

1. Opinions




Twelve discourses of climate delay in the transport sector

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Perhaps one of the few good news of the 2020s is that climate denial is on its way out. In most of Europe, it has become hard to find public figures or organisations that outright deny the reality of human-made climate change. The bad news is that a more subtle, but no less insidious discourse has taken its place. One where the speaker acknowledges (or pays lip service to) climate change, but then quickly moves on to explaining why we should not do this and that to tackle it. Often, the goal is exactly the same as climate denial: to stop climate mitigation efforts in their tracks.

In a recent commentary published on the journal *Global Sustainability*¹, we have proposed a typology of twelve such 'discourses of climate delay', organised into four overarching categories (see figure below). Sustainable transport provides perhaps the most fertile ground for such discourses, as it is a sector where the gap between policy aspirations and reality keeps getting wider and wider. In the EU, transport is the only sector where energy consumption² and greenhouse gas emissions³ have increased since 1990.



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Change is impossible

Any measure to reduce emissions effectively would run against current ways of life or human nature and is thus impossible to implement in a democratic society.

Doomism

Any mitigation actions we take are too little, too late. Catastrophic climate change is already locked-in. We should adapt, or accept our fate in the hands of God or nature.



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Redirect responsibility

The first category of discourses aims to **redirect responsibility**. It accepts in principle that someone should do something to mitigate climate change but tries to shift the responsibility for action to other countries, sectors, or actors. A very common variant is **individualism**, when the entire responsibility for solving climate change is pushed onto individuals, who should make different consumption choices. The goal is to avoid talking about anything that goes beyond that. For example, when the CEO of the Volkswagen Group blames the SUV boom on consumer preferences,⁴ this tends to downplay the responsibility of carmakers, which spend large sums on advertising this vehicle segment, and make larger profits out of it.⁵

The second variant is **whataboutism**. This is when someone trivialises their own responsibility to act on climate change, by pointing to others who (allegedly) are at greater fault and therefore should 'go first'. When someone in Europe points out that their country accounts for 'just two percent'⁶ of global emissions, and starts talking about China, this is a classic case of whataboutism (for the best rebuttal of that argument see here). A close relative of whataboutism is the **'free rider' excuse**, namely the argument that other actors have no real intention of reducing their carbon emissions, so it is not in our interest to reduce ours first. An egregious example of combined use of whataboutism and free rider excuse is the justification provided by the city of Leeds (UK) for going ahead with the expansion of the local airport, despite the opposition of the Climate Change Citizen's Jury. The city council argued that the city's airport "represents only 1.4% of air travel from the UK" and that other airports in the UK are planning expansion, so that not doing the same would "damage the local economy".⁷

Push non-transformative solutions

The second group of discourses of climate delay is about **pushing non-transformative solutions**. This is when measures that are ineffective and/or far off in the future are promoted, to the detriment of more effective (but more uncomfortable) measures in the here and now. One of the most common variants is **technological optimism**. Technological development obviously has a big role to play in reducing carbon emissions. But too often the green potential of future technology is exaggerated, and the uncertainties surrounding it are downplayed, so that technology is presented as the only legitimate solution while other measures are dismissed as unnecessary. Nowhere is this clearer than in the aviation sector, where since the 1990s various future technology solutions have been proposed and then discarded by the industry,⁸ while the need to curb growing travel activity has been consistently negated. Something along these lines is currently happening with electric planes⁹ and e-fuels¹⁰.

Another way of pushing non-transformative solution is to shift the focus from concrete measures in the present to future targets and commitments. We call this type of discourse **'All talk, little action'**. Climate emergency declarations¹¹ and net-zero climate targets¹² are increasingly popular among policy makers, but they are often not accompanied by adequate action plans, or even directly contradicted by government measures (such as massively expanding airport capacity¹³). There is a danger that they are used as forms of greenwashing¹⁴. Doubling down on ambitious future targets can also be a way to divert attention from the failure to meet past targets. For example, the German government had a target of 100,000 electric vehicle public charging points by 2020.¹⁵ It managed to provide only about 20,000,¹⁶ but it has now promised... a million charging points by 2030.¹⁷ The media are part of the problem here, as they tend to greet future targets with much fanfare, without providing the full context.

When it comes to sustainable transport, researchers broadly agree that we need both 'push' and 'pull' measures,¹⁸ both carrots and sticks. The **'No sticks, just carrots'** discourse of climate delay argues that only carrots are acceptable, while sticks (such as pricing and regulation) are taboo in liberal market societies. A good example of 'carrotist' thought is when political leaders argue that we should improve railways rather than increasing taxes on flights (as if we could not do both).¹⁹ Or when they suggest that motorway speed limits would result in mass street protests like the 2018-2019 Yellow Vests movement.²⁰

The **Fossil fuel solutionism** discourse of climate delay reframes fossil fuels as part of the solution, rather than the problem. The goal is generally to avoid that they are phased out too quickly. This discourse is perhaps more common in the energy sector (where the industry tries to present natural gas as green),²¹ but is increasingly used for transport as well. For example, German car manufacturer Daimler sees "the modern diesel engine as part of the drive-system mix of the future", because "improving (it) is better than banning it" and this "will greatly help us reach climate targets".²² This sort of statements – which are repeated almost word by word by the current German Transport Minister²³ – stand in stark contrast with the increasing number of countries that have set dates for the combustion engine phase out.²⁴

Emphasises the downsides

The third category of discourses is perhaps the trickiest to deal with. It **emphasises the downsides** of climate mitigation, implying that they outweigh the benefits. This includes (instrumental) **appeals to social justice**. Let us be clear: environmental policies do raise serious social justice issues – no questions about it – and it is imperative that we address them the best we can. But these issues are sometimes exaggerated or exploited by vested interests or other actors, if they fit with their agendas. This is the case for example when the tabloid press claims that new taxes on air travel would "hammer hard-working families",²⁵ while we know that taxes on flights are progressive and hurt the rich the most.²⁶

A slightly different variant is when 'delayers' make instrumental **appeals to well-being**. This is when fossil fuel consumption is conflated with human development and need satisfaction, without further nuance or qualification. Such appeals typically gloss over the question of whether there could be alternative, lower carbon ways of satisfying those needs. For example, it is often claimed that 'people need their cars', so that any attempt to reduce car travel volumes would be doomed to failure. But while it is true that some contexts (such as periurban areas) can be extremely car dependent, that does not apply equally to all people in all places, nor does it necessarily have to be that way.²⁷

The tenth discourse of climate delay is called **policy perfectionism**. This is when the bar for acceptable climate policy measures is set so high that it basically cannot be met - anything less than perfect will not do. But perfect is the enemy of good, and the enemy of done. Also, supporters of the status quo may find it convenient to present themselves as 'supporters of climate action who are really just waiting for the perfect policy package to be agreed upon'. According to aviation expert Dan Rutherford, for example, "airlines advocating for global carbon pricing want the exact opposite: no meaningful pricing anywhere".²⁸

Surrender

The final two discourses of climate delay – **'doomism'** and **'change is impossible'** – negate the very possibility of substantially mitigating climate change, essentially suggesting to **surrender** to fate. As climate change gets worse, and the prospects of meeting Paris targets grow increasingly dim, we will probably hear more and more of this. Yet these arguments have a more general scope, and do not apply specifically to sustainable transport. Which, come to think of it, is good news as we have got more than enough on our plate!

Notes

- 1 <https://doi.org/10.1017/sus.2020.13>
- 2 <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/publication/eur-scientific-and-technical-research-reports/energy-consumption-and-energy-efficiency-trends-eu-28-2000-2018>
- 3 http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?lang=en&dataset=env_air_gge
- 4 <https://twitter.com/andreasgraf/status/1221866580818255874>
- 5 <https://www.autonews.com/article/20170724/RETAIL01/170729911/crossovers-and-suvs-fatten-profit-margins>
- 6 <https://www.climatechangenews.com/2015/03/11/nigel-farage-on-climate-change-in-his-own-words/>
- 7 <https://democracy.leeds.gov.uk/documents/b22995/Item%2010%20-%20Response%20to%20the%20Citizens%20Jury%20Recommendations%2010th-Mar-2020%2013.00%20Climate%20Emergency%20A.pdf?T=9>
- 8 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.trd.2016.02.004>
- 9 <https://theconversation.com/electric-planes-are-here-but-they-wont-solve-flyings-co-problem-125900>
- 10 <https://stay-grounded.org/e-fuels-a-realistic-alternative-for-powering-aviation/>
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- 28 <https://twitter.com/rutherdan/status/1277951771889987586>

Movement

Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between an origin and one or more destinations, or it is more akin to the idea of simply wandering, with no real origin or destination.

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1 <https://twitter.com/6040split/status/1290312486625980416>