A race against the clock? On the paradoxes of acting 'now' in the climate struggle

Anneleen Kenis

This is the accepted version of an article published in South Atlantic Quarterly. Please check the following website for the final, published version: https://read.dukeupress.edu/south-atlantic-quarterly/article-abstract/122/1/192/319764/A-Race-Against-the-Clock-On-the-Paradoxes-of?redirectedFrom=fulltext

Abstract

Taking inspiration from Walter Benjamin's 'Theses on History', this essay discusses how new climate movements try to break with the *empty* time of conventional climate discourses in order to politicise the 'now'. Pointing at the catastrophe which is looming on the horizon, new climate movements question understandings of history as progress. These are underpinned by linear, gradual and homogeneous conceptions of time, as for instance present in IPCC scenarios, with their moveable deadlines and reliance on future promises. Embracing, at least rhetorically, a *full* conception of time, for instance in their call to declare a climate emergency, new climate movements claim that the struggle cannot be postponed until tomorrow. So they claim one has to act 'now'. Paradoxically, however, in order to create a sense of *full* time, the movements rely on the *empty* time of the IPCC climate scenarios and the image of the climate clock. The performative call to 'act now' entails, therefore, its own contradictions. When every 'now' moment can be staged as the decisive moment, time is paradoxically made empty again.

Keywords

Climate movements, Walter Benjamin, climate clock, Fridays for Future, Extinction Rebellion

A race against the clock? On the paradoxes of acting 'now' in the climate struggle

Anneleen Kenis

"[Who would believe it! It is said that, incensed at the hour, Latter-day Joshuas, at the foot of every clocktower, Were firing on clock faces to make the day stand still]"
(Benjamin, 2007)

Joining the race

"We are in the race of our lives. A race against time and against ourselves". Gigantic billboards speak directly to the more than 10.000 attendees of the Glasgow climate summit in autumn 2021. "We can do this, if we act now". A bit further, an electric race car is showcased: "Join the race against climate change". The message is one of progress, innovation and technological breakthroughs. If only we invest enough in green research and start-ups, the so-needed technological developments – whether green hydrogen, carbon capture and storage or next-generation nuclear power facilities – would be merely a matter of time. Transferring an accounting logic to history, it seems as if the steady increase of our capacity to address climate change parallels the steady accumulation of capital through time. Innovative technologies will be the happy by-product of greater financial recourses. International cooperation to reduce emissions will supposedly follow as a matter of course. Whether in the form of net zero scenarios, which gamble on the development of large-scale carbon capture and storage facilities at some point in the future, or assumptions that geoengineering can buy us time to arrive at a working climate agreement, the future is not only said to hold climate breakdown but also a lot of promises.

But progress is not the only temporal message that decorates the conference walls. The conference is above all an arena for the encounter of conflicting understandings of time. "Put the brakes on climate change", displays the showroom of *Envision Racing*, the company that is fabricating the first electric race car, next to a screen with a young black boy holding a banner "SAVE OUR ONLY HOME". *Envision Racing* is not the only tech company which refers in its messaging to the new climate movements like Fridays For Future (FFF) and the need to "act now". References to the strikes are meticulously placed throughout the conference halls as if they were precious objects in a museum: "This is not a drill", "The house is on fire", "In case of emergency break bad habits". Being spiky and innocent at the same time, these messages conflict with the linear and progressive understanding of time otherwise prevalent in the conference hall. They point at a catastrophe looming on the horizon, questioning gradual and homogeneous conceptions of time, as for instance present in IPCC scenarios, with their moveable deadlines and reliance on future promises. The alliance with FFF is partly just rhetoric. At the same time, the school strikers also figure prominently in panel sessions and debates. The message should be clear: we can get there in time, if we all join the race.

Yet, the School Strikers did not only raise their voices in the sessions they were invited for. They had their own ideas on where and how to set the terms of the conversation (see also Van Dyck et al. 2021). Not only did tens of thousands of people take the streets during various demonstrations and a number of smaller direct actions. At the doorsteps of the conference venue a diverse group of activists gathered from the early morning until late in the evening, asking the conference members to 'act

now', day after day after day. Extinction Rebellion's (XR) hourglass symbol was everywhere. Faith groups proclaimed that judgement day is near. School Strikers asked the attendees to do everything not to burn their future. A group of mainly elderly people lay like dead on the ground under the message "REMEMBER CLIMATE DEAD". However diverse the group of activists might have looked at first sight, they had one thing in common: they all called for a break with the time of daily affairs. Action can no longer be postponed. The clock is ticking. No techno-future imaginaries here. If progress had been a dream, it would have ended here. The future looks bleak. Images of storms, floods and wildfires evoke our predicament.

Politicising the 'now'

As Erik Swyngedouw (2010) has aptly observed, in contrast to other struggles, the actually existing climate movement has "no positively embodied name or signifier". It has no vision, myth or imaginary ideal waiting to be realised. While the future seems omnipresent in climate movements' discourses at first, a closer reading shows that the future is mainly present in its negativity. It is the lack of a future which figures centrally. For those who do not believe in techno-utopian fairy tales, the only easily imaginable future is an apocalyptic one. It is a future which has to be warded off by all means. The struggle is not so much about *which* future we want to build as it is about having *a* future at all (Kenis 2021). It is in this context of a lack of a convincing future alternative, that we should understand new climate movements' fierce attempts to politicise the 'now' (Kenis and Mathijs 2014).

Certainly, the slogan "act now" has been omnipresent in the climate movement for decades. Still, the so-called new climate movements, FFF and XR, seem to have succeeded in politicising the 'now' in unprecedented ways (Davies et al. 2021). In the slipstream of the special 2018 IPCC report of global warming of 1.5 °C, and driven by the narrative that humanity would only have 12 years left to ward off climate change, FFF mobilised millions of young people to take the streets in the years before the Glasgow climate summit. Stating that we have to act "as if our house is on fire", and that there is no use in attending school in times of climate change, FFF shows that the struggle cannot wait until tomorrow, or in their narrative, until the day they graduate. Similarly, XR claims that 'this is an emergency', and that only large-scale disruption can stop the clock. Both movements aim at disrupting the time of daily affairs, which relies on the slow process of supposedly gradually progressing knowledge and capacities, and the incremental but steady future changes which are believed to follow from this.

Full versus empty time

To understand what is at stake it is useful to take inspiration from Walter Benjamin's (2007) work 'On the Concept of History'. In this text, he deals with the delusions of understanding history in terms of progress and the challenges of understanding time politically under emergency conditions (Löwy 2016). Importantly, Benjamin wrote his reflections in the context of a severe personal and political threat, the rise of fascism, and the frustration with the lack of response from both the social democrats and communists. What they failed to see, to Benjamin's mind, was that fascism was not just a detour on an otherwise progressive course of history. From the latter perspective, the stakes are relatively minor: in the end all will be fine. This view, for Benjamin, relies on an *empty* or homogenised understanding of time, in which each moment equals every other, an hour equals an hour, as in the typical representation of the clock. In such an empty conception, time is reduced to space: days and years can be spread out on a (time)line. But as Benjamin fiercely argued, this attitude starts from an entirely mistaken view on time and history. In reality, the future is defined by what we do today.

Decisive action cannot simply be postponed. The right moment to act can be missed, irretrievably. Understanding Benjamin's argument therefore requires a *full* conception of time, in which each 'now' moment is a nexus of specific, contingent possibilities. When the moment is missed, these possibilities can be lost.

My argument is that a *full* understanding of time politicises, as it sharpens our awareness of contingent possibilities (see also Kenis and Lievens 2017), and confronts us with the need to act, to decide, or take sides. By recognising in each now moment the possibility to act, a full conception of time interpellates people to become political subjects. An *empty* understanding of time, on the contrary, tends to conceal the contingency of temporal possibilities. It creates the illusion that what is not done today, can still be done tomorrow, perhaps by others, and that the necessary actions can be set out on timelines and planned at will. It fails to see that the time to act can be missed, and that it might never return.

Looking at the climate struggle from this perspective, FFF and XR seem to embrace a *full* conception of time. Such a conception can trigger mobilising forms of political subjectification and can help explain the success of the movements in terms of passion and numbers. It distinguishes their discourse from mainstream climate discourses, like the IPCC climate pathways or the time discourses displayed in the showrooms of the Glasgow climate conference. The latter exemplify empty conceptions of time, mapped spatially in gradual timelines, with moveable deadlines and a predictable range of future scenarios. There might be thresholds or tipping points, but these are merely of a physical, not of a political nature, and are increasingly framed as reversable, as for instance implicitly in overshoot scenarios. While these timelines might be scientifically 'correct', they make abstraction from the concrete moment in which action is required or becomes possible as a result of converging events.

At first sight, a distinct understanding of time seems to be at work in the new climate movements and more conventional climate discourses. However, in what follows, I will show that in actual fact, their respective understandings of time are more ambivalent than rapid conceptualisations suggest. Paradoxically, in order to create *full* time, the movements rely on the empty time of the IPCC climate scenarios and the symbol of the climate clock.

The ticking clock

It is October 2021. In the run-up to Glasgow, debates are taking place all over the world about the prospects of the coming climate summit. School strikers have clearly been able to raise their voices; they are invited to the debating table next to well-known politicians and prominent scholars. During these debates, they tell a story of bleak future perspectives and a ticking clock: the time we still have to ward off runaway climate change gets shorter every second, every day. Being well aware of the apocalyptic undertone of their narrative, at one of these debates a school striker puts a climate clock in front of them to show to the audience. It is, however, not just a conventional climate clock, they proudly proclaim. The clock does not just count down until the deadline by which action has to be taken to have a reasonable chance to stay under 1.5°C global temperature rise, it also displays the more hopeful rising percentage of renewables within the global energy mix. If we are to believe the clock, new capacity is added every second, every day.

During the years before the Glasgow conference, the climate clock had become a key symbol of the narrowing time window to tackle climate change. The clock had not only travelled with Greta Thunberg over the world, it had also been installed on towers and other sky-reaching buildings in cities stretching over the globe: from Berlin to New York, from Seoul to Kazakhstan, from Chiapas to

Glasgow. Just as the clock on the church tower was central in structuring social life in Christian parishes for centuries, the climate clock is hoped to structure society's climate engagements. Centrally located, "an iconic reference point", no-one can escape being reminded of the progressively limited scope to tackle climate change.[1]

Symbolising the struggle against climate change with a climate clock might seem an obvious gesture, but it actually requires a refined process of abstraction and equalisation (see e.g. Lohmann 2012). First, climate change is equalised to global temperature, which in its turn is equalised to the total cumulative amount of CO2 emissions (Asayama et al. 2019; Hulme 2019).[2] Subsequently, time is levelled down to the empty succession of seconds, minutes and days. In such an approach, the difference between yesterday, today and tomorrow is merely quantitative, as is the difference between your emissions and mine. As Rogelj and colleagues (2019) argue in their defence of the concept of a carbon budget, on which the climate clock is based: "Every tonne of CO2 emitted into the atmosphere by human activities adds to warming, and it does not matter whether this tonne of CO2 is emitted today, tomorrow or yesterday." While adding the growing percentage of renewables might counter despair, it participates in a similar logic of abstraction and equalisation. Furthermore, it buys into the narrative of progress, giving the impression that we are, even though slowly, on a steady pathway towards carbon neutrality. Following from this image, paradoxically, no real political action is needed: if we just continue watching the clock, in the end all will be fine.

The caveats are plentiful. That the percentage of renewables in the global energy system is going up says something about what is happening in relative terms, but not in absolute terms. Moreover, the question should be asked whether solving the climate crisis is just about replacing fossil fuel infrastructure by renewable energy sources, even if that would obviously be a big deal. Most importantly, however, both 'clocks' completely misrepresent the real social and political dynamic happening on the ground: change does not happen in a steady way. It happens through decisions, discontinuities, leaps and events. In the reality of politics, each moment is different. Representing climate change, or the struggle against it, through a climate clock flattens out the unevenness of time. It is an attempt to draw a line between the dots, ignoring the outliers which show that not every moment is the same. The investment decisions to build new coal power installations, the sudden shift in funding streams towards or away from fracking or tar sand exploitation, the policy approvals for a gigantic solar panel park or the resistance against new wind turbines: all of these struggles come with their own, complex temporality.

Through the simulation of the ticking clock, the pathway towards net zero emissions is represented in an almost mechanical way, thereby concealing the social and political processes taking place. But there are decisive moments, when it is time to force breakthroughs in building renewable energy infrastructure or blocking the development of new fossil fuel projects. Think about the Standing Rock activists resisting the construction of a new pipeline near their lands. These activists are aware that this struggle cannot be postponed until tomorrow. Once a new pipeline, gas or coal power installation is built, new shale gas drilling towers installed, or tar sands cleared, the clock cannot so easily be turned back anymore. The time of climate change is not empty and homogeneous, but *full* and marked by critical thresholds and turning points, and so are the social and political temporalities of the struggle against it.

(Un)moveable deadlines

The emptiness of the climate clock works interestingly enough also in the opposite way. Irrespectively of what we do, the clock continues ticking at the same pace (see also Asayama et al., 2019). Nothing,

or at least so it looks, can stop the clock ticking towards its inevitable end.[3] While the clock had been invented to mobilise action in the now, it might paradoxically create the passivity it aimed to prevent.

In the representation of the climate clock, there is only one moment of *full* time, one threshold, tipping point or discontinuity: the deadline, or the moment when the clock stops ticking. It is the moment when, from one day to the other, everything will supposedly be different. However, just as the empty time of the ticking clock makes abstraction of the real political, social and physical processes taking place, so does the *full* time of the deadline. As Mike Hulme (2016) has argued, interestingly enough in relation to the previous climate clock which reached its deadline in 2016,

> There is no meaningful sense in which it is now no longer 'likely' that the world's temperature will remain below 2°C, whereas before last Wednesday it was 'likely'. Even if such decisive thresholds existed in the climate or in socio-technical systems, it is beyond our ken to know when and where they are reached, or with what consequence.

Still, putting a deadline might be useful from a political perspective. In contrast to the classic clock which goes on forever and does not have an 'end time', the climate clock embraces at least one *full* moment of time. In this way one could argue that deadline-ism still has a politicising side. Indeed, does the imaginary of the 'end time' of the climate clock, as "the point of no return" (Hulme 2011) not resonate with Benjamin's idea that a lost moment never returns? Still, this 'moment of no return' has a very ambiguous character in the narrative of the climate clock. Not only because of its largely performative nature: the deadline appears as an artefact, varying with the latest insights in climate science and the factors (not) taken into account in climate models. But also, and maybe most importantly, because the only moment of 'full time' in the climate clock paradoxically converges with the moment when no action is needed or possible anymore: it is the moment when it is too late.

Performing the 'now' moment

"This is not a drill". "Act now". A small group of mainly elderly activists are standing at the corner of a busy shopping street in the city centre of Glasgow. Two of them are holding a banner. One distributes leaflets to passengers. Three others are performing a jury trial. One person, holding a megaphone, is pleading guilty for having acted on the climate emergency. As she states, "dear lord, do you understand, the time to act is now?" I had met them a few months earlier in London. Also then they asked to 'act now'. Whether it being in London or Glasgow, the passion of the activists stands in sharp contract with the reaction of the people around them. Some look amused at the theatre play, though most people try to avoid the activists, or quickly accept a leaflet and then rush on.

At first sight, XR seems to have taken the idea of *full* time very seriously. Every moment which is not acted upon is a missed chance, and it does not return. At the same time, they do not seem to be able to convince many people that the time to act is 'really now'. Their actions have something theatrical about them, as the contrast is so big with the giggling and shouting people rushing through the shopping street while the climate clock above them ticks undisturbedly. Obviously, the argument can be made that the passers-by are the ones who live in an artificial world, amused and entertained by the band which goes on playing while the ship sinks under their feet. Stuck as they are in the time of daily affairs, and blinded by the narrative of progress, they might be the ones who are so occupied with playing their roles that they fail to see what is at stake. Alternatively, the passers-by might feel very well that even the activists are not really serious about what they say, that there is something empty about their declaration of an emergency, their pervasive though repetitious call to act now, that after their action they go back to their comfortable homes, watch television and have a cup of tea.

How to create a moment for collective action and change is a problem every social movement is confronted with. Creating such a moment inevitably has a performative character. Was one of the most cited events of politicisation, Rosa Park's refusal to give up her place in the bus for a white passenger, making her into an icon of the Civil Rights Movement, not a performative gesture as well? Politicisation is about making something visible that otherwise goes unnoticed (Rancière 1999). It is about disrupting the time of daily affairs and opening a view on a different temporality. But to what extent can such an event be consciously created or triggered?

The narrative of the clock, which inspires the narrative of the new climate movements, was invented in the hope that it would trigger action in the 'now'. The idea was that it could create "a critical time window for action" in the words of the inventors of the climate clock.[4] The clock was intended to show us that every day, maybe even every second matters. In that sense, the representation of the clock aimed at establishing an imaginary which is exactly the opposite of what I have claimed above. The idea was to create a feeling of full time *par excellence:* everything is at stake at every moment. One can never rest assured. But to what extent can the exemplary figure of empty time, the clock, be used to create a sense of full time?

The answer is in the question. Paradoxically, as they try to create full time *par excellence*, the new climate movements see in every moment great, though similar possibilities to act. In other words, they attempt to politicise 'the now moment' in an undifferentiated way. As a result, time is rendered equal again. Maybe this is what makes the 'now' in XR's discourse merely performative. If each day is as appropriate for declaring an emergency, none is, and we paradoxically end up with an empty conception of time again.

The comparison with love might help understand what is at stake. Falling in love is a peculiar event. You cannot really artificially create it or actively pursue it. Still, passively waiting until it crosses your path is most likely not very fruitful either. If you never get out of the temporality of daily affairs, nothing will happen. But actively 'performing' a moment, in the hope the performance will turn real, might also lead to disappointments. I would argue that something similar is at play in the political realm. Seizing the now moment requires a capacity to read and intervene in the political conjuncture. There is always something performative about the moment to act, but that does not mean that this moment can be created at will or out of thin air.

Fire alarm?

Envision Racing claims that we have to 'put the brakes on climate change', a claim which at first sight resonates with Benjamin's appeal to pull the emergency brakes, as an example of what it means to act in full time. Only, *Envision Racing* imagines its brakes as the result of a technological breakthrough on the linear road of progress. Benjamin, in contrast, claimed that we have to put brakes on the motor of progress itself, as the train of progress drives us with increasing speed into the abyss. It is in this sense that Benjamin's entire work can be read as a kind of 'fire alarm', drawing attention to the imminent dangers that loom on the horizon and that require action in the 'now' (Löwy 2016).

Greta Thunberg famously claimed that we have to act as if our house is on fire, because it is, thereby resonating the argument which Walter Benjamin made 80 years earlier. Similarly, XR claims we need to declare a climate emergency, thereby clearly trying to pull the brakes. In that sense, both movements seem to embrace a full conception of time, taking up the struggle that cannot be postponed until tomorrow. Yet, as I have tried to show in this essay, artificially pushing an excessive version of full time makes empty time come back with a vengeance. By drawing on an artificially

constructed deadline and claiming that in the countdown towards this deadline *every* moment is the appropriate moment to act, time is emptied again.

Would it not be possible to create a more political clock? A clock which displays a much more dynamic interplay in which time can be stretched or compressed, lengthened or shortened, depending on the political events on the ground? Such a clock would show that two seconds are not necessarily the same. It would also indicate the extent of our failure to step on the brakes. However, displaying only one temporality, such an imaginary perhaps still stays too close to an empty conception of time. Maybe, if they really want to politicise time, the new climate movements can learn something from *Envision Racing* after all. As everyone who has ever done an 'Emergency Response Driver Training' course knows, if you fix your eyes on the abyss, the chance of plunging into it is much greater. The way to avoid crashing is to keep your eyes on the road, even if it is bumpy, and focus on where you want to go.

Notes

[1] https://climateclock.world/

[2] The climate clock is based on a calculation of the amount of time we have left before our global 'carbon budget' runs out. See https://www.mcc-berlin.net/en/research/co2-budget.html

[3] The climate clock is aligned with new IPCC figures if available.

[4] https://climateclock.world/

Biography

Anneleen Kenis is a senior research fellow in Political Ecology at the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO) and is affiliated with KU Leuven, Ghent University and the University of Cambridge. Her current research deals with the role of time and temporal discourses in (de)politicising climate change.

Acknowledgements

This research has been funded by the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO) and has been conducted during my stay as a visiting scholar at the Department of Geography of the University of Cambridge. I want to thank the members of the Climate Change Reading Group and the participants of the seminar where I presented this paper, for the fruitful discussion. Most thanks go, of course, to the co-authors and editors of this special issue, for the inspiring collaboration while trying not to run out of time. All potential mistakes or other problems with the paper are the sole responsibility of the author.

References

Asayama, Shinichiro, Rob Bellamy, Oliver Geden, Warren Pearce, and Mike Hulme. 2019. "Why setting a climate deadline is dangerous." *Nature Climate Change* 9 (8): 570-572.

Benjamin, Walter. 2007. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." In *Illuminations*, 253-264. New York: Schocken Books.

Davies, Anna R., Vanesa Castán Broto, and Stephan Hügel. 2021. "Editorial: Is There a New Climate Politics?" *Politics and Governance* 9 (2): 1-7.

Hulme, Mike. 2011. "Reducing the Future to Climate: A Story of Climate Determinism and Reductionism." *Osiris* 26 (1): 245-266.

Hulme, Mike. 2016. "“Deadline-ism”: when is it too late?".

Hulme, Mike. 2019. "Climate Emergency Politics Is Dangerous." *Issues in Science and Technology* 36 (1): 23-25.

Kenis, Anneleen. 2021. "Clashing Tactics, Clashing Generations: The Politics of the School Strikes for Climate in Belgium." *Politics and Governance* 9 (2): 135-145.

Kenis, Anneleen, and Erik Mathijs. 2014. "Climate change and post-politics: Repoliticizing the present by imagining the future?" *Geoforum* 52: 148-156.

Kenis, Anneleen, and Matthias Lievens. 2017. "Imagining the carbon neutral city: The (post)politics of time and space." *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 49 (8): 1762-1778.

Lohmann, Larry. 2012. "Financialization, commodification and carbon: the contradictions of neoliberal climate policy." *Socialist register* 48 (85): 107.

Löwy, Michael. 2016. *Fire Alarm. Reading Walter Benjamin’s ‘On the Concept of History’*. London: Verso.

Rancière, Jacques. 1999. *Disagreement: Politics and philosophy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Rogelj, Joeri, Piers M. Forster, Elmar Kriegler, Christopher J. Smith, and Roland Séférian. 2019. "Estimating and tracking the remaining carbon budget for stringent climate targets." *Nature* 571 (7765): 335-342.

Swyngedouw. 2010. "Apocalypse Forever?" Theory, Culture & Society 27 (2-3): 213-232.

Van Dyck, Barbara, Anneleen Kenis, and Andy Stirling. 2021. "The genetically modified organism shall not be refused? Talking back to the technosciences." *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 0 (0): 25148486211042307.