

Beyond Crisis and Emergency: Climate Change as a Political Epic

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Terms like “crisis” and “emergency” describe dangerous situations in which human intervention appears necessary to alleviate or avert harm. Awareness of the effects of greenhouse gases in the Earth’s atmosphere has therefore spawned frequent use of phrases such as “climate crisis” and “climate emergency.” Even if this sort of usage in ordinary language seems justifiable at first blush, closer inspection reveals significant conceptual difficulties. My goal in this article is to demonstrate those difficulties, to explain their ramifications for research and policymaking on climate change, and to propose an alternative conceptualization of the problem. I will argue that humankind now finds itself living through a “climate-change epic,” more than a crisis or emergency.

Some of the difficulties associated with the language of crisis and emergency have been explored by prior research on “securitization” in international relations.¹ This article discloses novel reasons for rejecting such language in the specific context of climate change. Important differences between the concept of crisis and the concept of emergency, often overlooked in public discourse, offer useful clues about different ways of responding to major threats. Legitimate fears about atmospheric tipping points, for instance, cannot easily be translated into the standard time frames of crisis or emergency. The point is not to discount or censor the idea that climate change is an urgent problem, at a high level of

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generality. The point instead is to warn of certain theoretic implications of assuming that climate change, as a political problem, resembles a crisis or emergency at a higher level of conceptual precision. Crisis and emergency can usefully be treated as distinct types of problem with different temporal structures and therefore different implications for remedial action, and both seem mismatched with one or more important features of climate change.

If we assume that climate change is an epic problem, rather than a crisis or emergency, we are forced to reconsider customary ways of devising political responses to it. Normatively, the concept of epic climate change undermines two standard arguments for democracies' ecological superiority over autocracies, which emphasize democracies' practical responsiveness for meeting emergencies and epistemic innovation for resolving crises. It also fits poorly with the technocratic tendencies of modern political institutions in general, and perhaps especially with the dominant liberal model of democracy, by accentuating the adaptive virtues of ordinary citizens over the mitigative virtues of privileged elites—thereby offering a potential bulwark against certain forms of autocratization.

The first section of this article reviews the most salient physical features and human impacts of climate change, and the second describes how policymaking and academic discourses have interpreted these realities in terms of crisis and emergency. The subsequent section develops a conceptual distinction between crisis and emergency, based on the temporal properties of climate change. I argue that the problem's important features today fit neither category and introduce the concept of an epic, an alternative that better fits the distinctive temporal structure of climate change. I then discuss normative implications for democratic and nondemocratic institutions and conclude by offering some suggestions for future research on climate change and political institutions, with insights into the temporal aspects of problem definition in mind.

CLIMATE CHANGE AS A POLITICAL PROBLEM

Climate change is a political problem because of its perceived impacts on human interests, but these human impacts lie at the end of a physical process of causality with two phases. First, human activities contribute to chemical and physical transformations, particularly in Earth's atmosphere and oceans. Second, these transformations contribute to alterations in the settings of and constraints on human social and economic activities.

The first of these two phases is a process of “atmospheric carbonization,” or the progressive accumulation of carbon-based molecules in the Earth’s atmosphere. The principal “greenhouse gases” are carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide.² (The last of these contains no carbon and only contributes a relatively small degree of warming compared to carbon-based gases.) The accumulation of these gases in the atmosphere tends to raise average temperatures on land and at sea over long periods of time. In addition to a warming effect, atmospheric carbonization also increases the volatility and variability of weather patterns,³ including wind and precipitation. Thus, the first causal phase of climate change begins with atmospheric carbonization and culminates in climatic destabilization.

Climatic destabilization, in turn, is a major political problem because of the severity of its currently observable and likely future impacts on human life.⁴ Rising average temperatures increase heat-related deaths, decrease productive labor hours, and raise the costs of maintenance for human infrastructure. More frequent and longer-lasting droughts will occur in some regions, while higher annual rainfall may be expected in others; either way, costly disruptions to agriculture become more likely. More frequent and more destructive weather events will require greater public spending on flood prevention, recovery from disasters, and the residential or commercial abandonment of some inhabited areas. Sea-level rise will contribute to similar impacts, including the relocation of communities and interruption of commerce, while increased sea temperatures will negatively impact a wide range of marine life used as food. Additionally, significant geographic shifts in the habitat of various nonhuman species will affect human food supplies and exposure to disease-carrying agents. This catalog is not exhaustive.

In addition to the novelty and magnitude of these human impacts, the temporal properties of climate change make it a special kind of political problem. Because of the durability of carbon-dioxide molecules in the atmosphere, there are unusually long time spans involved in the relevant causal dynamics: climate change is a slow-motion process. The lag between the human activities that contribute to atmospheric carbonization and the impacts that ultimately follow—because of the “inertia of the earth system”—can last “decades or even centuries.”⁵ Current scientific consensus holds, for example, that the effects of climate change on oceans and ice sheets are “irreversible for centuries to millennia.”⁶ It takes at least twenty years for carbon to have significant observable effects, and most take even longer to materialize.⁷ Among other types of physical impacts, scientists forecast “some responding [to additional carbonization] over decades and others over millennia.”⁸

In short, the atmospheric carbonization (or decarbonization) that humans contribute today will make most of its impact only after a couple of decades have passed, and this impact will then continue for several generations. By the same token, the impacts that we are feeling today are largely not the result of activities within the last generation; instead, our current experience is the cumulative effect of the previous several generations' carbon contributions. This slow-motion causality underlies the comment by Kate Marvel, a NASA scientist, that "climate change isn't a cliff we fall off, but a slope we slide down."⁹ Slow-motion causality has important theoretical and practical implications that will be explored more fully below.

BOTH CRISIS AND EMERGENCY

This section describes the increasingly prominent place of the phrases "climate crisis" and "climate emergency" in public discourse in the last decade, with examples from international diplomacy, civil society, and academia.

The social and economic threats that climate change poses to human communities have become leading concerns for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), first convened by the United Nations in 1988. The IPCC's "integrated assessment" reports synthesize relevant bodies of knowledge about three major components of the problem: physical science, adaptation, and mitigation.¹⁰

Only relatively recently, in 2014, did the phrases "global sustainability crisis" and "climate emergency" appear in an IPCC report on mitigation.¹¹ By 2022, another report in the same series referred to "the nature crisis" in its foreword,¹² before going on to cite a "climate and energy crisis," a "climate crisis," and a "climate emergency."¹³ The IPCC reports reflect a relatively conservative use of language, given that participating governments retain editorial control over key parts of the text,¹⁴ but other UN agencies communicate more freely. For example, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) conducted an inquiry into "the climate, biodiversity and pollution emergencies,"¹⁵ and its forewords (by the UN secretary-general and the UNEP executive director, respectively) refer to "climate crisis," "climate emergency," "planetary crises," and "planetary emergency."¹⁶ A subsequent UNEP report on the financial sector's role in climatic mitigation uses "climate crisis" three times in its executive summary and introduction.¹⁷

Similar language has been appearing in other public forums around the world for about two decades. According to one analysis, "climate crisis" surged in

popularity between 2006 and 2008, while “climate emergency” surged in a wave of declarations by national and subnational governments in 2019,¹⁸ among more than two thousand such declarations that have appeared since 2016.¹⁹ In another analysis, the Copenhagen climate summit of 2009 witnessed the maturation of the discourse of “climate crisis,”²⁰ which had previously been foregrounded in public interventions by figures such as Al Gore and Nicholas Stern.²¹

Numerous publications by individual scholars and policy analysts have reinforced these declarations by placing phrases like “climate crisis” in their book titles.²² In 2020, a prominent article that was accompanied by over eleven thousand signatures from the scientific community billed itself as “World Scientists’ Warning of a Climate Emergency,” with “climate crisis” and “climate emergency” used interchangeably in the text.²³ More generally, interchangeable invocations of crisis and emergency are central to the policy-academic interface on issues such as the Green New Deal.²⁴

Granted, many scholars question the value of such language. In literature critical of the “securitization” of climate change, characterizing climate change as a threat to national or international security is seen as favoring militarized responses that are inappropriate to climatic challenges or authoritarian responses that jeopardize non-climatic values such as civil liberty.²⁵ The notions of climatic crisis and emergency bear at least some affinity to securitization because of their emphasis on the severity and urgency of the problem,²⁶ raising the specter of extralegal or arbitrary state action.²⁷ Interesting debates in this field concern whether climatic securitization gains more by politicizing the issue and mobilizing new constituencies²⁸ than it loses by crowding out other political problems such as poverty.²⁹

The rest of this article will explore similar questions to those animating debates over discourses of climatic securitization. The assumption will be that the physical and temporal features of atmospheric carbonization and climatic destabilization constrain how the social construction of climate change as a political problem can unfold. Little attention has previously been paid to the proposition that “crisis” and “emergency” signal two distinct types of problem with different sets of constraints—especially by way of their temporal properties—on available political responses.

CRISIS AND EMERGENCY DISTINGUISHED

This section treats crisis and emergency as two distinct types of political problem, with different temporal structures and different modes of redress. This analytic

argument is based on conceptual hints from English dictionaries and historical examples ranging from the Cold War to the recent COVID-19 pandemic.

English dictionaries are not comprehensive guides for political thought but can offer useful prompts about conceptual attributes and distinctions. Dictionaries from the past sixty years suggest that the words “crisis” and “emergency” acquired interchangeable meanings only relatively recently. Recovering the older meanings enables a clearer distinction between the two words.³⁰

Two aspects of the word “crisis” have been suggested in dictionary definitions since 1963. First, the phrase “turning point” has consistently been used to express the word’s perennial essence. Second, the phrase “decisive change” has almost as often been used to describe what comes after the turning point. The change is sometimes characterized as “a transition to better or worse”;³¹ or, in a medical context, as a pathway to “recovery or death.”³²

Definitions of the word “emergency” also have a two-part structure. First, there is a “sudden” and “unexpected”³³ event or situation. Second, this situation requires an “immediate”³⁴ or “prompt”³⁵ response.

Interestingly, the entry for “emergency” in *The Scribner-Bantam English Dictionary* includes an extended note on near-synonyms. Here, the generic meaning of “a pressing state of affairs” puts “exigency,” “crisis,” “necessity,” “pass,” and “conjuncture” in the same family as “emergency.”³⁶ In a related development, definitions of “crisis” in later dictionaries added a generic meaning referring to “times of difficulty, insecurity, and suspense”³⁷ or to “a time of intense difficulty or danger.”³⁸ The examples cited in the previous section of the interchangeable usage of “climate crisis” and “climate emergency” are consistent with this relatively new generic meaning.

A second lesson from the dictionaries tells of differences rather than similarities. What makes crisis a distinct concept from emergency is the requirement that the former “must alter for better or for worse.”³⁹ By contrast, the concept of emergency suggests a danger that is closer to its beginning than its end, as indicated by the frequent reference to a “sudden” or “unexpected” onset. In short, the essential distinction is related to timing.

Historical examples can illustrate both the similarities and the differences between the conceptions of crisis and emergency developed here. The language of crisis has long been a staple of modern political discourse, especially in the international arena. In the Anglophone world, famous examples include the Suez Crisis of 1956 and the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962.

The Suez Crisis pitted Great Britain and France (allied with Israel) against Egypt in a contest for control of the Suez Canal.⁴⁰ Britain and France initially opposed Egypt's move to nationalize the canal, against the Soviet Union's backing of the latter. The ensuing invasion of Egypt by British, French, and Israeli forces was a failure, and the United States put its diplomatic weight behind a deal that effectively settled the canal under Egypt's control. After what some observers viewed as a diplomatic and military humiliation, Britain and France clung to diminished roles in global affairs, compared to their former imperial and "great power" status. Thus, the confrontation was a crisis in both the generic and the narrower senses; in the latter sense, the crisis was resolved by a transition to a new geopolitical equilibrium rather than a restoration of the old one.

The Cuban Missile Crisis put the United States and the Soviet Union into more direct confrontation, when the latter placed nuclear missiles in Cuba.⁴¹ The two great powers traded nuclear threats after the Soviets rejected an American ultimatum to remove these military installations. Ultimately, a deal was struck whereby the United States offered to dismantle similar installations in Turkey (in the Soviets' neighborhood) and pledged nonintervention against the Soviets' Cuban allies; in exchange, the Soviet missiles were brought home. This crisis was resolved with something more like restoration of the status quo (a heavily armed peace) than transformation (an unprecedented nuclear exchange).

These two examples illustrate the key ingredient of the narrow conception of crisis: the necessity, or even the possibility, of an imminent resolution of turbulence and danger bringing about a new and calmer condition. This conceptual essence has been a standard feature of political understandings of crisis, similar to how it is used in medicine ("recovery or death"). The equilibrium that follows a crisis may be new or old, but in either case the type of agency needed is that which can steer someone or something through an unstable situation (the purpose of "crisis management").

An emergency and a crisis may be related yet distinct phases of the same process, as illustrated by the more recent example of the COVID-19 pandemic, certainly a major global problem by any definition. The first phase is the sudden shock of disequilibrium. The chief objective of governmental actions taken in response to the initial emergency of the novel contagion, such as prohibitions of and regulations on public gatherings of more than a few people, was to slow down the pandemic's progress and buy time for building longer-term responses such as new medical treatments and new working arrangements. The second

phase of responses, in turn, was more like crisis management than emergency management, since it was an attempt to get through the novel troubles to a “new normal,” after time for deliberate and strategic choices had passed.

As of 2024, it is possible (but not certain) that the COVID-19 crisis has passed, albeit with significant regional variations around the world. On the one hand, some regions seem to have attained a social equilibrium different from their pre-pandemic reality, which may never be fully restored. On the other hand, the virus at the heart of the COVID-19 pandemic may have the power to adapt and mutate, causing future emergencies. We can never be sure that a crisis is over except in retrospect.

In summary, crises and emergencies are generically similar in two respects: they are serious problems, and they are presumed ameliorable through timely human intervention. But the two types of problem can be distinguished in two further respects: the nature of their temporal structure and the nature of their remedial actions. Whereas a crisis represents a danger that is near its end, an emergency represents a danger that is near its beginning. The difference in remediation follows closely the difference in timing. Whereas emergencies require reacting, crises require reorienting. When the problem is novel, limiting damage is the main type of redress for an emergency. Proverbially, someone must “stop the bleeding.” When the problem is ripe for resolution, by contrast, the goal must be different: reorientation toward stability. In this second kind of case, the proverbial “moment of truth” calls for a remedy that steers through the problem toward some sort of positive rebuilding, whether that takes the form of restoration or transformation.

NEITHER CRISIS NOR EMERGENCY

This section argues that salient features of global climatic disruption today do not fit the more precise conceptualizations of either crisis or emergency. This analytic point is less important for changing how people label the phenomenon than for stimulating further reflection on alternative conceptions of climate change and of ethical and political responses to it.

Scholars sometimes employ a two-dimensional concept of political emergency, with the dimensions variously characterized as “scale” and “urgency,”⁴² or, correlatively, as “emergency of effects” and “emergency of action.”⁴³ For the purposes of this article I will call these two dimensions “scale” and “time.” In terms of scale, climate change clearly and distinctly counts as a crisis and an emergency in the

generic sense of the words: it is severe in magnitude, global in scope, and “unprecedented”⁴⁴ in human experience. But it matters a great deal, politically, exactly how we find a problem to be unprecedented. Scale cannot be the only relevant consideration, to the exclusion of our second dimension: time. On this dimension, advocates of critical or emergent frames around climate change frequently cite notions of “a closing window of opportunity to avoid potentially catastrophic outcomes”⁴⁵ or a “window of opportunity” that is “limited” in time.⁴⁶ This is where analytical and perhaps ontological problems arise.

As we have seen, climate change is a physical phenomenon with human impacts and exhibits slow-motion causality. It is therefore conceptually different from the more specific (less generic) conceptions of emergency and crisis. Since neither atmospheric carbonization nor climatic destabilization is a sudden, recent danger, climate change is unlike a traditional emergency. Since its temporal properties also obscure the “moment of truth,” when a decisive choice could guide us toward a better or worse state, it is also unlike a traditional crisis.

More importantly, problems of remediation follow from these problems of timing. It matters what sort of problem humans think they are redressing. Rapid action is evidently essential to handling an emergency but arguably destructive of the strategic choices needed to steer through a crisis. Climate change cannot be redressed through rapid, improvised action in the same sense that an emergency often can be. No one can “stop the bleeding” by acting quickly today because the damage, already well underway, is guaranteed to proceed for at least another generation and possibly for centuries to come, regardless of what anyone does. Nor will crisis management apply in the traditional sense. The causal complexity of our planet’s atmospheric, oceanic, and terrestrial systems obscures where we are, at any given moment, in the overall trajectory of the process. This complexity defies the prospect of imminent resolution (or at least approaching one), which is essential to the traditional concept of crisis.

Admittedly, humans do not need to forecast the precise moment of crisis in order to anticipate that one is coming, and to prepare for its coming. In this spirit, social and physical scientists sometimes use the concept of a tipping point to explain how crises can be conceptualized within complex systems. It is widely believed that the global climatic system has on occasion undergone transitions of relatively high magnitude and relatively short duration in the past,⁴⁷ and the corresponding danger today is that rising air and water temperatures could trigger future cascades that amount to violent and destructive changes in humans’

physical environments. For instance, warming air temperatures in polar regions could (beyond a certain tipping point) lead to a massive melt-off of ice caps, in turn leading to rapid rises in sea levels far from the polar regions and sudden shocks of social and economic dislocation. The concept of a tipping point is obviously similar to the concept of a turning point, the latter being essential to the temporal structure of crisis.

The problem with using the possibility or likelihood of a climatic tipping point to inform intentional collective action, however, has to do with uncertainty about time frames. Even those most alarmed by potential climatic tipping points admit that their “dramatic and swift” effects⁴⁸ could take anywhere from “a decade or two”⁴⁹ to a century or more.⁵⁰ One example of this type contemplates an even wider span of time when it recommends that “emergency” action by humans could postpone the onset of ten meters of sea-level rise to ten thousand years from now instead of one thousand years from now.⁵¹ On such timescales, the past incidence and future possibility of climatic tipping points cannot be readily translated into a crisis or an emergency in human political terms. The frame of geological time involves centuries, millennia, or longer; that of political time involves months, years, or (at most) generations. Intentional collective action by humans—to which emergency appeals are inevitably addressed—occurs in political time, not geological time. As Graeme Maxton and Jorgen Randers suggest:

The human impacts of climate change—economic, social, and political—will not manifest as a sudden crisis [and] will not be triggered by some unexpected event that changes almost everything overnight, or even over a year, with living standards abruptly pushed back to those of the Dark Ages. Human history and major environmental or social change does [sic] not happen like that. Big changes take many years.⁵²

There are alternative approaches for conceptualizing climate change as a political problem that do not rest on a conflation of the traditional temporal meanings of crisis and emergency. In the policy-adjacent disciplines, academic researchers use the category of “wicked problems” to describe collective challenges of unusual complexity with no particular temporal structure considered definitive of their nature.⁵³ Other commentators, recognizing the novel features of climatic destabilization, have resorted to oxymorons like “long emergency”⁵⁴ and “slow crisis.”⁵⁵ Such neologisms are not necessarily symptoms of conceptual confusion or carelessness; they merely signal a recognition of genuine analytic difficulties. Indeed, academic discussions of “slow emergencies”⁵⁶ acknowledge the absence of the

“decisive moments” or “time pressure”⁵⁷ in certain political problems, and climate change appears to fit into this category.

In a similar spirit, the conceptualization of climate change as a “social drama” is predicated on a valuable temporal insight: it is “a chronic rather than acute condition.”⁵⁸ In its original formulation within ethnology and anthropology, the concept of social drama involves “an initial normative breach or crisis . . . followed by a period of instability, tension, uncertainty, and creativity” prior to resolution.⁵⁹ Temporally, “dramas can be very short or very long in duration. They can be intense or diffuse.”⁶⁰ In the history of the term “crisis,” as far back as ancient Greece, medical crises could also be conceived as either acute or chronic in their temporal structure.⁶¹

The slow-motion causality of climate change, then, fits better analytically with one particular type of crisis than with any kind of emergency. If climate change were merely a chronic crisis, though, how could we identify, along its temporally diffuse trajectory, “that point in time in which a decision is due”?⁶² It is evident that this general problem of uncertainty—about when preparation should give way to a decision—is exacerbated by the immense scale and complexity of global atmospheric and oceanic systems. At some point, a gap in quantity becomes a gap in quality: a new kind of problem has arisen. The notion of a political epic may look more appealing whenever these kinds of conceptual issues seem intractable.

CLIMATE CHANGE AS AN EPIC PROBLEM

This section argues that the recent and likely future experience of climate change can usefully be conceived as an epic political problem. The concept of an epic in European intellectual history was originally a literary one, which I adapt here for political contexts.

The English word “epic” is derived from ancient Greek and has counterparts in most European languages. The ancient literary epic was an unusually lengthy poem that narrated the life and times of a single heroic figure. Modern English dictionaries have consistently emphasized length and heroism as the two definitive traits of a literary epic: it is a “long” or “extended” narrative involving “heroes” or “heroic feats.”⁶³ Homer’s *Odyssey* and *Iliad* are commonly cited as notable examples. In the later twentieth century, dictionaries began to add nonliterary meanings related to “an exceptionally long and arduous task”;⁶⁴ or, in adjective form,

related to anything “surpassing the usual or ordinary, particularly in scope or size.”⁶⁵

An overlooked example of a twentieth-century American epic is *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. Ernest Gaines’s novel narrates the life of a 110-year-old woman, covering her enslaved childhood during the U.S. Civil War, her life in Louisiana and Texas through Reconstruction and the two world wars, and her final years during the civil rights protests of the 1950s and 1960s. The novel itself is not lengthy, at just under 250 pages, but its epic quality comes from two other features: the century-long scope of the narrative itself and the protagonist’s experience of recurrent episodes of tribulation and loss. Jane’s heroic qualities emerge in multiple forms of endurance against exogenous challenges.

The critical reception of Gaines’s work has characterized *The Autobiography* as “descended from the epic or medieval romance.”⁶⁶ The title character, Jane, comes across as “a powerful, heroic figure” who “prevails over seriously adverse circumstances.”⁶⁷ Jane has also been called “simple and complex, heroic and mundane, epic and realistic all at once,”⁶⁸ while Gaines himself emphasized his protagonist’s “fantastic courage.”⁶⁹ In a broader perspective, on one critic’s account, “the stories told by Ernest Gaines, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and others portray the traditionally anonymous black folk who live in and through history rather than transcend it.”⁷⁰ Living through rather than transcending events could be the principal mark of the epic hero or heroine, whose virtue is withstanding troubles more than resolving crises. The oral origins of the Homeric epic also find parallels in Gaines’s own preparation as an author. As he explained to an interviewer, “I doubt that I read two novels before I went to California [where he began writing after the Second World War]. But I come from a long line of storytellers. I come from a plantation, where people told stories by the fireplace at night, people told stories on the ditch bank.”⁷¹

A properly political conception of an epic problem would include some of the standard features of both literary and nonliterary definitions. To accentuate its temporal differences from the concepts of crisis and emergency, I define a political epic as follows: a process of collective human effort that features gradual progression through time, obscure problem origins, and anticlimactic outcomes.

The characteristic of “gradual progression” captures the most readily apprehended trait of literary epics, contrary to the compressed time frames of crises and emergencies. Climate change counts as a political epic in this sense because

of the slow-moving character of the physical and social processes associated with it. The “obscure problem origins” characteristic distinguishes a political epic from an emergency that arises distinctly and suddenly. The sources of climate change have become less obscure over time, causally, but their recognition has been temporally diffuse. When climate change appeared on the global political agenda, subjectively, it was already an old phenomenon, objectively. The “anticlimactic outcomes” characteristic distinguishes a political epic from a crisis, in which a decisive resolution is pending. Climatic processes can guarantee us no single moment of definitive transcendence, for good or ill. Instead, they constitute an ordeal of successive challenges with uncertain prospects for resolution.

Though a political epic has distinct temporal properties from a crisis or emergency, on this conception it may partially overlap with either one. A sudden emergency may develop into a slowly moving ordeal instead of a crisis that will be decisively resolved. Similarly, a gradually developing process may ripen to a point of decisive change: an epic that becomes a crisis. This possibility for partial overlap is a strength of the concept of a political epic. To say that we are living through a political epic is to recognize that we are no longer in an emergency and cannot count on entering a crisis. It does not imply that we never were in an emergency and never will be entering a crisis.

Among historical illustrations of political epics, the Cold War may be the most salient example. It was a saga of recurrent, patterned conflicts that extended over nearly half a century. As is possible within any epic process, multiple emergencies and crises arose from time to time. The Cold War was unquestionably global in scope, though different regions of the world averted its impacts to different degrees or with different frequencies. Multiple episodes that temporally resembled emergencies and crises (as with the Suez and Cuba crises) came and went during that time. Yet the ultimate crisis that brought the epic process to a close, in the later 1980s and early 1990s, could scarcely be recognized in advance.

Climate change now resembles this kind of political epic in key respects. Admittedly, the characteristic of the problem’s obscure origins may seem doubtful, since the causal theory of the greenhouse effect points the finger convincingly at human activities that contribute to atmospheric carbonization. But this level of clarity only arose late in the game, and the origins of the problem are obscure in two other important senses: its temporality and intentionality. The human-activated causes originated in a temporally diffuse fashion in the early-to-middle nineteenth century and were notably “accelerated” in the 1940s, during and after

the Second World War.⁷² Until the 1980s or 1990s, at the earliest, they were the unintentional and unwitting by-products of immense volumes of diffusely willed and relatively uncoordinated human activities. Moreover, the protracted duration and anticlimactic outcomes of climate change are difficult to deny, since the grinding and painful proceedings arguably have no end and no turning point within the time frame of human life. They are likely to worsen gradually and are incapable of suddenly improving.

Ultimately, the vital question for politics and policy is how human agency can and should respond to climate change in political time. Heroism may still be called for, but the individual virtues of literary epics must be somehow transmuted into collective action. Since political institutions are among the most powerful vehicles of collective agency, assumptions about institutions and regimes must not remain untouched by the temporal properties of epic climate change.

NORMATIVE IMPLICATIONS OF EPIC CLIMATE CHANGE

This section considers the implications of a climate change epic for liberal democracies' normative superiority over autocracies and hybrid regimes. It explains how arguments for democracies' superiority at providing public goods in general, and environmental protection in particular, also imply that democracies are distinctively valuable for handling crises and emergencies. Discourses of climatic crisis and emergency therefore tend to reinforce the superiority of liberal democracy, even when those who invoke a crisis or emergency profess a contrary intent. The conceptualization of climate change as an epic problem instead leaves open a more direct route to questioning both democracies' and autocracies' purchase on the problem.

Normative controversies over the politics of climate change sometimes fall under the banner of environmental ethics, but here I focus more on the normative aspects of political regimes. The two main institutional features that political researchers typically identify as constitutive of a "polyarchy" or liberal democracy—the most common type of democracy observed in world politics since the Second World War—are competitive elections and civil liberties.⁷³ Normative and empirical scholars alike have assembled a laundry list of green (environmentally protective) virtues that are supposed to be unique to liberal-democratic institutions. First, the incentives supplied by electoral competition should make governments in democratic states theoretically superior in responding to citizens'

demands for environmental quality.⁷⁴ Second, civil liberties should nurture private associations so that they are capable of contesting environmental degradation and should establish communicative rights that result in more information and greater transparency, thereby reducing the sorts of corruption associated with abuse of natural resources.⁷⁵

This logic of green democracy appears tailor-made, in some respects, for responding to declarations of climatic crisis or emergency. Institutionalized accountability through elections is supposed to incentivize governments to respond quickly and effectively to the basic needs of citizens when disaster strikes as well as to induce preparations to meet future disasters, as in Amartya Sen's famous dictum about democracy and the prevention of mass starvation amid drought.⁷⁶ In cases of crisis, in order to resolve a severe disequilibrium into a better condition rather than a worse one, policymaking agencies need powers of recognition and then redress to identify real problems and find real solutions. Andrew Dobson's suggestion is relevant, in this connection, that "public debate, accountability, and periodic elections" allow democracies to revisit complex problems, while "open decision-making" allows them to find the right answers.⁷⁷

If we distinguish a crisis, an emergency, and an epic as three types of problem with different temporal structures, what happens to the panoply of arguments reviewed above in favor of liberal democracy? The answer depends in part on the difference between short-term and long-term policymaking.

If climate change is conceptualized as a traditional sort of emergency, a familiar kind of debate between democracy and autocracy in response to short-term shocks becomes unavoidable. On one side is the view that emergencies and crises in the real world tend to threaten democratic politics with the specter of authoritarianism⁷⁸ because of the risk that an autocratic turn will be seen as necessary to ensure a rapid and effective response. On the other side, the most common and most intuitive of various liberal responses has been that suspensions of democratic rights and procedures, when limited in time and scope, can preserve democracy rather than subvert it. A kind of dualism is at the core of this "neo-Roman" vision⁷⁹ of "constitutional dictatorship"⁸⁰: a primary set of constitutional arrangements, normal and democratic, is rescued by a secondary set of arrangements, temporary and undemocratic. This same structure of debate applies even if climate change is conceptualized as a more protracted crisis—like the Cold War—that generates a series of smaller emergencies on the way to an eventual resolution.

But today's discourses of climatic crisis and emergency have largely ignored their own implications in such a debate.

Conceptual moves toward long, slow, or even chronic crisis could be excused for this kind of evasion since they represent an alternative to the inherent short-termism of the traditional concept of emergency. But they would then run into a different set of obstacles associated with long-term policymaking. Though democracies occasionally make long-term investments of various kinds under particular domestic political conditions,⁸¹ the best theoretical work on the subject argues that prospects for more consistent success remain dim without substantial institutional redesign.⁸² Since democratic elections incentivize governments to adopt short time horizons, adopting the language of crisis and emergency without attending to issues of temporality plays into this short-termism. But autocracy does not look much better on this score. The five-year plans of one-party states in the Soviet Union and China have created similar time horizons to those associated with the four- or five-year intervals between elections in a democracy.⁸³ Even without five-year plans, autocracies still have to anticipate the troubles that popular dissent can cause for short-term factors like food and fuel prices. These prices cannot rise significantly without a greater likelihood of social and political unrest, whether in democratic France (as in 2018) or autocratic Kazakhstan (as in 2022).

Trapped in this short-termism, all regime types may still seek long-term solutions in the gradual accumulation of technological advances more than the targeted interventions of public policy. This sort of long-termism, by default, is where democracy may appear superior once again. It is telling that accounts of liberal democracy's green virtues often include the encouragement of science and technology, especially through the "dynamism and innovation potential of the private sector."⁸⁴ Helpful as conceptual moves toward long, slow, or chronic crisis may be, such moves leave untouched the appeal of technological salvation.

The conception of a political epic defended above offers a distinctive theoretical possibility by more directly resisting the technocratic biases in the (democratic and autocratic) politics of climate change. Plebian virtues of endurance indicate a separate pathway through the problem, seeking salvage more than salvation. Technocracy could be considered the transfer station in liberal democracy's journey toward liberal oligarchy. In technocracy as an ideal type, the politicians and financiers are supposed to heed the engineers, and the engineers are supposed to heed the basic science. In this way, the liberal-democratic scheme of elections

and rights is made compatible with putting technology to work for the people. Autocracies have less need to justify technocracy in this way but are no less tempted to utilize it.

By emphasizing the obscurity of the origins of the problem and the anticlimactic outcomes, then, the assumption of epic climate change disrupts potential transfers of political power to technological saviors. To give one looming example, attempts at technological salvation may take the form of geoengineering, especially mechanized carbon capture and solar radiation management. The danger that “emergency frames could legitimate new repertoires of action not intended by proponents”⁸⁵ arises, in part, because these relatively rapid technological fixes stand ready to substitute for more tedious modes of decarbonization. Though mitigation of climate change generally requires long-term planning and execution, crises and emergencies seek available short-term solutions. But the only short-term approaches to greenhouse-gas mitigation lie in dubious technologies of geoengineering—as some early exponents of climatic emergency have long advocated.⁸⁶ Many of the scholars and activists who declare a climatic crisis or emergency may feel hostile to geoengineering,⁸⁷ but the temporal structure inherent in how they describe the problem pushes their arguments back into that territory.

CONCLUSION

For scholars who are dissatisfied with democracies’ ineffective responses to climate change so far, the temptation to invoke the language of climatic crisis or emergency may come from a desire to shock those regimes into bolder action. But this language also reinforces the problem-solving alliance between liberalism and technocracy, thereby carrying normative baggage that not all users of the language would otherwise accept. The concept of a political epic offers a different way of thinking about climate change as a political problem, partially compatible with but ultimately distinct from a crisis or an emergency. This alternative conception originates in the slow-motion, time-lagged causal dynamics linking atmospheric carbonization to climatic destabilization. In terms of novelty or magnitude, climate change easily counts as a crisis or emergency, in the generic form of these concepts: a severe problem provoking imaginative thought and determined effort. But the temporal properties of climate change are different from those of crises and emergencies, and these differences must impact questions

of political redress. As a result, conventional normative assumptions about how the problem is related to political institutions—and the ensembles of institutions known as regimes—stand in need of reassessment.

The most immediate implications of my analysis are straightforward: When would-be opinion leaders proclaim a “climate crisis” or “climate emergency,” they are acting either from conviction or from a more performative motive. In the former case, at least, they must consider the ambiguous and potentially troubling implications of this conceptualization of the problem for what sorts of policies and institutions offer appropriate responses. Are they supporting a pro- or an anti-democratic vision of how collective responses to severe climatic disruption should unfold? Why do they believe that their sense of the problem has the institutional implications that it does? What normative trade-offs are they setting up for us by getting us to think of the problem’s temporal structure as they do? I have argued above that conventional notions of crisis and emergency favor reinforcement more than reform of existing liberal-democratic arrangements, and that modified versions of these same concepts, extending them into chronic rather than acute time frames, offer little aid in adjudicating between more democratic and less democratic alternatives.

Multiple avenues of future research could be reframed by the conception of climate change as a political epic. Above all, democratic theory might respond by becoming more genuinely normative in style. Debates about whether green autocracy is an impossibility are intellectually interesting, but such appeals to empirical and causal theory to address normative questions implicate problems of external validity, which empirical scholars routinely encounter and seldom conquer. If political time itself is undergoing change, observing the past sins and atonements of autocracies and democracies with respect to environmental protection has limited value for the future of climate change. Rather than outsourcing the debate about regimes to empirical or causal theories of institutions’ ecological impacts, it might be useful to confront normative trade-offs more fulsomely. For example, how does the normative trade-off between climatic stability and democratic rights compare to the broader, classic trade-off between security and liberty?⁸⁸ Guidance on such fundamental questions could be useful for a variety of institutional circumstances whose future empirical incidence is difficult to estimate in advance.

The second respect in which democratic theory on climate change could become more normative involves civic virtues under epic political rhythms.

Perhaps, in place of the crisis-resolving virtues of technocratic saviors, democracy might derive more support from epic virtues. These need not be the ancient virtues of aristocratic heroes like Odysseus, or the more modern romantic virtues of the heroes who lead their communities through “social dramas,”⁸⁹ but may instead be the virtues of tenacity more likely to be associated with ordinary heroes. Who can be expected to muster these epic virtues in times of severe climatic disruption? If Homer’s Odysseus represents heroism as the realm of the extraordinary, Gaines’s Jane represents a more demotic or plebian heroism anchored in patience and durability. Arguably, an even shorter time horizon than the four- or five-year electoral cycle reigns over the politics of climate change: three months, the period in which publicly traded companies publish their accounts for economic and political elites’ perusal. If impatience is therefore doubly built into current political and economic systems, could plebian virtues of longevity better fit the temporal demands of mitigation and adaptation amid epic climate change?

The third respect, about which I have said little here, is rhythm or tempo, as opposed to extensions or spans of time. In rhythmic terms, recent trends that seem likely to persist into the foreseeable future include the increased frequency and intensity of emergencies such as meteorological disasters, infectious diseases, and economic shocks. The novel type of political rhythm to which these trends lead can be visualized as an inverted cardiograph, in which a high-stress baseline is punctuated by occasional and brief moments of calm. Arguably, though, today’s democratic institutions (and their market-economic counterparts) were nurtured under the political rhythm of a normal cardiograph, in which occasional surges punctuated longer periods of low-level social stress. A critical question about temporary suspensions of democratic process during emergencies, then, is whether the reasoning behind them is more dependent on emergencies’ high-stress character or on their low frequency and short duration.

What is clear is that climatic destabilization is already altering economic and political practices that become unsustainable when thresholds in the real world are crossed. When there is not enough time, material, or money to keep rebuilding, we see changes such as the shrinkage of the insurance industry in disaster-prone areas such as California and Florida. Similar pressures could in the future affect political institutions, including regime-level ensembles of institutions. Normative theory and empirical research both have a role to play in understanding these potential impacts of altered political rhythms. But the tactic of

proclaiming urgency, unless it can avoid reifying the old rhythms while ignoring the new, appears destined to suffer diminishing returns.

NOTES

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Abstract: The available choices of political responses to disruption in the global climatic system depend in part on how the problem is conceptualized. Researchers and policymakers often invoke a “climate crisis” or “climate emergency,” but such language fits poorly with current knowledge of the problem’s physical causes and social impacts. This article argues that climate change is instead more like a political epic. It involves neither sudden onset, as in the concept of emergency, nor decisive resolution, as in the concept of crisis, but rather a protracted ordeal of (temporally) obscure origins and uncertain outcomes. This alternative ontology of climate change highlights its novel temporal properties, including unusually slow-moving or time-lagged causal dynamics, with unsettling implications for academic research on the climatic-institutional nexus. Normatively, it undermines arguments for democracies’ environmental superiority over autocracies that rely on the former’s general superiority at resolving crises and responding to emergencies. At the same time, some new arguments for democratic distributions of power become possible within the epic frame. More broadly, embracing the assumption of epic climate change may redirect attention from Promethean, managerial, or technocratic solutions to questions about which values or identities deserve preservation amid presumptively interminable and imperfectly remediable sources of disorder.

Keywords: climate change, climate emergency, democratic theory, environmental politics, securitization, political regimes, political time