Less Talk, More Walk: Why Climate Change Demands Activism in the Academy

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As climate scholars, it is our professional responsibility to engage in climate politics. First, we need to engage in radical scientific analysis: we must ask questions that get at the root of climate change. Second, we need to plant a flag: we must be explicit about what our findings indicate we should do. This should go further than laying out the options; we must indicate which among them is preferable and why. Third, we must engage broadly, both across disciplines and beyond the academy. Many will object to the notion of engaging publicly as advocates, but the climate crisis demands nothing less. Choosing not to have a view, in the name of preserving our expertise, is an abdication of our responsibility, as both scholars and teachers.

As a graduate student in political science, I learned to be objective. I was taught to be analytical, methodical, and scientific. I learned to proceed incrementally: immersing myself in others' research, meticulously assembling modest, falsifiable hypotheses, then dutifully reporting the sources of bias, potential problems, and, with trepidation, my findings. In short, I had politics trained out of me. Instead of engaging in climate politics – my area of expertise – I studied them. Instead of advocating, I analyzed. After all, expertise, not activism, is the path toward tenure. Yet I felt that I was shirking my political responsibility as a scholar to *do* something.

I struggled mightily with this problem, trying to walk a line between producing peer-reviewed articles and public-facing work, hoping that the latter would not undercut my credibility as an international relations (IR) scholar. Of course, I did other things on the side: protesting, organizing for pro-climate candidates, and the like. But I felt that as a scholar of climate politics, I was, along with my colleagues, in a unique position to participate in political debates.

Yet the discipline of political science neither expects nor rewards such engagement. We are rewarded, first and foremost, for engaging with each other, through peer-reviewed publications and conferences. Only the most senior among us re-

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ceive accolades for public engagement. There is a small cohort (who skew younger) who are committed to engaged scholarship, but they are in the minority within the discipline.

Then I got tenure. With it, I can worry less about getting published, and am able to focus more of my energy instead on trying, in my own corner of the universe, to shape the discourse about the future of climate policy.

But most scholars – especially the growing number of us who are part of the "precariat" on temporary teaching contracts – do not have this luxury. As a result, we tend to ask narrow "impartial" questions that can be answered in an empirically rigorous way, and we shy away from bolder questions that we *should* be asking. The dominance of positivist inquiry in political science, which emphasizes hypothesis-testing and generalizable results, has solidified this practice.[1] One critic, political scientist Jonathan Isacoff, suggests that this has driven many international relations scholars away from "human woe and issues that matter" to "the self-definitionally obsessed, paradigm-driven culture of academic IR."[2]

I publicly and emphatically reject this expectation. I echo Dennis Thompson's argument in this volume of *Dædalus* that "the professional's obligation to witness is different from *and stronger than* the obligation that they may have as a citizen."[3] As climate scholars, it is our professional responsibility to engage in climate politics and use our expertise to serve as advocates, to identify the political causes of climate inaction as well as solutions to overcome them.

Many will object to the notion of engaging publicly *as advocates*. By advocating, we undermine our credibility, and without credibility, no one will listen to us. But consider the counterarguments. As human beings, we are in a fight for our collective survival. This takes precedence over our precious credibility. And this is why respected conservation scientists have called for civil disobedience.[4] By doggedly insisting that speaking truth to power will effect the necessary societal changes, we undercut our credibility as moral actors.

We are living in an age of rising populism and a corresponding distrust of experts. Our vaunted positions as experts are perhaps not as respected as we might think. Finally, and most important, if we don't talk – loudly and forcefully, to be heard above the din and false information – no one will listen. If we don't clearly voice our views in public-facing venues to counteract misinformation, which is often amplified through echo chambers, our knowledge will be irrelevant.[5]

What does it mean to walk the walk? I am not proposing that academics involved in climate politics should become lobbyists. Rather, there are three ways that we can advocate *in our expert capacity*. First, we need to engage in radical scientific analysis: we must ask questions that get at the *root* of climate change. Second, we need to plant a flag: we must be explicit about what our findings indicate we should *do*. This should go further than laying out the op-

tions; we must indicate which among them is preferable and why. Third, we must engage broadly, both across disciplines and beyond the academy. We can do more than publish op-eds (though we should do that too). We should consider ourselves idea machines for those engaged in both political debate and policy design. We must remember that policy is not a substitute for politics. Without political power, policy is unlikely to advance.

Ask radical questions. We need to ask those radical questions that get at the root of the problem. Climate change is not about science, but about politics. It requires elaborating a new theory of political economy that puts the climate crisis front and center. Radical questions will clarify power asymmetries and identify obstacles to change. Asking big questions about climate politics may seem an obvious first step, but it is not as pervasive as one might expect. In fact, as evidenced by an analysis of articles published in the field's top journals, in international relations, we have hardly discussed climate change at all.[6]

International relations scholars have tended to treat climate change more as an economic problem than a political one. This is evidenced by the dominant view that climate change is largely a collective action problem that requires cooperation among all nations to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions.[7] In this game-theoretic view, climate "politics" is reduced to conditional cooperation: nations will reduce emissions as long as they are guaranteed that others will do the same.[8] Ultimately, IR scholars' propensity to cast climate change as a collective action problem fails to elaborate *who* constitutes the collective beyond the black box of the nation-state.[9]

From the collective action view, the main challenge is to deter free-riding: that is, to prevent nations from shirking obligations to reduce. The political solution is to create binding legal commitments to cut emissions, coupled with a mechanism to punish nations that fail to meet their goals. This was precisely the logic of the Kyoto Protocol. Yet Kyoto was politically untenable.[10]

Why? Because the real challenges to effective climate action are political, and often occur at the domestic rather than the international level.[11] We know from more recent political science research that obstructionism by fossil fuel companies, electric utilities, and other owners of climate-forcing assets – those that contribute to climate change – are significant obstacles to decarbonization.[12] Yet scholars have only begun to study the impact of climate obstructionists at the international level, even as the timeline for far-reaching action tightens.[13]

Instead, research has focused on how nation-states can cooperate with firms and multinationals to find innovative solutions to climate change.[14] While some of this work is skeptical about the effects of such cooperative efforts,[15] it is inherently focused on cooperation, rather than obstructionism. This is wrongheaded. Indeed, research in progress on investor-owned fossil companies shows that even "leaders" like Shell and BP have moved little on diversifying away from fossil fuel holdings.[16] By focusing on collective action rather than obstructionism, we have

largely ignored the "existential politics" of climate change: the political conflicts embedded in the current international system.[17]

It is important to emphasize that investigating such radical questions can and should be done in a rigorous manner. For example, the aforementioned research on investor-owned fossil fuel companies has demonstrated empirically, using original data, that participation in voluntary climate partnerships – where NGOs or firms decide to collaborate on a jointly agreed climate goal – is not correlated with reductions in firm emissions.[18] While not a causal explanation, this provides a preliminary indication that voluntary partnerships – which have been touted as an important way to engage the private sector in climate mitigation – do not appear to be reducing emissions of key actors.

Asking radical questions also means that we must be wary of incrementalism, for two reasons. First, it is an understatement to say that the science is clear. We know that drastic action on decarbonization is needed if we are to avoid catastrophic effects of climate change, which will fall disproportionately on those least responsible.[19] Incremental responses are morally dubious, as they will still condemn many to death and suffering.[20]

Second, studying incremental approaches has the unintended effect of validating them, skewing our focus toward short-term, small wins when we should be considering long-term, large-scale change.[21] Thus, much ink has been spilt debating the appropriate design of a carbon price, despite the fact that in the majority of cases, it has had limited effects on emissions.[22] There are surprisingly few post hoc analyses of the extent to which pricing reduces emissions.[23]

Thus, the oft-repeated received wisdom that carbon pricing must be part of a global response to climate change is not definitively supported by extensive evidence. For example, the European Union has the oldest and largest emissions trading system. Yet the few analyses of its effects on emissions are mixed. According to some studies, the European Union Emissions Trading System (EU ETS) resulted in limited reductions: between 2 percent and 8 percent in Phases I (2005 – 2007) and II (2008 – 2012) of the EU ETS.[24] But different studies have found otherwise. For instance, economists Germà Bel and Stephan Joseph found that the majority of emissions reductions in the EU between 2005 and 2012 can be attributed to the global financial crisis.[25] Moreover, we know that causal inference is difficult due to the variety of other policies simultaneously employed to reduce emissions.

Discussions of how to reform or improve current policies imply that carbon pricing is desirable. Yet the empirical basis for this claim is debatable. At this point, we should focus less attention on how to design carbon pricing policies, and more on whether carbon pricing is in fact a useful tool.[26] This is, to be sure, a normative question. But it can and should be informed by our expert knowledge about both the policy and politics of climate change.

Instead, we need to be asking more radical questions, like whether and how the redistribution of wealth and power can help promote decarbonization. Recent research shows the extreme inequality of carbon emissions by wealth: the bottom half of the population consumes less energy than the top 5 percent.[27] One long-haul flight produces more emissions in a day than residents of some nations generate in a year.[28]

Wealth, particularly extreme wealth, is a key cause of climate change. Thus, policies to address inequality must be considered as an essential component of efforts to reduce emissions. Yet at least in international relations, there is limited work that considers climate change in the context of the broader frame of wealth inequality.[29] There is ample work that considers "climate finance": the institutions that help the developing world with efforts at mitigating emissions and adapting to the effects of climate change (though some of this is outside of political science). While related, work on climate finance tends to focus on implementation, shying away from explicitly addressing inequality.[30]

Plant a flag. In general, positivist social scientists (like myself) are more comfortable describing than prescribing, yet we must do both. Our analyses must first present and analyze problems, and do so in a rigorous fashion. Then we must move beyond describing various options and indicate which among them is preferable. We can have positivist inquiry in the service of normative goals.

As social scientists, we take as given that we must be transparent about our methods and data. So too must we be transparent about our normative assumptions and claims. Several tenets should guide our advocacy. First, we should not oversimplify. Experts understand the complexity of issues. Simplification is both important and necessary, but *over*simplification is irresponsible. To the extent possible, this complexity should be communicated, so that others may make their own decisions about whether our positions are justified.

Second, to maintain credibility with fellow scholars, we should be explicit about our evaluative criteria. Indeed, normative assumptions are frequently buried in work about climate change ("efficiency is critical," "growth must continue"). We do ourselves and others a service by being explicit about these normative criteria. One can choose to agree or disagree with our conclusions. However, providing clarity about how we arrive at conclusions, and the basis upon which we make recommendations, allows others to make their own assessments about the quality of our research, the veracity of our claims, and the validity of our proposals. This is critical for maintaining credibility within our discipline, to demonstrate that our work is more than a proclamation of what we *ought* to do, but what the evidence indicates about *why* we should.

Engage broadly. Finally, with proposals in hand, we must engage broadly. We should of course try to communicate our ideas to a lay audience, through op-eds, media interviews, and the like. But we should also consider how our work can help

those engaged in climate politics. And again, when we ask *radical* questions, we are more likely to supply politically relevant answers. Here, historians of science Naomi Oreskes and Geoffrey Supran's groundbreaking work on ExxonMobil is exemplary. Through historical analysis of Exxon's communications related to climate change, the authors show a definitive division between the firm's inward-facing and outward-facing communications. They found that "ExxonMobil contributed to advancing climate science – by way of its scientists' academic publications – but promoted doubt about it in advertorials."[31] They conclude, in no uncertain terms, that Exxon deliberately misled the public about the causes and consequences of climate change. In addition, Oreskes' earlier work shows empirically that of almost one thousand peer-reviewed papers published between 1993 and 2003 on global climate change, not a single paper disagreed with the consensus position that human behavior induces climate change.[32]

These papers both ask radical questions that get at the root of climate change politics. Each plants a flag: Exxon lied, and there *is* a scientific consensus about climate change. And they have broadly engaged the public and policy-makers. Each paper has been extensively covered in the media. Moreover, they have furnished important expert opinion for those making political arguments. And crucially, they have provided a much-needed rejoinder to other supposed experts who have been bankrolled by the fossil fuel industry.

Advocacy breeds credibility. Many who read this essay may worry that advocacy will jeopardize their tenure case or their standing in the discipline. To address this concern, it is important to consider – and distinguish among – the various audiences that academics address. Being credible to fellow scholars is distinct from being credible to students, or the public at large, or the activist community. I offer three responses to this objection, applicable to different audiences.

First, climate change is morally wrong. Any activist – scholarly or otherwise – who does not acknowledge this forcefully undermines her own credibility to students and fellow academics. We have a collective moral duty to address these injustices with all the tools at our disposal. Public policy scholar Eric Beinhocker has proclaimed himself to be "a carbon abolitionist." He invokes abolitionism as a way to build a movement to end the use of carbon, just as abolitionism ended the institution of slavery. He notes that "both systems are built on an immoral core, where one set of humans benefits by harming another."[33] It is our moral duty as human beings to end this injustice, even if that means sacrificing some degree of credibility in the minds of our colleagues.

Relatedly, this moral framing is also an argument against incrementalism. Incrementalism validates the status quo, which, in this case, is immoral. Thus, Beinhocker continues: "those who abolished slavery did not just want to reduce slave

numbers, free some slaves, make slave lives better, or have a slave-tax to reduce incentives for slave ownership."[34] Similarly, we cannot just offset our carbon emissions, or slightly reduce them, since doing so will still condemn many to death or displacement.

Second, the notion of impartiality is a myth. The idea that social science is morally neutral is naive and, arguably, harmful to scholarly credibility. Even Herbert Simon, a pioneer in the study of rational decision-making, conceded that all decisions "must begin with an ethical premise that is taken as given."[35] Economics professor Maximilian Kasy recently made the point more starkly: "Data . . . do not allow us to avoid value judgements, and do not relieve us from taking sides in distributional conflicts."[36] We must make assumptions in our work, and we should not suggest otherwise. Our biases – whether conscious or not – influence the questions we ask, at the very least. To assume that impartiality is the opposite of advocacy is giving ourselves too much credit. Reminding fellow scholars of the myth of impartiality can help address credibility concerns.

Third, we delude ourselves to think that reasoned analysis will dislodge the powerful. We have brought a knife to a gun fight. To stubbornly insist that the truth will prevail or that we must simply "speak truth to power" ignores four decades of climate inaction. Such an approach overestimates our authority and thus undermines our credibility.

Climate change is deeply polarizing in many developed nations. Research has shown that in the United States, views about climate change correlate strongly with party affiliation.[37] This in turn implies that people on both ends of the political spectrum engage in motivated reasoning to justify their beliefs about climate change, discounting information that does not align with their beliefs.[38] Quite simply, this means that "impartial" analyses of climate change will not change peoples' minds, at least not in the United States. (And some evidence suggests that similar trends, though less pronounced, exist elsewhere.) By remaining above the fray, we render ourselves irrelevant. Our sharp knives matter little when opponents wield automatic weapons.[39]

There is another reason academics should take the role of advocate seriously: it is part of our job. We are not simply experts; we are also teachers. First and foremost, we teach our students, and we have a responsibility to help them understand the climate crisis, which will surely have a material impact on their lives. Helping them understand the real political-economic stakes of climate change can help galvanize new publics to engage in politics across borders.[40]

I take particular pride in helping interested students find career paths in climate policy and social justice. One of my proudest achievements as a teacher was helping a student understand that he had many postcollege options beyond joining the military, which was his initial plan. I explained to him frankly and per-

sonally my own objections: the military is a terrifying source of human suffering and environmental destruction. I arranged for him to speak with friends and colleagues who had served in the military, as well as those in the legal profession (he was considering law school). He currently works as a data analyst for a labor union, and has plans to attend graduate school to study sustainable transportation. Watching his career path unfold has served as a powerful reminder of how listening and providing information to students can help them see the world differently. I am constantly heartened by how many are willing to take their anger and fear and channel it into productive activities.

Second, I have tried to mentor junior faculty by modeling engaged scholarship and offering support to younger scholars trying to do the same. I see this as an act of solidarity with fellow scholar-advocates – helping them get published and valorizing, whenever possible, the "unconventional" forms of scholarship in which they engage.

Third, public engagement should be recognized as part of our role as teachers. Scholars speak to each other, often in theories, formulae, or other languages that are not readily understood by a lay audience. Peer review is the foundation of evaluation; publication in highly ranked peer-reviewed journals is an important signal of success. But evidence shows a significant gender gap in citations in international relations.[41] Non-peer-reviewed publications – op-eds, commentaries, news appearances – are not counted seriously as part of a scholar's productivity. But this is wrongheaded. It indicates that we have forgotten our *real* role as teachers – making complex ideas readily digestible for a lay audience – which is, perhaps, also the *most difficult* kind of teaching. Participating in public discussions should be acknowledged not only as a public service, but also as evidence of excellence in teaching.

Being an advocate and an expert should not be mutually exclusive. Rather, as educators and scholars, it is our responsibility to participate in public discussions. Indeed, the University of Toronto, where I am on the faculty, describes its mission as follows:

> The University of Toronto is dedicated to fostering an academic community in which the learning and scholarship of every member may flourish, with vigilant protection for individual human rights, and a resolute commitment to the principles of equal opportunity, equity and justice.[42]

To me, a resolute commitment to the principles of equity and justice means engaging and teaching beyond the academy in ways that indicate what we ought to do about climate change, rather than simply explaining the available options. The basic motivation for our work is to make sense of the challenges we face as humans. Our job is to understand, explain, and broadcast those challenges to everyone, and those core tasks are what we should value as academics. When we for-

get this, our research and teaching suffer. We can inform our students, the public, and those engaging in policy-making and political action. In this latter category, in particular, we should ask radical questions and move beyond incremental proposals.

These proposals will make many academics uncomfortable. And they should. They make me uncomfortable – hence this essay. We are no longer bystanders in the climate crisis; we all have skin in the game that is climate politics, whether we are aware of it or not. Choosing not to have a view, in the name of preserving our expertise, is an abdication of our responsibility. That abdication works in favor of powerful interests, and against those seeking to reorganize power relations. There are stakes to the political phenomena we study. We have a professional responsibility to act.

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