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To Trump's Chagrin, Non-nationals Are Still In

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Eric S. Godoy, PhD

The anti-environmental policies of the Trump administration are morally disturbing, to say the least. The willful ignorance of basic scientific facts and shameless pandering to the very industries profiting from environmental degradation are especially lamentable.¹ In what follows, I focus on the response elicited by the administration's plan to withdraw from the 2015 Paris Agreement. But first, an analogy.

Suppose there is a lousy lifeguard who blatantly decides to slack off. When beachgoers point out a swimmer in danger of drowning, the lifeguard refuses to help (instead insisting the swimmer is a hoax and tweeting about the size of the beach crowd). When it becomes clear that the lifeguard will not help, responsibility falls on the beachgoers. They ought to do something rather than nothing if they are capable, cooperating to do so if necessary. Moral responsibility abhors a vacuum.

Governments are often the best way to address collective action problems such as climate change, just as lifeguards are better at protecting swimmers than are casual beachgoers. Regarding climate change, the U.S. Government is like a lousy lifeguard failing at its job. In fact, it is doing *such* a lousy job² – not just failing to act, but even waylaying efforts to curb further warming and doubling down on activities that cause it – it has catalysed a round of action by non-national agents. So far, cities, counties, states, tribes, businesses, investors, faith organizations, and higher learning institutes representing \$6.2 trillion of the U.S. economy have announced that they remain committed to Paris by signing 'America's Pledge' and declaring We Are Still In (2018). The list of signatories includes Apple, New York City, and the University of Michigan. The U.S. Climate Alliance (2018) is another group of 16 states and territories

representing 40% of Americans. While these agents are not as powerful as the U.S. Government, together their power – and indeed, their very existence – is far from insignificant.

Non-national agents have become increasingly involved in international policy negotiations, especially regarding environmental issues. While their power is limited by sovereign state agents, there are nevertheless at least three ethically important features of these attempts by non-national agents to fill the responsibility gap.

It is Communicative

Many signatories had already established environmental policies committing them to meeting Paris. Nevertheless, there is what Hourdequin (2010) calls ‘communicative value’ in their joint pledging. Non-national agents signal through pledging that they value the intentions of the Paris goal; they are jointly and publicly taking up a shared responsibility to meet it. This signalling can help encourage other agents to do likewise and is therefore praiseworthy in situations that require collective action. Communicative value may be difficult to measure but is morally significant since it makes achieving the shared goal more likely. To understand why, consider an alternative, what I call ‘atomistic responsibility’, which agents could adopt by taking responsibility solely for their own actions as isolated agents rather than as part of a larger movement. Agents adopting this attitude might reduce their emissions, but refuse to sign public pledges, or agree to share information and other resources. Because sharing responsibility encourages greater action, it is morally preferable to the atomistic alternative.

It highlights our multiple, simultaneous collective potential

May (1992) defines ‘putative group’ as a collective of agents that *could* work together to solve collective action problems, but that ‘must first recognize they share responsibility for the harms,

in order to feel motivated to form structures allowing for collective action' (p. 105). It is important to acknowledge that, as agents, we already belong simultaneously to multiple potential groups capable of acting together; or as Aristotle put it, we are political animals. If lifeguards or governments are not fulfilling their role, then it is praiseworthy when citizens and the groups to which they belong find alternate ways of meeting responsibilities to each other. There are two reasons it is useful to remember this when thinking about climate change.

First, the causes of climate change are so deeply integrated into our everyday routines that nothing short of a radical rethinking of core collective habits will stem further warming. Our current methods of transportation, energy generation, and agriculture all contribute to a warming atmosphere; they also all make possible a host of other activities that we undergo – e.g., commuting to work, filling our bellies, and warming our homes. Envisioning and experimenting with feasible methods of transforming these habits will require voluntary efforts from many levels of society. Federal-level policies cannot do this alone. It is praiseworthy when putative groups take steps toward turning themselves into the type of collective capable of enacting change of this nature.

It is localized with a global reach

The second, related reason is although climate change is a global phenomenon, it manifests differently in different locations. Where it does, it exacerbates existing injustice. Local stakeholders are in the best position to identify and articulate such injustice. This is what feminists (eco- and otherwise) have called 'epistemic privilege'.

Consider the relatively new phenomenon of climate gentrification. A history of racism positioned poorer neighbourhoods in Miami on the city's highest terrain furthest from the

lucrative beachfronts, which have recently become less valuable because of rising seas (Charlton, 2017). Local activists are resisting developers' efforts to relocate poorer residents to low-lying areas where they would be at greater risk from future storms and high tide events. Different stakeholders face different climate risks. While climate gentrification is not unique to Miami, the city's history, geography, and culture are. The way climate injustice manifests and presses upon existing injustice, and the type of organizing required to resist it, is best understood by the local stakeholders.

I am not suggesting that having a lousy lifeguard is a good thing. Rather, federal-level incompetence has inspired greater, more vocal organization by a plethora of other collective agents, and more organization is precisely what we need to better identify and address the harms that climate change will continue to bring. This does not mean that federal-level policy cannot help or inhibit more localized action – it certainly can do either. But networks of more localized agents can help lay the groundwork for more general policy. It also do not mean that environmental groups will find an easy alliance with the corporations and local governments committing to Paris. The next few years will be no day at the beach for climate activist, but Trump's actions have helped strengthen resolve, galvanize action, and grow the type of cooperative networks necessary for future success.

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Notes

¹ Donald Trump implied icecaps were at a record high (Morgan, 2018). Emails with EPA secretary, Scott Pruitt, reveal connections with the fossil fuel industry (Dennis and Mufson, 2017).

² The current administration is not unique for failing to act. But, its backsliding after the momentum generated by Paris is hard to deny.