdf).

66 Hadden, *Networks in Contention*, 21.

67 Hadden, 'From Science to Justice'.

68 Stuart Rosewarne, James Goodman and Rebecca Pearse, *Climate Action Upsurge: The Ethnography of Climate Movement Politics* (Oxford: Routledge, 2014): 133.

As the material in this section makes clear, the communication of climate radicalism and systemic critiques comes up against an embedded economic status quo. This complicates the challenge of finding a balance between reaching people and speaking to the full scale of the climate crisis. Perhaps the challenge is, as Edwin Amenta and colleagues put it, to ‘be simultaneously threatening to elites and persuasive to the public’.<sup>69</sup> As elsewhere, the audience being addressed is an important influence on decision-making. It is clearly possible to communicate about both co-risks/co-benefits and the climate crisis, as well as to include systemic concerns in the communicative mix; however, difficult decisions about the balance of focus cannot be avoided.

## The communication of moral economic solutions

The most powerful lever for change [is] the emergence of positive, practical, and concrete alternatives to dirty development.<sup>70</sup>

In addition to offering ‘moral economic critiques’, research participants also made use of positive, moral conceptions of economics—an ‘economics as if people and the planet mattered’.<sup>71</sup> This further illustrates the importance of considering how forms of framing intersect and blend. In line with the earlier discussion of the importance of communicating about solutions to promote hope and active engagement, research participants also discussed a number of specific ‘moral economic solutions’ that can be interpreted as embodying a moral conception of economics. These include divest-

69 Edwin Amenta, Neal Caren, Elizabeth Chiarello and Yang Su, ‘The Political Consequences of Social Movements,’ *Annual Review of Sociology* 36 (2010), 295.

70 Klein, *This Changes Everything*, 357.

71 Previously the motto of the New Economics Foundation: <http://neweconomics.org/>



ment, voluntary simplicity, social entrepreneurship, stewardship of the land, permaculture and organics, co-ops and co-operative solutions,<sup>72</sup> local (food) economies, de-growth and steady state economics, and a just transition. Research participants gave a range of details about communicating each of these, including the ways in which they offered opportunities to connect with people as well as challenges. Here, I briefly consider communication around just-transition and ‘prefigurative’ approaches.<sup>73</sup>

Just-transition approaches bring together social, economic, and ecological justice in responding to the climate crisis and other sustainability issues. While various interpretations of the just-transition concept exist,<sup>74</sup> a core element is the highlighting of questions around jobs and livelihoods in our efforts to create a sustainable society: ‘There are no jobs on a dead planet’. As mentioned earlier, Jeanette Fitzsimons spoke about people’s fear of losing jobs through climate action. Anabella Rosemberg highlights that: ‘Vulnerability may be a source of reluctance to support change’,<sup>75</sup> and that promoting a just transition as part of climate-communication efforts is therefore a way of bypassing or transforming this reluctance and resistance (and the framing of climate legislation as a ‘job killer’).<sup>76</sup> Jeanette Fitzsimons spoke about how communicating about a just transition can help reach audiences ‘who would not normally have been that receptive to a

72 See also Sam Oldham, ‘Intersections, Old and New: Trade Unions, Worker Cooperatives, and the Climate Crisis,’ *Counterfutures* 1 (2016).

73 See, for example, Marianne Maeckelbergh, ‘Doing is Believing: Prefiguration as Strategic Practice in the Alterglobalization Movement,’ *Social Movement Studies* 10, no. 1 (2011).

74 Dimitris Stevis and Romain Felli, ‘Global Labour Unions and Just Transition to a Green Economy,’ *International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law and Economics* 15, no. 1 (2015).

75 Anabella Rosemberg, ‘Building a Just Transition: The Linkages between Climate Change and Employment,’ *International Journal of Labour Research* 2, no. 2 (2010): 144.

76 Cf. Corner and Clarke, *Talking Climate*, 29.

straight climate change message’ but who listen if you talk ‘about how you can reinvent communities to a different kind of an economy’. More broadly, and in line with the analysis above, Jeanette Fitzsimons suggested that, ‘The public are mostly happy to back a phase-out of coal if they think the people affected are going to be taken care of’.

Several research participants spoke about their engagement in prefigurative approaches—what might be considered everyday efforts towards systemic change—and their experiences of communicating in relation to such approaches (in one-on-one conversations, workshops, public talks, and other events). In line with this, and with my conception of ‘moral economic solutions’, Hilary Wainwright writes about ‘the practicality of values of solidarity, equality and co-operation, and harmony with the environment’, bringing attention to the ways in which values are embedded in economics and underpin ‘material alternatives’.<sup>77</sup> Speaking of such ‘material alternatives’ in relation to systemic change, Robina McCurdy noted the importance of ‘plugging at the grassroots’: ‘[It’s about building] strong models on the ground . . . creating a new paradigm to step into, not just in theory but in practice, being tried and tested and experimented with as the old paradigm crumbles’. Such ‘solutions-oriented’ approaches, focused on the development of community-level counter-power, can be considered part of a response to the systemic problem of disengagement and distancing, where spectatorship supplants genuine activity. Thus, Kari Norgaard describes ‘the failure to integrate . . . knowledge [about the climate crisis] into everyday life or transform it into social action’.<sup>78</sup> This suggests that what

77 Hilary Wainwright, ‘State of Counter Power—How Understanding Neoliberalism’s Cultural Underpinnings Can Equip Movements to Overthrow It’ (TNI, 2014), 7-8, accessed March 8, 2017, [https://www.tni.org/files/download/state\\_of\\_counter\\_power.pdf](https://www.tni.org/files/download/state_of_counter_power.pdf).

78 Norgaard, *Cognitive and Behavioral Challenges*, 29.

is urgently needed are efforts to actively promote this integration and action, not just further information or theories about systemic change

Research participants gave various examples of how they approached the communication of prefigurative approaches to the climate crisis. Describing how discussion of local-food economies ‘hits the personal’, Robina McCurdy spoke of responding to the ‘fear of not having your current lifestyle’ by approaching communication in a non-prescriptive manner, and making sure there is space for deep and open discussion about these issues. Another important element is the degree of focus on ‘solutions’, which varied among research participants, but was particularly strong for Matt Morris’s work with Edible Canterbury:

The approach is very much about empowering people to live in a thriving local economy, and we . . . generally speaking, don’t really overtly pit that against the industrial global agribusiness [laughs] agrimilitary complex, but I suppose that’s always there in the background. What we try and do is to create an alternative . . . we pitch it mostly in the positive.

Matt Morris described how such an approach allows for broad outreach, noting that ‘developing a local food economy’ was ‘quite well received by people from various parts of the political spectrum’.

The various prefigurative ideas discussed by participants are consistent with a ‘living economics’ where people ‘build the economy anew through daily embodied practice’.<sup>79</sup> In terms of the transformative power of the creation of such ‘practical, productive alternatives’, Hilary Wainwright writes:

79 Florence Scialom, *Embodying Economic Change: De-Growth and Localisation Practices in Totnes, United Kingdom* (2014), 44, accessed March 8, 2017, [http://www.transitionresearchnetwork.org/uploads/1/2/7/3/12737251/embodying\\_economic\\_change\\_by\\_florence\\_scialom.pdf](http://www.transitionresearchnetwork.org/uploads/1/2/7/3/12737251/embodying_economic_change_by_florence_scialom.pdf).

These tendencies do not necessarily have an immediate, lasting impact on the dominant structure of political power, but they set the material foundations for the embedding of values of solidarity, social justice, co-operation, and democracy against those of possessive individualism. Our analysis of neoliberal power indicates that such foundations are a condition of an effective challenge to neoliberal dominance.<sup>80</sup>

By combining such material foundations with a systemic critique, backed up by mobilisation, the New Zealand climate movement is clearly working towards such an ‘effective challenge’. As demonstrated in the comments of participants in this research, communicative efforts to promote both a systemic critique and the ‘real alternatives’ that make up systemic change are an integral aspect of these efforts.

## Conclusion

Through developing useful forms of knowledge that address the ‘real, immediate questions’ that arise in efforts towards systemic change, movement-centred research has much to offer both social movements and social-movement scholarship. In synthesising the perspectives and experiences of New Zealand climate-movement participants, I have developed an analysis of core dynamics in climate communication.

A significant dynamic in climate communication is the balance communicators strike between, on the one hand, speaking faithfully to the facts of the climate crisis and to what makes climate action meaningful to climate communicators personally,

80 Wainwright, ‘State of Counter Power,’ 8.

and, on the other, speaking in a way that is meaningful to those being communicated with. If climate communicators are able to strike the right balance, they will empower people, helping translate belief in, and concern about, the climate crisis into behavioural change and political engagement, cumulatively creating social change. If the right balance is not struck, communication efforts risk not connecting with people, emotionally overwhelming them with the weight of the climate crisis, or overly diluting the message and losing its integrity, leading to no effect, or to a negative effect.

Given the urgency of responding to the climate crisis, sustained attention to this balance is essential. Attention to this balance and its associated risks can promote a deep awareness of the communication gap faced in communicating for systemic change, in a manner that recognises the challenges this gap creates for communication, but still works with this gap to engage and mobilise people. An essential element of this balance is attention to the emotional elements of communication, and the need to promote active hope. Consequently, communicating about solutions, helping people believe that such solutions are both necessary and possible, and empowering people to participate directly in these solutions, are indispensable elements of social-change communication.

Further, as this analysis has shown, it is clear that both moral and economic issues must be addressed, in some form, in climate communication. Through a combination of moral and economic framing, climate communicators address the challenge of meeting people's needs for economic security and prosperity while promoting positive values of solidarity and care for each other and the planet. In doing so, they offer both a systemic critique and the real alternatives of a living economics.

Social movements are central to processes of societal learning. The perspectives and experiences of New Zealand

climate-movement participants synthesised in this article can therefore provide valuable insights for further reflection as we continue with the vital task of engaging with a diverse public and communicating for systemic change, building momentum towards social and political transformation.

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