

The Role of Actionless Action in Generating Quantum Social Change: Forum on Snapshots from Home

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ipt**Karen O'Brien** 

University of Oslo, Norway

Abstract

This article considers an alternative paradigm for responding to the climate emergency. Drawing on Fierke's ideas on quantum complementarity and *wuwei*, or actionless action, it considers what quantum social science and Eastern philosophies can offer to a fragmenting, polarized world where responses to climate change appear to be limited and ineffective. The wisdom of actionless action involves engaging differently with difference, emphasizing a spontaneous and ethical quality of agency that both disrupts the patterns that maintain the drivers of climate change and contributes to social and cultural norms, rules, regulations, and institutions that are equitable and sustainable. In contrast to doing nothing, actionless action may one of the keys to generating quantum social change.

Keywords

climate change, sustainability, quantum social science, complementarity

“Too much action or intervention may produce opposite outcomes to those which are desired.”

(Fierke, 2022: 136)

Introduction

Should we give up? It is hard to be optimistic about current efforts to address climate change equitably and sustainably when so many signs point in the opposite direction:

Corresponding author:

Karen O'Brien, Department of Sociology and Human Geography, University of Oslo, P. O. Box 1096 Blindern, Oslo 0318, Norway.

Email: karen.obrien@sosgeo.uio.no

increasing greenhouse gas emissions, extreme heat, drying rivers, warming oceans, rampant wildfires, bleaching corals, and melting ice among other things. A continuous stream of scientific studies and news of climate-related catastrophes has been met by a lack of committed action at all scales. Instead, fossil fuel investment, exploitation, consumption, and unsustainable food systems continue to perpetuate what is now referred to by many as a climate emergency.

But wait. To give up is to accept that current policies, practices, and power dynamics are immutable. Submitting to business as usual, politics as usual, and international relations as usual concedes that we have neither the wisdom nor the capacity to transform disempowering relationships, even when we know they are killing us. We need a qualitatively different response. What if we decide not to give up on the future, but to give up on the paradigms or thought patterns that are keeping us stuck? What if our best hope for the future is to *deliberately* choose an alternative paradigm?

An alternative paradigm does not have to be a new one. In fact, responding to climate change at the speed, scale, and depth that is needed to consciously generate transformations to sustainability calls for us to be pragmatic and focus on how to act wisely on behalf of people and the planet. In my research, I have been interested in exploring the insights quantum physics and quantum social science offer to climate change and transformations to sustainability, whether in terms of metaphors, methods, or meanings (O'Brien, 2016, 2021). Such an inquiry recognizes that wisdom traditions and Indigenous philosophies have long offered alternatives to the mechanistic, deterministic, and reductionist paradigm that dominates current approaches to economic and social development. For this reason, I was excited to discover Karin Fierke's brilliant new book that weaves together insights from Eastern philosophies and quantum physics. Can it offer us new ways of approaching social change?

In *Snapshots from Home: Mind, Action and Strategy in an Uncertain World*, Fierke explores concepts from Buddhism, Daoism, and Hinduism, bringing them into dialogue with quantum concepts such as impermanence, complementarity, and entanglement. She challenges contemporary theories of international relations and the assumptions and "givens" of the modern world, pointing out that they do not arise "from underlying principles or laws of nature but rather from categories that have constituted and informed a series of practices within the world during a particular historical juncture" (Fierke, 2022: 48). These categories have defined the world and the universe in mechanistic manner based on classical ideas about separation and causation. We see the consequences of this mechanistic approach play out as climate change transforms the world as we know it, destroying the very conditions that enable life to thrive.

Yet there are alternatives to mechanistic approaches that are worth exploring and engaging with. For example, quantum social science recognizes oneness and entanglement, or as Fierke (2022) describes it, the "realization of our connectedness and interconnectedness within the world" (p. 147). It invites us to transcend dualisms and embrace paradoxes, such as the complementarity of subjects and objects, waves and particles, wholes and parts, unity and diversity, and nature and humans. Fierke (2022) adds to this list the paradox of action and no action. In *Snapshots from Home*, she considers whether we can successfully address climate change through the Daoist practice of *wuwei*, or actionless action. In this piece, I focus on the role and potential for actionless action to generate quantum social change.

The complementarity paradox

Climate action has been slow, and the issue has been polarizing and divisive: it challenges powerful interests, worldviews, and development models. Discussions and debates have been dominated by dualisms such as believers and skeptics, costs and benefits, individuals and collectives, winners and losers, top-down and bottom-up solutions, and local and global responses. In the same way that quantum physicist Niels Bohr described the complementarity of particles and waves, such entangled opposites, according to Fierke, can be considered complementary. Fierke (2022) focuses on the interplay of these dualisms: “Opposites do not cancel each other out but are rather engaged in a continuous process of becoming, in a contradictory but non-conflictual relationship” (p. 250).

Maintaining a both/and (either/and) perspective is essential within today’s fragmented and polarized discourse on climate change. Whether in international negotiations or local actions, perhaps there is something to be learned from Daoism, where “good and bad are potentials that exist within the universe, world and human selves” (Fierke, 2022: 37). Fierke reminds us that these opposites are not fixed but co-created mutually and in relation to the world. How can we responsibly engage in this co-creative process to *both* respond to climate change *and* realize the potential for an equitable and sustainable world?

Actionless action

Drawing on Daoism, Fierke (2022) focuses on *wuwei*, or actionless action. This, she argues, is analogous to the quantum concept of complementarity, in that “[e]ffective action or strategy works with contradictions rather than attempting to eliminate it. It is attentive to the dynamic relationship between the non-present background of the present” (Fierke, 2022: 242). Attention to this “non-present background,” which refers to nonmaterial aspects such as consciousness, values, and subjective meanings, is often missing in climate change action. Instead, there is a tendency to focus on observable and measurable trends, such as carbon dioxide emissions or the number of windmills and solar panels. Less attention is given to the non-present background of what is valued, desirable, and possible. Potentiality. Rather than consciously engaging with paradigms that challenge the very patterns and relationships that perpetuate inequitable and unsustainable systems, structures, and cultures, we tend to extrapolate the present into the future, colonizing it with the certainty that we cannot do otherwise.

In contrast to a classical, deterministic view of social change, Fierke (2022) describes a process that recognizes that multiple potentials are always available at a given moment in time. This offers countless opportunities to reposition the self. A quantum repositioning, she argues, brings the matter-consciousness relationship into view. Such an approach draws on a quality of agency that must be nurtured and embodied—it asks us to move beyond the rational, causal space of a mechanistic world to connect with an acausal, entangled space in our hearts. This is a space of equanimity that recognizes the complementarity between wholes and parts, mind and matter, and thoughts and feelings. To access this space calls for “the proper cultivation of emotions and desires so that they are

in balance” (Fierke, 2022: 135). In terms of climate action, actionless action describes the quality of presence brought to collective action to transform systems and cultures in an equitable and sustainable manner.

Actionless action has implications for how we perceive and relate to ourselves, each other, and nature: “The concept of *wuwei* entangles action in a relational whole in which the human actant is a part of nature rather than separate and standing above” (Fierke, 2022: 240). It is all too easy to misinterpret this and equate non-action as passivity or fatalism. However, as Fierke stresses, “[a]ctionless action, far from an absence of action, is a state of mind to be maintained while acting (that is, emptiness). This state of mind works from within the contradictions rather than attempting to resolve them” (Fierke, 2022: 136, emphasis added). This subtle yet important distinction calls for a new way of navigating change, where we allow “the desired potentials of a context to unfold effortlessly” (Fierke, 2022: 141).

Quantum social change

Quantum social change describes a non-linear, nonlocal approach to change that is grounded in our inherent oneness. It recognizes that we are entangled through language, meaning, and values, and that we matter, both in terms of substance and significance (O’Brien, 2021). It recognizes that our actions arise from a field of collective potential, or as Fierke (2022) puts it, “from both the process of individuation and the whole within which the actant is entangled” (p. 185). Quantum social change calls for us to engage with polarization and difference from this space of oneness. This does not mean that “anything goes,” but rather that how we show up matters. Aligned with notions of participatory realism and agential realism, it highlights our agency and potential to individually and collectively realize an equitable and thriving world, and it emphasizes that our everyday actions “matter.”

Addressing climate change calls for a quality of agency that generates self-similar patterns based on coherence and integrity, or wholeness (O’Brien, 2021). Fractal-like patterns that replicate at all scales acknowledge the complementarity of oneness and uniqueness, or unity and diversity. Whereas classical social change emphasizes “us versus other” relationships and focuses on direct action and power struggles, quantum social change involves shifting patterns through “fractal agency” that is not based on assertion, control, and fragmentation, but on values that apply to the whole, such as equity, compassion, and dignity (O’Brien et al., 2023). Such agency is based on flexibility and equilibrium, and it aims to alleviate the suffering of other sentient beings (Fierke, 2022).

A *wuwei* approach to quantum social change takes us beyond the blueprints and roadmaps for sustainability, drawing attention to deeper approaches to generating patterns and realizing potentials. Herein lies the significance of actionless action: it implies that we stop looking for responses exclusively “outside” of ourselves, but rather attune to those responses that are available to us context by context and moment by moment to create “the conditions by which an outcome can come about on its own, effortlessly” (Fierke, 2022: 155). While this may sound abstract and idealistic, from a quantum perspective it may be our most realistic response to climate change.

Conclusion

In a society that seeks immediate gratification, classical responses are increasingly likely to seek to “fix” the climate problem through technical interventions, such as carbon capture and storage and geoengineering. Indeed, in a mechanistic world, leverage points or places to intervene in a system are “out there.” In a quantum world, we are the leverage points, in that we possess a dynamic potential that can be seized to “act with the tide, rather than against it” (Fierke, 2022: 115). According to *wuwei*, the most effective responses involve not technologies but relationships. Our actions emerge, or rather we and the world *become action* as we engage with each other (Fierke, 2022). Generating quantum social change calls for the wisdom of actionless action, and Fierke (2022) points out that this “requires attention to the periphery and what is not seen, as well as to that which is present and seen” (p. 151). This involves a quality of agency that is spontaneous and ethical, that is, that *both* disrupts the patterns maintaining the drivers of climate change *and* generates social and cultural norms, rules, regulations, and institutions that are equitable and sustainable (O'Brien, 2021; Voelkner and Zanotti, 2022).

In practice, actionless action is not about doing nothing in response to the climate emergency. It is about approaching things differently, and this takes practice. Engaging with actionless action to generate quantum social change involves a continuous practice of “mattering in the moment” (O'Brien, 2021). In *Snapshots from Home*, Karin Fierke reminds us that this is something humans have known and been practicing for a long time, and it points to the paradox of *both* giving up on the future *and* co-creating it now through actionless action. Climate change offers us an opportunity—and many would argue an imperative—to practice this by consciously engaging with alternative paradigms for social change.

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ORCID iD

Karen O'Brien  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2448-0665>

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Author biography

Karen O'Brien is a Professor of Human Geography at the University of Oslo in Norway and co-founder of cCHANGE. Her research focuses on the human dimensions of climate change and integrative approaches to transformations to sustainability.