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To cite this article: Ben Anderson (2023): Boredom and the politics of climate change, Scottish Geographical Journal, DOI: [10.1080/14702541.2023.2197869](https://doi.org/10.1080/14702541.2023.2197869)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702541.2023.2197869>



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Published online: 16 Apr 2023.



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POSITION PAPER



Boredom and the politics of climate change

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ABSTRACT

In this position paper, I speculate on what we might learn about the politics of climate change if we stay with the possibility that boredom might be part of how subjects encounter and make sense of climate change. I argue that boredom enacts an ethically and politically ambivalent detachment from the demand to act that accompanies urgency-imbued vocabularies of crisis and emergency. Whether boredom is a refusal to face climate change, or a way of coping with and inhabiting the overwhelming, being bored with climate change allows existing attachments to fossil-fuelled lives and futures to continue. The event of climate change is 'suspended', in the sense that it is no longer affectively present. I distinguish this relation of 'climate change suspension' from two other ways of detaching from the event of climate change – 'climate change denial' and 'climate change delay'. Unlike in denial or delay, in suspension the demand of climate change is held in abeyance, not ended. It returns in ways that blur the line between boredom and other affects. In conclusion, I reflect on the affective politics of climate change, and wonder about how boredom could become part of a progressive politics of climate change.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 28 March 2023

Accepted 29 March 2023

KEYWORDS

Affective politics; boredom; climate change; suspension

What might boredom teach us?

What might be learned about the politics of climate change today if we begin from that most mundane and commonplace of affects – boredom? In this essay, I explore this question, wondering about the type of detachment from the ethical and political demand of climate change that boredom expresses and enacts. But juxtaposing climate change and its harms and losses with boredom is risky. Of all the affects, boredom has long been considered both trivial *and* trivialising (Goodstein, 2005). Given the enormity of what we face, its uneven impacts, and how legacies of colonialism and other social-spatial systems are intensified (Sultana, 2022), at best boredom might seem to be a trivial matter of little consequence. At worst, juxtaposing boredom with climate change might appear to legitimise and reproduce the trivialising effect of boredom, or the relation of indifference that accompanies it.

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But what if boredom haunts today's intense claims that we live in a climate emergency, and is part of how some subjects sense and make sense of it? Another image of a burning earth quickly scrolled past. An injunction to act *now* after the latest IPCC report warning of the catastrophe to come met with a shrug, and a movement to something more immediately engaging. A cry of injustice issued from a street protest greeted with a shift of attention away from the demand to change. Consider this issue's focus on the 'human geographies of COP26 itself' (Moreau et al., 2023, p. 4, *emphasis in original*). Holding onto the resonances and dissonances between ordinary encounters with COP26 and the extraordinary demands of climate change, the interventions reveal the occasion to be one of temporarily intensified possibility. Public space is remade by activists who co-produce 'materially affecting geographies' (Moreau, 2023), hope shimmers (McGeachan, 2023), activists practice desire for the new (Sutherland, 2023). Different earth futures are glimpsed, even as security intensifies (Parr, 2023). But perhaps boredom was also part of the banal encounters through which this 'crucible of crisis', as COP26 was previously described (Warren & Clayton, 2021), was encountered in and beyond Glasgow? An encounter and relation that directs us towards more ethically troubling questions of a lack of care or love or indifference.

Occasionally, the presence of something that might be 'climate change boredom' crosses a threshold and becomes a public matter of concern. Parts of the press worry about indifference and its relation to inaction. 'Why is the greatest threat to the planet of so little concern to most Americans?' asked the *Los Angeles Times* in a (2022) editorial, with more than a hint of despair.¹ A satirical piece in the UK *Guardian* juxtaposes boredom with the image of a burning earth, beginning with the line 'I find the environment and the climate emergency the most boring topic on the (burning) planet' (Hagan, 2022). The slow news site Tortoise convened an event entitled 'Climate backlash: Are we bored of climate change?'² Boredom is also in the background for claims by activists and politicians about new forms of representation being needed that are more interesting, more engaging, more inspiring. Erik Solheim, then Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), claimed in 2017 that: 'The language of environmentalists has been boring, so uninspiring.'³ Faith is placed in producing affected subjects, who are motivated through new stories, new art, and other projects of promise and hope. As Solheim went on to say in a typical comment: 'You cannot bore people into action. They need to be excited and inspired to take action and change their behaviour.'

But, in the main, boredom subsists below the threshold of public concern and discussion, replaced with discussions of apathy or other forms of non-action. There is always a little doubt about whether or not or how or why it exists. The ordinary scenes above are imagined, we know little about climate boredom. Perhaps what is of more importance is the political work claims about other people's boredom do, such as the claim issued by Solheim? Perhaps boredom with climate change is really not about climate change, but about a new form of boredom – 'anticipation of the possibility of boredom' – through which value is created in today's digital platform economies, and their (dis)organisation of attention? But perhaps boredom with climate change really is present, a public secret, a guilty one given the dissonance between the triviality of boredom and enormity of emergency and crisis?

Whether or not it exists, boredom sits uneasily with how climate change is now mediated as an event in the global north. What marks 'climate change' as mediated is

genre proliferation and confusion animated by affects of urgency. Is climate change a crisis, a disaster, a catastrophe, an emergency, or all at once? But genres flail (Berlant, 2018). The disaster is too ordinary. The exception is everyday. New genres emerge to name a blurring of disaster or catastrophe and the everyday, a blurring always-already too evident for some people for whom climate impacts are inseparable from everyday life. But there is also a sense that all genres fail, that they cannot do justice to the disruption of the distinctions between events and conditions, between the everyday and its opposites, which 'climate change' heralds.

Boredom would seem to be a little undramatic, too flat, for this confusion and proliferation as claims of climate emergency and imminent extinction pile up. Unsurprisingly, discussion of the climate affects emerging in the present has stayed away from boredom or other ways of 'unfeeling' (Berlant, 2015) or being 'unaffected' (Bissell, 2022), attending to the different ways in which subjects are affected. Climate change as mediated event is present through 'climate anxiety' or 'eco-anxiety' (Boyd et al., 2023), 'doom' or 'dread' (Goldberg, 2021), 'ecological grief', 'trauma', or 'sadness' (Cunsolo et al., 2020), 'solastalgia' (Albrecht, 2019), 'enjoyment' (Pohl & Swyngedouw, 2023), and so on. Whilst the structure of intensity and attachment varies across these different 'earth emotions' (Albrecht, 2019), in all cases subjects are moved, they are affected by present or to come losses. In the midst of this presumption of affection in a crisis prone present, how to make sense of the claim that others are bored of and by climate change? What might we learn about this crisis-filled affective present if we stay awhile with the possibility that something like 'climate boredom' exists in encounters with climate change?

In this position paper, I speculate on climate boredom, acting as if it exists and bracketing, for a time, the uncertainty that accompanies all discussions of boredom. I argue that staying with climate boredom might help us better notice 'climate change suspension' as a distinctive form of detachment from climate change or, more precisely, a detachment from the demand to exit attachments to fossil-fuelled lives with which the name climate change is now inseparable.⁴ Becoming bored performs a muted relation of detachment from a relation of proximity to a demand. It exists as the affective underside of today's intense claims of a climate emergency.

Climate change boredom

Elsewhere, I have argued that boredom involves a relation of detachment from within proximity (Anderson, 2021). Being bored dampens the intensity of an event, practice or relation. As a starting point, then, perhaps instead of the event of climate change being overwhelming or unbearable or motivating it becomes ... nothing much at all. Claims of present emergency or imminent extinction barely register, except as something else to be turned away from, as attention and interest moves and is held by something else within people's mediated everyday lives. The demand of climate change, the demand to respond by acting, sacrificing, ending and changing, is turned away from. Climate change recedes into the background as attention and action shifts to something else. The bored subject is still in proximity to climate change, in the sense of inhabiting worlds where traces of mediated climate change will be encountered, but climate change happens as a non-event. For a limited duration, it is not felt to demand anything of the subject who detaches.

What are the politics of this detachment from within continued proximity? We could judge climate boredom, first, as an ethical failing of particularly positioned subjects of climate change who turn away from a demand. Boredom allows the bored subject to proceed as if there is nothing demanded of them. It is a form of indifference, a refusal of the promise of another person, an object, a piece of art, or anything else. And boredom has often been judged because it generates indifference, for the lack of care or concern with which that which bores is encountered. Acedia, typically understood as a precursor to modern boredom, was, for example, commonly judged as a sin for how it refused the affective presence of God (see Raposa, 1999). In climate change boredom, what is turned away from is actual or possible loss and damage, but also the explicit or implicit injunction to act, the urgency which is now the atmospheric accompaniment of all climate change aesthetics. And in that turning away is a willed or unwilled refusal – a refusal to exit attachments to fossil-fuelled lives. If only momentarily, being bored allows attachments to fossil-fuelled lives to *feel* unproblematic,⁵ even through the inferno of mediated scenes of present or future loss and suffering.

We might, though, be more generous to momentarily bored subjects, recognising that boredom as relation and practice happens in the midst of a host of other earth emotions, as well as the ongoingness of daily lives. Perhaps boredom is a weak form of defence against an event or demand that is just too much? Boredom would be a way of getting through a situation where everything is overwhelming, both the scale of action demanded of us all, and the scale of damage and suffering here and to come. We might draw on traditions that understand something like boredom as a way of protecting the subject and inhabiting a scene which threatens to overwhelm. Simmel's (1971 [1903]) blasé attitude, for example, was understood as a way of enabling urban inhabitants to live in an urban condition characterised by disordering forces and abrupt shifts in the human sensorium. Climate change would be too much, and boredom a means for the subject to inhabit and go on in a world of too much intensity. Imagine being affected by every image of catastrophe to come! Imagine constantly feeling the losses here and to come! Of course, some of us do and climate change boredom would coexist with anxiety, dread, and other ways of being affected by the losses of climate change. Perhaps it surfaces once other affects become too much or threaten to become too much, providing a handrail to allow subjects to keep going without completely exiting the demand of climate change as incessant background 'condition' (on 'climate-as-condition' see Bulkeley 2019).

Climate boredom might be both of these things at once: a way of enabling a demand to be refused and a defence against something which is too much. Either way and whether or not we judge bored subjects, in climate boredom the demand for action and change that accompanies climate change is momentarily suspended. If climate change is affectively detached from, if it is felt as nothing much at all apart from the muted restlessness or frustration that so often *is* boredom, then the call for action is exited, rather than simply refused. In this respect, climate boredom is the affective opposite of the genre of climate emergency with its characteristic affect of urgency (Cretney & Nissen, 2022). What distinguishes emergency as a genre for making sense of events, in comparison to genres of catastrophe or disaster, is the hope that action can make a difference (see Anderson, 2017). Whilst harm might be emerging, something becomes an emergency and is claimed as such by actors because time remains for action to make a difference.

There is an ‘interval’ of time before the catastrophe or disaster fully materialises. But claims of emergency rely on the combination of the affective presence of a future threat, some form of motivating desire to protect something valued, and the affect of urgency. Boredom involves none of these three affective qualities. In boredom, the future event stops being an event. It is greeted with indifference, turned away from. There is nothing in the present to be protected, and nothing in the future which threatens. Boredom results in an extended present until time is started again and something else becomes the object of investment and attachment and attention.

Climate change suspension

What does the event/condition of climate change become when mediated through boredom? Climate change is suspended. By which I mean that the demand that accompanies mediated climate change, the demand of emergency, is, for a time, stopped or halted. Action can proceed as if climate change either was not happening or did not affect the subject. Life can continue as normal, even if mediated climate change is still present. Boredom also, though, begins a beginning (Phillips, 1993). In turning away from the demand of climate change, a non-climate changed future emerges as still possible. This might simply be a future in which attachments to the cluster of promises gathered around fossil fuels can continue. Normal life can, once again, be attached to as something that will endure. Boredom allows the continuation of the fantasy that the present will be the future and that nothing has to change, unless we want it to. Instead of a slowly cancelled future, or a futureless future (Goldberg, 2021), being bored with climate change enables the promise of continuity.

Boredom with climate change is different in kind, then, from two other ways of refusing the demand of climate change: two affective-material formations that I will term ‘climate change denial’ and ‘climate change delay’. Denial involves becoming intensely affected by climate change. There is no indifference. The affect structure is melodramatic and has the same formal structure as claims of climate emergency – a threat to the future that makes action in the present necessary and urgent. It is just that in climate change denial the threat to the future is action in the present to stop or end ‘climate change’. Present action is judged as a threat. As Daggett (2018) shows, countering action in the name of stopping climate change becomes an intensely urgent task. Convincingly, she suggests that ‘denial’ has morphed into something closer to ‘defiance’ or ‘refusal’ as it becomes attached to forms of petro-masculinity. Whilst the content of the present threat varies, what climate change denial (or refusal/defiance) shares with the claim of emergency is intensity. The present becomes a scene of dissensus where correct action matters to stop or halt the threatening future to come. Climate change suspension involves exiting from the scene of climate change *per se*, rather than the reversal of concern that characterises climate change denial.

‘Climate change delay’ is a little different as a formation, associated more with attempts to shore up and continue neoliberalising apparatuses. Climate change is accepted, but the time of action is deferred as climate change is rendered equivalent to a range of other threatening events. As such, it must be weighed up alongside other events and their possibilities, especially but not exclusively economic ‘growth’. Reasons are found to delay climate change action because of the effects of that action in relation

to some other normally economic event, such as job losses, or a lower rate of growth (on which see Lamb et al., 2020). Delay involves acceptance that climate change is happening, but not that it is qualitatively more important as a threat than the other events that (de)compose a turbulent present. In both denial and delay, the relation between the event of climate change and the demand for action in the present is severed.

In different ways, both denial and delay 'end' climate change as *the* event, if by 'event' we mean some form of shattering or undermining occurrence which disrupts sense (although it is maintained as background condition). Denial does so by changing what the event is. In a reversal, the event which threatens becomes action in the present in the name of climate change, rather than climate change itself. Delay does so by rendering climate change equivalent to a set of other events that threaten some form of harm. Climate change ends as 'The Event', the horizon of all thought that might bring irreconcilable loss (after Morton, 2013). Climate change is rendered equivalent to a host of other events, all equally important. By contrast, boredom does not end the event. The event is held in abeyance, and what temporarily ends is the urgency that is a necessary part of any claim of emergency.

But even the end of urgency is temporary. Suspension holds the possibility within it that the suspension will end. And climate change as mediated has a tendency to return, not least because climate-as-condition is incessant (Bulkeley, 2019). Perhaps the opening scenes of the intimacy of mass death from a heat wave in Robinson's (2020) *The Ministry of the Future* will shock a reader to action. Perhaps shifting weather patterns and a sense of weather out of sync will generate a new resolve to act now that interrupts a resigned sense of inevitability. Perhaps the new stories that Rebecca Solnit and other advocate and tell through the #nottoolate project will cultivate new practices of ecological love, and hope.⁶ Or perhaps in a political-cultural and ecological field now saturated with traces of climate change, shock and boredom mix in a way that suggests we need new names for new experiences. Ngai's (2005) 'stuplimity' might be one. Another might be 'bore-doom' registering the intimacy of indifference and a deep sense of foreboding.⁷

Progressive boredoms and other climate affects

If it exists, climate boredom might indeed be lots of things at once: a defence against the need to detach from fossil-fuelled forms of life; a way of inhabiting the overwhelming or unbearable; a means of continuing existing attachments; the refusal of a demand issued from elsewhere; a desire for normality to endure. And if climate boredom does exist, it might only be partially connected to the event of climate change, relating as well to shifts in expectation about what everyday life can and should feel like in a digitally mediated world where value is created through the promise of the possibility of enlivening experience.

But the relation of detachment that is boredom is only ever temporary. Climate change as a present emergency, as *the* Event, is suspended, not ended. Climate change 'suspension' is different, then, to 'delay' or 'denial', all of which are forms of detachment and all of which, in different ways and for different durations, exit the demand of climate change. Suspension orientates experience around the feel of a flat present, and involves an exit from climate change as an object of concern, interest or engagement, an exit that

(re)enlivens the present. The felt presence of climate change fades. But climate change is still present, ready to return, ending its own suspension. Climate change suspension is fragile, and, if it exists, mixes with other ‘earth-emotions’ (Albrecht, 2019) as well as the tangle of affects that makes up everyday life. By contrast, denial and delay are durable affective structures, since both are tied tightly into webs of attachment to existing ways of life. Climate change denial is bound to forms of petro-masculinity and their felt fragility in the midst of challenges to white supremacies. Climate change delay is rooted in attachment to the continuation of existing political-economic arrangements and consumption based forms of life. The event of climate change is held in abeyance in climate change suspension, but it is not ended. It remains as an ever-present possibility, interrupting the elongated present of the bored subject, making the future threat affectively present again, and unsettling attachments to fossil fuelled lives.

If we accept that some boredoms might work against support for or participation in progressive climate action, then what to do about them? Perhaps boredom needs to be noticed, disrupted and moved through as part of a politics of detachment. I think recent efforts to expand the forms through which climate change is mediated, such as ‘cli-fi’, can be understood as responses to climate change suspension. Hope is invested by activists and others in producing affected subjects, newly moved by stories of loss and possibility, no longer either over or underwhelmed by climate change. Boredom is taken to be a lesson that climate change communication and representation need urgently to change. Whilst all this is necessary, I am a little cautious of the hope placed in newly affected ‘passionate in just the right way’ subjects. It seems to invest a little too much hope in supposedly ‘proper’ feeling. Perhaps hope might also be found in cultivating and redirecting boredoms as part of a range of ‘negative’ feelings. If boredom is a detachment, if it is linked to ordinary scepticism (Goodstein, 2005), then perhaps we should welcome boredom with greenwashing, boredom with outrageous statements by deniers, boredom with yet another platitude as business as usual continues?

But giving attention to climate boredom might also expand and shift our understanding of the affects and emotions of climate change. It supplements the emerging attention to affected subjects and their (in)capacities to act before climate change, by drawing attention to affects that are a little more ambivalent. Affects such as boredom where the lines between affection and disaffection, between action and inaction, are blurred, with unclear or incoherent political consequences. The result might be different stories about the new and old earth-emotions that are emerging today, as well as new ways of understanding the challenges of cultivating the affective energies necessary to foster forms of detachment from fossil-fuelled lives⁸.

Notes

1. ‘Americans don’t care about climate change. Here’s how to wake them up.’ *Los Angeles Times*. Available at: <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2022-09-22/climate-change-concern-marketing> Last accessed 14.02.23.
2. ‘Climate backlash: Are we bored of climate change?’ Available at: <https://www.tortoisemedia.com/thinkin/climate-backlash-are-we-bored-of-climate-change/> Last accessed 14.02.23
3. ‘Stop “boring” language to spur climate action, U.N. environment chief says.’ Available at: <https://news.trust.org/item/20171219194959-ac14a/> Last accessed 14.02.23

4. The vocabulary of attachment – as a relation to an “object” that promises – that underpins the account of the politics of boredom in this paper is set out in Anderson (2023).
5. In using the term “feel unproblematic”, I am distinguishing my analysis from Berlant’s (2011) account of a relation of cruel optimism. For them, one of the features of “cruel optimism” as an “affect structure” is the relation to a “significantly problematic object” (Berlant, 2011, p. 24). My argument is that, in this case, boredom allows an “object” and relation of attachment to feel unproblematic, but only for a limited duration. On other occasions, boredom involves a suspension of the promise of an “object” of attachment, and can be the beginning of a detachment.
6. Details of the #nottoolate project can be found here. It is justified in affective terms, seeking to facilitate a shift from “sorrow and despair” to a reignited sense of the possibility that action in the present can make a difference to an open future. Available at: Not Too Late (nottoolateclimate.com)
7. The term “bore-doom” was a neologism coined during COVID-19 lockdown and circulated through social media to name the mix of being overwhelmed and underwhelmed that characterised some experiences of living through the pandemic.
8. My thanks to Chris Philo for his generous and careful editorial comments on a previous draft. This paper was first given as part of the (Re)Imagining crisis and recovery: Social and cultural responses to climate change” session at the 2022 RGS-IBG, organised by Amy Robson and Charlotte Veal. My thanks to Amy, Charlotte, Harriet Bulkeley, and other attendees for questions and discussion.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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