



**THINKING ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE
AND POLARISATION TOGETHER**

HOW TO START A NEW CONVERSATION_

THE
PROTOPIA
LAB



Thinking about climate change and polarisation together

HOW TO START A NEW CONVERSATION

The Protopia Lab is a space for open dialogue, learning and innovation on how to redevelop trust within our polarised societies, create ways to cooperate effectively across humanity and upgrade our civilisation to help prevent its collapse.

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AUTHORS_ MICHAEL NARBERHAUS
ALEXANDER BEINER

COPY-EDITOR_ DANIEL PARSONS

DESIGN AND LAYOUT_ LIDIA RUIZ OLMEDO



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1 THE PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDE

This guide is for environmentalists who believe that public discourse has become increasingly polarised in recent years, leaving very little room for nuanced discussion.

In many conflicts – whether it is about Covid-19, immigration, identity politics or, in America, Trump – the opposing camps move in such different worlds of communication that they can only interpret each other as the result of conspiracies, and thus are no longer accessible for arguments and facts. Collective sensemaking becomes impossible.

This guide is for activists who are worried that the more our societies drift apart, the more difficult it will be to achieve the necessary societal support to address the most pressing issues, such as

climate change, and to advance a more just and sustainable world.

But what is really driving polarisation? What brought us to the situation we're in? And how is all this related to the work you and your colleagues are doing? Is there anything change agents in civil society can do to depolarise and reduce the growing contempt?

These questions are at the heart of The Protopia Lab, a recently founded space for open dialogue, learning and innovation on how to redevelop trust within our polarised societies and create ways to cooperate effectively across humanity.

We are still testing different ways to improve dialogue and create rich conversations where participants listen to plural perspectives. This guide is based on our research over the past few years as

well as our experience with a range of methods to this day, in particular during a recent series of exploratory online workshops with 25 activists and change agents.



2 WHY IS POLARISATION HAPPENING?

Polarisation can mean many different things – when we’re talking about polarisation in this guide, we don’t mean a healthy political debate between two (or more) ideologically different sides, we’re rather talking about deep social division and growing animosity. When speaking of the United States, it is obvious to most observers that there is indeed a bitter division between two different camps that live increasingly separate lives and have come to hate each other in recent years. Conversely, polarisation in many European countries is not as obvious and is certainly at a different stage.

For example, in Germany the populist far-right party AfD entered the national parliament in 2017, but its electoral support has been around 10% for quite some time.

The rest of the political landscape in Germany is likely less polarised between its parties today than it was 20 or 30 years ago. Similarly, there is no equivalent to Fox News yet in the German media landscape and the public and private national media outlets show a rather harmonious picture of German politics. However, below the surface there is a situation that in many ways resembles the situation in the US; it might just be lagging behind in time. In fact, America, Germany, France, the UK, Sweden and probably many other countries, with all their important national peculiarities, share a number of important underlying trends.



THE SOCIOLOGICAL EXPLANATION

The sociologist Andreas Reckwitz argues that the political polarisation and the rise of authoritarian far-right populism in recent years is a rebellion partly against the economic effects of globalisation, but it is at least as much a rebellion against the effects of the dominant cultural liberalism.¹ Authoritarians and nationalists have been on the rise precisely because a growing part of society believes that (cultural and economic) liberalism has too many downsides: a fragmented society with weakened shared norms and values.

Reckwitz argues that the political conflict line divides the old middle class, traditionalist and conservative, largely residing in small towns and rural areas, and the new middle class, that mostly lives in metropolitan areas. British journalist David Goodhart refers to the old middle class as the *somewheres* (people who are more rooted in a local community and place) and to the new middle

class as the *anywheres*, who have become the cultural and political leaders, with their liberal and post-modern values, cosmopolitan worldview and often academic education.²

The post-industrialisation of the economy since the 1970s has fundamentally changed a number of things. All Western countries experienced a massive decline in industrial sector employment. This has led to an increasing disparity in incomes: on the one hand an expanding knowledge economy for highly qualified people and on the other the new service sector for simple services. With this economic divergence, the social structure is changing. An emerging academically educated middle class stands in contrast to the precarious class, the service class. And the traditional middle class continues to exist between them. For the new middle class, it is no longer sufficient to simply work for a living. Post-material values such as self-actualisation are now important aspects of the work sphere, and the attractiveness of a

profession is often more important than the pay cheque.

However, the old (traditional) middle class (the *somewheres*) hasn't changed much. They haven't benefitted much from post-industrialisation, their education, jobs, and income all resting at mid-level. It is important to note that the gap that is widening between the new and the old middle class is less economic than it is cultural. **The way of life of the old middle class that was formerly the normal way of life for most people is no longer worth much. A good example of this is the issue of health, where the new middle class (the *anywheres*) has generally asserted its values on smoking and fatty foods, core elements of the classic working-class lifestyle that are now frowned upon.**

The traditional model dividing the homemakers and breadwinners of the old middle class has also lost prestige in face of the now dominant societal ideal of emancipated professional women.

Conversely, the modernisation of gender relationships has shaken the identity of men as breadwinners, eroding their self-confidence.

While university education expanded rapidly over the last decades and politically the goal was to move towards the knowledge economy, the societal status of non-academic professions typical of the old middle class, including craftspeople and technicians, diminished. Parties and parliaments in liberal democracies today are mostly controlled by professionals who graduated from university and share a cosmopolitan, liberal worldview (*anywheres*). Increasingly, *somewheres* have felt that politics hasn't been working in their interest. They don't feel represented by parties and political decision making.

Prominent among broader concerns about rapid change is immigration. The consensus across the political spectrum over the last few decades had been

¹ Andreas Reckwitz, *The End of Illusions: Politics, Economics and Culture in Late Modernity*, Polity Press, 2021.

² David Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere*, Penguin, 2017.

pro-immigration, mainly because it was seen as good for the economy and for economic growth. From 1990 to 2015, 44 million people migrated from the global South to the global North, with the United States receiving the largest number but Germany and Sweden receiving more immigrants relative to their population.³ Precisely because Western birth rates are very low, immigration changes these societies very rapidly. While anywheres generally welcome the cultural diversity that comes along with immigration, it has become increasingly unpopular among somewheres. **Most importantly the latter feel that this big change in society has been imposed on them and that their views on the issue have been ignored for too long.** Most somewheres are not hostile to immigrants or to some lower level of immigration, but they perceive mass immigration as a threat to their collective identity and culture. Anywheres don't usually have the same sense and attachment to society as somewheres, which is a source of conflict.

³David Frum, *'If Liberals Won't Enforce Borders, Fascists Will'*, The Atlantic, Apr 2019

THE EVOLUTIONARY EXPLANATION

Empirical research by psychologists and evolutionary scientists comes to conclusions that are consistent with the anywheres-somewheres analysis.

In his book *The Righteous Mind*, the moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt lays out the variety of moral systems that govern human societies, based on a common set of six moral foundations that he claims are shared by all human beings.⁴ Haidt shows how human morality has its roots in the moral intuitions children are born with. Mainly from studying twins, we know that people's morality and political attitudes are heritable by up to 50%.

In more traditional societies across the world, all six moral foundations can be found in more or less equal strength. When compared to the rest of the world, the well-educated Western urban progressive liberal class is an exception. Their morality is mostly based on care and fairness, whereas they

are often suspicious of calls to loyalty and authority. Empathy for those who are suffering and the willingness to help them is their highest moral good. However, the vast majority of the global population (including rural and traditionalist working classes in Western societies) care about their religion, nation and family as much as the rights of minorities and the pursuit of social justice.

The morality of progressive people who are passionate about social justice has made the world a better place with less discrimination and oppression. But conservative values like authority and loyalty have also been important tools in human evolution. Together, these two sets of values have helped bind people together and thereby helped advance human cooperation and the building of civilisation. Haidt believes that all moral foundations have been essential tools that enabled the success of human civilisation.

The issues change, but the dividing

lines in our societies between anywheres and somewheres and between different moralities are remarkably similar. The bitter division over how to deal with the coronavirus crisis has followed similar patterns to what we've seen in recent years with immigration and climate change. It happens that the fiercest defenders of tough lockdown measures belong mostly to the metropolitan progressive class, whose incomes are safe and who have found comfort in their Zoom-based home offices. Those who are more sceptical about shutting down public life at all costs are more likely to belong to a more culturally conservative, more working-class and more rural population, and are more likely to suffer severe income loss from long shutdowns.

An important conclusion from this research is clearly that the divide that we're seeing in our societies has to do with different moral worldviews and not with one side being evil and the other side morally good. It's important to keep this in mind.

⁴Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, Penguin, 2012. The original five moral foundations found in his research are: Care: cherishing and protecting others; opposite of harm / Fairness or proportionality: rendering justice according to shared rules; opposite of cheating / Loyalty or ingroup: standing with your group, family, nation; opposite of betrayal / Authority or respect: submitting to tradition and legitimate authority; opposite of subversion / Sanctity or purity: abhorrence for disgusting things, foods, actions; opposite of degradation.

3 WHY SHOULD ENVIRONMENTALISTS WORRY?

An urgent task lies ahead for us humans: We need to find ways to make human life on Earth compatible with our ecological reality. Climate change, biodiversity loss and other issues pose urgent, existential threats. For those of us who live in liberal democracies, the only way to deal with these issues successfully is to create awareness about the scope of the tasks ahead and discuss our values and opinions through mutual encounters in the public sphere, in what we call public discourse. Precisely because we are dealing with a clear need for major changes in the way we will live and in the way our economies are run, we need a sufficient number of people to be able to form an opinion about these complex issues and we need our sensemaking mechanisms to operate extraordinary well.

The reality, however, is that the public conversation around our most pressing issues has become highly dysfunctional, and it is entirely inadequate for dealing with our complex challenges. In fact, there is little interest among the different actors and between different groups to have real conversations at all. Instead, different actors seem to believe they already know the truth and would rather like to impose it on the rest of the world.

Climate activism holds this attitude, too. Much of this work has been taking a more confrontational approach in recent times, which means more direct action and civil disobedience. The most prominent examples are Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion, who rose to fame in 2019. The energy of these new movements certainly helped to put climate change on the top of the political agenda in 2019. But at the same time, it has

contributed to further polarisation in our societies. Greta Thunberg reached quasi-saint-like status among the part of society that holds green-progressive values and became a reviled figure for many others.

Given the threat that climate change poses and the insufficient political action so far, it is more than logical and reasonable to increase the volume and try new ways to create awareness about these threats. The problem is that these movements only speak to one part of our societies, those who are already on board as is. At the same time, they unintentionally alienate large parts of our societies from the climate movement.

Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion have a highly homogeneous membership which is mostly academic and cosmopolitan. Historically, the climate movement developed

its strongest roots within the academically educated cosmopolitan class and lacks representation and role models among rural and small-town society.

The somewheres (old middle class) mostly perceive the people participating in these movements as members of a privileged class that is completely detached from the reality of the working classes. The moralising and uncompromising manner in which these movements communicate drives many people away from the cause who may even be fundamentally sympathetic to climate protection.⁵

All this shows that climate change has now become one more issue forming part of the landscape of polarisation. Therefore, addressing polarisation is an essential

⁵Clemens Traub, *Future for Fridays?*, Quadriga, 2020.

condition if we to have a chance to tackle the climate crisis.

However, recent developments in the environmental movement are instead moving in the opposite direction and are likely to make matters worse. The climate movement is a subsection of the cosmopolitan new middle class (Reckwitz) and in recent years its worldviews have developed in accordance with its social milieu, showing an increasing attachment to post-modern values. On the surface, this seems like a very positive development: society shows greater sensitivity towards discrimination of minorities and disadvantaged social groups and organisations, and institutions are becoming increasingly inclusive towards these identities and groups. But this is only part of the story.

THE PROBLEM WITH ADOPTING AND COMMUNICATING AN INTERSECTIONAL⁶ WORLDVIEW

In recent years many organisations and networks in the environmental movement have adopted a worldview that sees the world primarily through the lens of power and privilege and argues that the roots of most social problems – including climate change – lie in the persisting systems of patriarchy, colonialism and racism.

For example, we can see that organisations like Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace frequently now express their solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement, with Friends of the Earth even actively promoting the slogan of #defundthepolice and the ideas behind it.⁷

The organisation Seas at Risk sees a strong link between ecological destruction and the

oppression of women: “Patriarchy & overexploitation of the Earth’s resources are two faces of the same coin. A logic that sees women & nature as something to be controlled and exploited.”⁸ And 350.org argues that “in order to halt the climate crisis, we must also take down the patriarchy.”⁹ Countless statements by environmental organisations in recent years have argued that women are better leaders against climate change and that people of colour are at the forefront of the movement against climate change.

Apart from more generally speaking to the zeitgeist and also the fact that especially younger movement members share these worldviews very strongly, there is clearly also a strategy behind this obvious change in communication in recent years. The idea of trying to find links between the fights against oppression, especially feminism and anti-racism,

with climate change and other ecological issues is to join forces and create a larger movement across issues.

The underlying ideology is one that sees white masculine power and privilege working to oppress, marginalise and silence other identities while also destroying the environment. Accordingly, building and strengthening intersectional grassroots movements that connect oppressed and marginalised groups ultimately serves to gain political power, as a precondition to creating an oppression-free world as well as an ecologically sustainable economy focused on human needs.

The problem with intersectionality is not its original concept of overlapping discriminations. There is value in this concept when applied with rigour. The grievances and inequalities that many social

⁶ Advocates of intersectionality argue that oppression due to race, sex, gender and so on often overlap (as multiple forms of discrimination) and need to be thought through and fought together. According to the scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, who originally coined the term in 1989, it is important to understand that historical inequalities and oppressions that discriminate against women overlap with historical injustices against black people and therefore hit black women hardest. / Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, ‘Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color’ in *The Public Nature of Private Violence* edited by Martha Albertson Fineman and Rixanne Mykitiuk, Routledge, 1994, p. 93–118.

⁷ Friends of the Earth US (@foe_us), on Twitter, 1 Jun 2020.

⁸ Seas at Risk (@SeasAtRisk) on Twitter, 8 Mar 2021.

⁹ 350.org, *Real Solutions are Feminist*, 8 Sep 2018.

dangerously impoverished.”¹³ The strategy of building power through intersectional movements is based on faulty assumptions about the values held by most people in our societies. The majorities of Western societies perceive the ideas voiced as a result of today’s woke ideology to be an urban elite project that is detached from their reality and morality. In 2018, the organisation More In Common published a report on the project Hidden Tribes of America, based on an in-depth survey with 8,000 U.S. citizens analysing the values and political views they hold.¹⁴ The report concluded that only 8% of Americans hold the values and political views that are fully in line with progressive activists. “[They] are deeply concerned with issues concerning equity, fairness, and America’s direction today. They tend to be more secular, cosmopolitan, and highly engaged with social media.” In contrast, around 80% of the people surveyed believe that “political correctness has gone too far in

America”. In Europe, surveys by More in Common and others show a similar picture.

Environmental organisations that decide to communicate their causes through a lens of power and privilege might exacerbate the spiral of polarisation and tribalism in our societies. The attachment to a highly dogmatic and narrow ideological worldview prevents us from having real conversations about how we can solve our complex issues.

Polarisation is not something that can be addressed by looking for the problem on the other side, for example by blaming far-right populist leaders and right-wing groups for spreading misinformation and conspiracy theories. All this might be true and important to bring to the table, but more important for environmental and social activists is a holistic analysis that includes one’s own role and responsibilities in the situation.



¹³ Glenn C. Loury, ‘Self-Censorship in Public Discourse: A Theory of “Political Correctness” and Related Phenomena’, *Rationality and Society* vol. 6 issue 4, p. 428–461, 1 Oct 1994

¹⁴ Stephen Hawkins et al., ‘Hidden Tribes: A Study of America’s Polarized Landscape’, More in Common, 2018.

4 THE CASE FOR HETERODOX DIALOGUE - BURSTING THE BUBBLE

The basic idea of intersectionality includes an important truth. It's not enough to narrowly focus on one issue like climate change and try to forge a movement behind that cause. These issues are far too complex and intersect. There are many trade-offs to be considered and perspectives to be heard.

The philosopher John Stuart Mill believed that the pursuit of truth required the collation and combination of ideas and propositions, even those that seem to be in opposition to each other. He urged us to allow others to speak – and actually listen to them – for three main reasons:

- First, the other person's idea, however controversial it might seem today, could turn out to be

right. ("The opinion may possibly be true.")

- Second, even if our opinion is largely correct, we hold it more rationally and securely as a result of being challenged. ("He who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that.")
- Third, and in Mill's view most likely, opposing views may each contain a portion of the truth, which need to be combined. ("Conflicting doctrines share the truth between them.")¹⁵

It's difficult for anyone to escape our human penchant for confirmation bias, "our tendency to search for, interpret, favour, and recall information in a way that confirms our preexisting beliefs or hypotheses while giving disproportionately less consideration to alternative possibilities".¹⁶ Our rational mind

typically reasons to justify our pre-existing intuitions. Our reasoning process has become well-adjusted to the continuous task of justifying our deeper moral intuitions and subconscious motives.¹⁷

This quote by a former libertarian gets right to the point to why attachment to ideology is problematic for tackling our most complex problems: "Even if we embrace ideology merely as a conceptual lens to help us better understand what is most *likely* to promote human well-being (ideology as a pattern-recognition device), we run into difficult problems. The incredible complexity of social and economic relationships, the heterogeneity of human beings, and the ubiquitous and irresolvable problem of unintended consequences will frustrate dogmatic shortcuts to problem-solving. Given our very human tendency to filter

out information that does not comport with our worldviews – and excessive attention to information that comports with the same – the more we repair to our ideological lenses, the more distorted they become thanks to a spiralling process of confirmation bias".¹⁸

When we as individuals join groups, as we so often do as activists who are keen to develop collective action, our individual biases then interact with group dynamics.

Research shows that groups often don't reach the ideal state of the wisdom of the crowd, where the collective thinking of a group is superior to that of any individual therein. Instead, groups often adopt the more extreme positions already taken by a minority of its members.¹⁹ Such groupthink may be fuelled by a particular agenda or simply because group members value

¹⁵ Richard V. Reeves and Jonathan Haidt, *All Minus One: John Stuart Mill's Ideas on Free Speech Illustrated*, Heterodox Academy, 2018.

¹⁶ Thomas DeMichele, 'Confirmation Bias, Ideological Bubbles, Reference Frames, and Filters', 13 Dec 2016

¹⁷ Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, Penguin, 2012, p. 61–83.

¹⁸ Jerry Taylor, 'The Alternative to Ideology', The Niskanen Center's blog, 29 Oct 2018.

¹⁹ Cass R. Sunstein, *#republic*, Princeton University Press, 2017, p. 70.

harmony and coherence above rational thinking. Those members of the group who believe they hold minority positions often stay silent for the mostly unconscious fear of being isolated (the so-called spiral of silence). These dynamics reach a greater extreme when groups become ideological echo chambers, systematically alienating their members from all outside epistemic sources. The way they see the world remains intact when confronted by outsiders because their belief system is designed to withstand intellectual attack.²⁰

In order to find truly viable solutions to our global problems, we all need to break out of the current echo chambers. We need to acknowledge our human predisposition for motivated reasoning and confirmation bias and deal with it in a thoughtful manner. This will require some fundamental changes in the way activists and civil society pursue their work. We need to allow for real conversations to take place

and accept that any ideas of good faith that are relevant and important should be part of the discussion.

This requires a wholly new mindset and approach to sensemaking from everyone involved. According to the journalist Nafeez Ahmed, we have to “cultivate open, intersecting nodes of humble, critical, self-reflective engagement in which new information is able to come in from multiple perspectives, to every perspective”.²¹

²⁰ C Thi Nguyen, ‘[Escape the echo chamber](#)’, *Aeon*, 9 Apr 2018.

²¹ Nafeez Ahmed, ‘[How collective intelligence can change your world, right now](#)’, *INSURGE intelligence on Medium*, 11 Jan 2019.

5 HOW CAN WE START SEEING THINGS FROM MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES?

Ideological bubbles keep us trapped in certain ways of thinking and encourage us to reject anything that challenges them. We must grow beyond these bubbles if we want to meet the considerable challenges we face in our societies. When we question our preconceptions, we tap into new ways of seeing and new insights that can make a significant impact.

During a recent series of exploratory workshops with 25 activists and change agents that was held via Zoom, we (at The Protopia Lab) started to experiment with a number of tools that help us to be open, curious, and able to hold many perspectives at the same time.

Anyone who would like to try out

these tools with groups of activists and people working in civil society should try to gather people who are clearly open-minded and curious to learn about new perspectives, some of which might challenge one's deeper held worldviews. We also advise striving to get some ideological diversity in your group.

The methods we have explored put an emphasis on growing awareness of our own cognitive biases and psychological processes. By understanding these we can step back from our ideological frames and broaden our horizons.

As part of our small project, we held three online Zoom workshops over the course of 6 weeks and asked people to also meet in small pods of three in between meetings. Here are some steps and some advice that you can use to design your workshop or series of meetings:

STEPS AND TIPS TO DESIGN YOUR WORKSHOP OR MEETINGS:

1_ PROVIDE CLARITY OF CONTEXT AND PURPOSE

Break from our ideological bubbles

2_ DEVELOP AWARENESS OF OUR OWN EMOTIONAL RESPONSES

Mindfulness and dialogue practices

3_ BECOME AWARE OF YOUR OWN SHADOW

Shadow work, 'the me I can't see'

4_ ENGAGE IN A REVERSE MEDIA DIET

Explore contradictory viewpoints

5_ TWO INSPIRING VIDEOS (POTENTIAL HOMEWORK)

Jonathan Haidt's TED talk
The War on Sensemaking

PROVIDING CLARITY OF CONTEXT AND PURPOSE

Each group needs to know why it's important to break from our ideological bubbles:

It is very normal to get stuck in an ideological bubble at some point in our lives. As human beings, we have various cognitive biases and emotional needs that can lead to our frame of reference narrowing until it feels like we're running a script rather than seriously inquiring into our own beliefs or challenging the status quo.

Neuroscientist Marc Lewis has pointed out that we can get stuck in self-reinforcing beliefs and behaviours which he calls *reciprocal narrowing*.²² This often happens with addiction, but we can be addicted to ideology too, as Dr Gabor Maté has pointed out.²³ Reciprocal narrowing makes it hard for us to 'think outside the box' and reduces our cognitive flexibility. Psychologically, it prevents us from seeing the full picture of reality. If we can't see clearly, we can't solve problems together. In fact, we might not even be able to agree on what is true.

This reciprocal narrowing also makes it hard to speak across cultural and political contexts. The world has changed significantly in the last 20 years. Instead of 'left/right' or 'USA/USSR' we live in a multi-polar world, with many 'tribes' competing for narrative control. We see this most intensely online as social networks are the perfect place for misinformation and narrative warfare to spread.

Therefore, if we're trying to make an impact in our work on social change, we need to know how to navigate this. Cognitive scientist John Vervaeke has

argued that there is also such a thing as reciprocal opening where we are able to zoom out and see the bigger picture, expanding our awareness. Techniques like mindfulness and Socratic inquiry allow us to do this.

Socratic Inquiry is a form of cooperative argumentative dialogue between individuals, based on asking and answering questions to stimulate critical thinking and to draw out ideas and underlying presuppositions.

These techniques do this by helping us to 'zoom out' and pay attention to our frames of reference, like taking off a pair of broken glasses and inspecting them. Then once we've cleaned the dirt, we can zoom into our improved frame and use it to make sense of the world. This isn't just something we do once – it's a way of being, a constant back and forth to keep our perception as clear as we can.

In this way, we move from a stagnant conversation with everyone defending their position (their frame) to one which fosters curiosity, openness, is generative and takes us to new solutions.

²² Marc Lewis, *Brain Change in Addiction as Learning, Not Disease*, The New England Journal of Medicine.

²³ Gabor Maté, *Addicted to Ideology?* Interview on Rebel Wisdom YouTube Channel, 16 Nov 2018.

DEVELOPING AN AWARENESS OF OUR OWN EMOTIONAL RESPONSES

With this in mind, in order to have a new type of conversation we must develop a new type of cognition. At The Protopia Lab we have found that mindfulness and dialogue practices (like Socratic Inquiry)²⁴ are particularly effective at helping us change our frames.

For example, you might invite people to discuss in groups of two or three their personal experiences with polarisation with an attitude of curiosity, and without interrupting one another. The topic of inquiry can be:

- Where have you noticed Us vs Us or Us vs Them dynamics in your organisation or in society? How has this affected efforts for social and structural change?

After a few minutes of discussion, in which each person has a chance to share without being interrupted, facilitate an open discussion.

- What are people noticing? What happens when we become curious about our responses when we encounter ideas we strongly disagree with? What can we notice in our bodies and in our language?

When we do this, we quickly notice how helpful it is to become aware of our own emotional responses when faced with something that challenges our worldview.

We might also notice that we can't make sense of society and systems until we can make sense of ourselves. With that in mind, understanding the science and psychology of disagreement is essential.

This exercise involves a short explanation about polyvagal theory, which is the science of how our nervous system is designed for 'social engagement' and how

we can bring ourselves out of a defensive 'fight or flight' mode into curiosity and openness. You can show [this short video](#) to introduce what this theory is about and why it's relevant.

Another important concept is the *paradox of sameness and difference* and how this affects our nervous system. The facilitator Diane Musho Hamilton says: "We like the sameness, until it becomes dull and heavy, and conformity burdens our conversations and dogma confines our mind and restricts our ability to grow and change. [...] We like the stimulation of difference. That is, until it escalates into stressful interactions, intensifies into ongoing conflict, or breaks out into war. [...] Practices like listening, appreciative inquiry, and creating shared vision and goals or value lists support groups in their togetherness, promoting harmony and a sense of belonging, and keeping everyone moving in the same direction. When groups are sluggish, flat or lacking inspiration, differences may be brought out, heightened, and explored. [...] The capacity for a group to allow for difference, to be willing to explore it, and to include diversity of opinions and styles within its boundaries is a sign of health for a human community much like it is in any ecosystem".²⁵

After explaining these two concepts, we recommend asking participants to read an article that might create some controversy in the group. In our group we read [an article](#) that argued a certain level of nationalism was necessary to develop a willingness for the sacrifices that are necessary to prevent catastrophic climate change.

The invitation here is for each person to become aware of their own responses as people read the article. You can ask people to write down anything that comes up and let people share their experience in the session.

²⁴ Agnes Makhene, *The use of the Socratic inquiry to facilitate critical thinking in nursing education*, Health SA Gesondheid – Journal of Interdisciplinary Health Sciences, 23 Apr 2019.

²⁵ Diane Musho Hamilton, *Everything the same, everything different*, Ten Directions, 26 Feb 2015.

BECOMING AWARE OF OUR OWN SHADOW

Another great tool that we recommend trying out is shadow work. It helps us identify what ideas or emotions we might be rejecting in ourselves and projecting onto other people – making them an ‘other’ in the process.

The shadow is a concept from Jungian psychology and can most simply be defined as ‘the me I can’t see’. The shadow is any part of ourselves we reject. However, it doesn’t go away when we do this. As the shadow is present and needs to be expressed, we start to project it into others. For example, if we decide it’s bad to be angry, we might start to think ‘everyone around me is always so angry!’ We might act out our own anger subconsciously, for example by being passive aggressive, or saving it all for when we’re alone in a car and shouting at other motorists.

The shadow is a major factor in our inability to listen to perspectives we disagree with, or that challenge our identity. We can often find a shadow by following our sense of disgust or resentment. For example, you might have a strong reaction to people who reject human-caused climate change. You might see them as stupid, selfish or irresponsible. By connecting with those uncomfortable qualities in ourselves, we can take the emotional charge out of our interaction. This doesn’t mean they are right in their ideas – but it stops us from dehumanising others by projecting a warped version of our own emotions onto them. From there, we can have a conversation that stays open to curiosity and is generative. In essence, we can engage in dialogue with almost anyone and see them as a human being if we can own the parts of ourselves that we have imposed on them.

There are many ways to work with our shadows – one that is useful as an entry point is the 3-2-1 method developed by the Integral Institute.²⁶

²⁶ [Integral Life, 3-2-1 Process](#)

ENGAGING IN A REVERSE MEDIA DIET

As a final tool, we suggest you ask your participants to explore contradictory viewpoints by embarking on a 'reverse media diet', and practice techniques designed to help us stay present and centred while doing this.

As the name suggests, the reverse media diet is about taking stock of your regular media diet, taking an honest look at where you generally get your information from, and deliberately trying to change it.

The invitation is to go to sites or sources that challenge you or annoy you, so this is also a chance to practice some of the 'shadow' skills. Can you bring empathy and understanding to what you might normally reject?

This exercise is intended to challenge, cultivate empathy and increase one's ability to hold multiple perspectives.

These are the instructions:

- Take stock of your current media bubble. Make a list of the people on social media, the YouTube channels and trusted news sources that you rely on to inform yourself.
- Take a pledge to not watch these for a week. Set a start and an end time.
- Now, build your alternative media bubble. Seek out people that you usually disagree with or avoid, possibly from the other side of the political spectrum, the ones you see as unreasonable, you despise or who rub you the wrong way.
- If you tend to read Huffington Post or the Guardian, look at quillette.com and unherd.com.

- Do you trust the mainstream media? Seek out conspiracy theorists on Twitter and YouTube and research what they claim as truth. Do activists and social justice warriors anger you? Read radical feminist blogs or start following woke people.
- You can find inspiration and find your own biases [here](#).

These are instructions for small group meetings to discuss the reverse media diet:

- Inquire for 10 minutes each about what came up. What did you notice in your body, your thoughts, and your emotions? Did you learn anything? While someone else is inquiring, practice active listening and don't interrupt them.
- After inquiring individually, spend the rest of the hour in a group conversation. This is where we start exploring our collective sensemaking. Pay attention to what's alive for you in the moment, and what was particularly salient in the inquiries - someone else's, your own, or what you noticed arising in the group. Begin by asking one another any questions that you're sitting on. For example: 'When you talked about feeling aversion to following that person on Twitter, I noticed a feeling of uncertainty coming up in myself. I'm curious to hear more about why that post you mentioned was so challenging?'
- Follow your curiosity and see where the conversation leads.

TWO INSPIRING VIDEOS (POTENTIAL HOMEWORK FOR PARTICIPANTS)



In this [TED talk](#) moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt shows how human morality has its roots in the moral intuitions children are born with. In his research Haidt found a variety of moral systems governing human societies all based on a common set of six moral foundations shared by all humans. His theory offers a powerful explanation for the political polarisation and the ideological divides we're seeing within Western societies and the fact that everybody's convinced that the other side is totally wrong and even evil. It's because our moralities differ, and we're ignorant that this is the case.



In this video [The War on Sensemaking](#), futurist and visionary Daniel Schmachtenberger outlines the dynamics at play in our broken information ecology. He shows why we need to and how we can become more aware of the many cognitive biases that distort our picture of reality as well as how we also need to learn to separate the signal from the noise in order to make better sense of the world.

These are only a few initial ideas and tools that we found helpful to guide groups to develop awareness of their own biases and step out of their ideological frames. We will continue exploring more tools and methods as we move forward with our project.

6 WHAT CAN CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS DO TO FOSTER A HEALTHIER CONVERSATION ON OUR MOST PRESSING ECOLOGICAL ISSUES?

Developing self-awareness about our own biases and stepping back from our ideological frames as well as understanding the causes of polarisation and our organisations' role in causing it are necessary steps on the journey to become wise civil society leaders in this political landscape. But this leaves us with the important question: what can our organisations and civil society networks do from an institutional perspective to burst their ideological bubbles, improve their sensemaking and help heal societal divide? And how can campaigns and communications strategies contribute to a healthier public conversation?



FOSTER VIEWPOINT DIVERSITY IN YOUR ORGANISATION

One of the most passionate demands frequently made at progressive activist gatherings is full inclusion (at meetings) of all dimensions of society and especially of marginalised communities who often don't have a voice. The narrative goes that without representation of the oppressed and the marginalised, we are perpetuating oppressive power structures, and any discussion about social change is worthless.

The argument is compelling and often convinces many people. It looks like we're excluding important voices if, for instance, in Europe we organise activist gatherings where people with a migratory background from Turkey or Africa lack representation.

While making groups more diverse by inviting in more women and

different ethnic groups is a positive objective in principle, it shouldn't become an obsession. Often the main reason for these inequities has to do with different subgroups at different moments in time having different levels of interest in certain activities or questions. One of the reasons certainly is that people are drawn towards projects according to their values, personalities and areas of interest.

Increasing the diversity of experience, cultural background and social class is a valuable goal for any group that aims to discuss the future of our society on this planet. However, to promote viewpoint diversity as the overarching goal at meetings will make it much easier to also achieve a broader participation by ethnic majorities that are actually representative of the ideas held in these segments of society given that a large percentage of ethnic minorities hold more traditionalist and conservative values, both in

Europe and North America.^{27 28 29}

Environmental activism would benefit from groups, meetings and organisations that allow a broader diversity of ideas to be part of their discussions. In other words, the ideas shouldn't be judged by their ideological loyalty but by their quality and capacity to solve the multidimensional problems we're facing. Also, to create new, out-of-the-box ideas, we need disagreeable people who don't conform to the group's thinking. But creative individuals who score low on the personality trait of agreeableness can easily be silenced or ignored, if the focus is on consensus building in groups. Creative new ideas often don't emerge from group processes.³⁰ Disagreeable people should be given opportunities and be encouraged to develop their ideas.

The difficult task is to find the right balance between sameness and difference (see chapter 5), between

unity and diversity, in order to make the work of civil society a force for good.

Hannah Arendt believed in the importance of people joining forces for political goals. It was a crucial element of her vision of democracy and her positive concept of power. But she was also wary of the potentially destructive power social movements can have: "A characteristic of totalitarianism [...] is the assimilation of process and movement into the very fabric of social and political life."³¹

²⁷ Pew Research Center, *5 facts about black Democrats*, 27 Feb 2020.

²⁸ Deutsche Welle, *Homophobia among Muslim students in Germany*, 20.3.2012.

²⁹ Pew Research Center, '4. Views of immigration policy' in 'More Latinos Have Serious Concerns About Their Place in America Under Trump', 25 Oct 2018.

³⁰ Andre Walton, 'Resolving the Paradox of Group Creativity', *Harvard Business Review*, 25 Jan 2016.

³¹ "Finn Bowring, "Hannah Arendt and the hierarchy of human activity" (7 Sep 2017)

TELL NEW STORIES THAT BRING US TOGETHER

If we want to contribute to a healthier public discourse, our organisations and networks obviously need to reflect on how we communicate to our audiences and what we say. One way to look at this is through the stories we tell.

Stories are an effective tool for activists and campaigners because they affect people on an emotional level. Stories reach both people's emotional and rational brain, which is critical to galvanising action (in contrast to pure rational information and facts, which don't reach the emotional brain and are therefore often ineffective).³²

Most importantly, stories can create deep cultural meaning and impact. In his book *Winning the Story Wars* acclaimed storyteller Jonah Sachs writes about the stories that have been told for generations, across centuries and even millennia. These stories that make sense of

the world he calls myths. Sachs argues that “myths are the glue that hold society together, providing an indispensable meaning-making function. [...] They allow us to see the world through powerful symbols that stand in for and remind us of deep truths.”³³

Alex Evans, author of the book *The Myth Gap*, states: “Once upon a time, our society was rich in these kinds of stories, and we called them myths. Today, though, we have a ‘myth gap’. Religious observance is declining steadily, leaving instead a focus on literal, scientific truth. Almost unnoticed, the old stories that used to bind us together – stories about meaning, identity, and what matters in life – have disappeared. Yet new ones have not emerged to take their place – creating the perfect environment in which the Trumps and Farages, Putins and Le Pens can flourish”.³⁴

The *oppression story*, with its popular memes like *white male*

privilege and *toxic masculinity*, falls on fertile ground in a postmodern and individualistic society that has social and psychological needs which in the absence of religious beliefs and community are often unmet.³⁵ These intersectional frames provide meaning, identity, community and moral guidance for what is right and wrong – it plays a similar role to a religion. But ultimately, us-vs-them identity politics and the oppression story turn people against each other and instead of resolving grievances, they create a greater sense of unfairness and new injustices.

The futurist Jordan Hall notes: “This is how delusions fall apart. Try as we might, our desire to interpret reality to mean what we want it to, at the end of the day, will always be checked against what reality actually is. It may take some time because we're pretty good at making things up and pretending, but eventually reality is reality”.³⁶

The problem with stories like

the oppression story is that they might seem true at a superficial level, but they fail to be grounded in real truth. We don't live in a world that is dominated by the white supremacist patriarchy. The dominant cultural narrative of people in the Western world is not that men are superior to women, that white people are superior to black, Asian and minority ethnic people or that straight people are superior to gay people, as we can see in the widespread support for gender equality, racial equality and issues like same sex marriage.³⁷

In these times of disorientation and pessimism, we need to come together around powerful emotional stories about who we are, where we're coming from and where we're heading. But instead of preaching ideological wishful thinking, effective stories have to be grounded in reality and truth. They should be honest about difficult and uncomfortable truths and provide a sense of direction for a

³² George Marshall, *Don't Even Think About It: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Ignore Climate Change*, Bloomsbury USA, 2014, p. 227.

³³ Jonah Sachs, *Winning the Story Wars: Why those who tell – and live – the best stories will rule the future*, Harvard Business Review Press, 2012.

³⁴ Alex Evans, “The Myth Gap: how to navigate a world of ‘post-truth’ politics”, The Collective Psychology Project's blog, 14 Jan 2019.

³⁵ James A. Lindsay and Mike Nayna, ‘Postmodern Religion and the Faith of Social Justice’, *Areo*, 18 Dec 2018.

³⁶ Jordan Hall, ‘“A Glitch in the Matrix” - Jordan Peterson, the Intellectual Dark Web & the Mainstream Media’ [video], Rebel Wisdom on YouTube, uploaded 15 Feb 2018, 28:06.

³⁷ Helen Pluckrose, ‘“Cultural Marxism” is a Myth. The Threat Comes From Elsewhere’, *Areo*, 30 Oct 2018.

better future.

George Marshall, the author of the book *Don't Even Think About It: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Ignore Climate Change*, suggests that climate change lends itself “to multiple interpretations of causality, timing and impact. This leaves it extremely vulnerable to our innate disposition to select or adapt information so that it confirms our pre-existing assumptions – biased assimilation and confirmation bias. If climate change can be interpreted in any number of ways, it is therefore prone to being interpreted in the way that we choose. These constructed narratives therefore contain the final reason why we can ignore climate change: they become so culturally specific that people who don't identify with their values can reject the issues they explain”.³⁸

Marshall argues that we should make explicit our psychological biases and recognise that many may be subconscious. He offers

some important advice for how to frame stories with real potential to bring people on board and take action:³⁹

- We interpret the ecological crises through frames, which focus our attention but limit our understanding. We should resist simple framings and be open to new meanings in order to avoid limited frames that exclude meanings that lie outside the frame.
- Because the ecological crises are wicked problems, they're in danger of becoming entirely defined by a frame or a solution that is proposed. We need to ensure that we constantly discuss a wide range of solutions that are under review and be honest about the fact that nobody has the definite answers to the problems.
- We need to avoid enemy narratives that fuel division. Campaigns should create alternative narratives where the

enemy might be our 'internal weaknesses' rather than an outside group. We need narratives of cooperation that bring people together around a common cause.

- Stories can help shift social norms, but people will only trust the message if they hear it from trusted communicators (people with status of prestige). If it comes from someone they don't trust, the opposite effect is possible: it can increase resistance.
- The stories should be honest about the danger, but (again) this will only motivate people if they hear it from trusted communicators.
- Importantly, stories should start with affirming wider values. This makes people far more willing to accept information that challenges their worldview. This includes respect for authority, personal responsibility and loyalty to one's community and nation.

Marshall states: “I warn environmental liberals that the measure of success will inevitably be the emergence of some new ways of talking that you may find unpleasant. Similarly, never assume that what works for you will work for others. Indeed the fact that you strongly like something, may well be an indication that people with other values will hate it”.⁴⁰

The British charity Climate Outreach that Marshall co-founded has recently launched the toolkit Britain Talks Climate designed to equip campaigners and communicators with insights on how to talk to different segments of the British public about climate change in a way that draws on shared values and avoids division.⁴¹ The toolkit is based on extensive field research on the moral foundations and views of the different parts of British society and its application (and adaptation to the other countries) can be a great step towards creating a healthier discourse on climate change.

³⁸ George Marshall, *Don't Even Think About It: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Ignore Climate Change*, Bloomsbury USA, 2014, p. 227–8.

³⁹ Extracted from George Marshall, *Don't Even Think About It*, Bloomsbury USA, 2014, p. 231–8.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 237.

⁴¹ Climate Outreach, *Britain Talks Climate: A toolkit for engaging the British public on climate change*, 2020.

DON'T MORALISE, EMPOWER!

Tackling climate change is not a special interest issue. It's a question of the survival of our civilisation, and it should be of interest to all people. It doesn't make sense to organise a movement for tackling climate change based on a narrow ideological basis, as is often the case with current climate justice activism.

Bringing traditionalist working classes on board to collaborate for a climate friendly world is a possibility if everyone learns to accept and tolerate the diversity of moral foundations and worldviews.

The open society can only exist if everybody is capable of being tolerant – this has to include tolerance towards those who hold traditional values. If we are not tolerant towards this significant part of our societies, it will only lead to more resistance against liberal values and trigger more authoritarian dynamics. One of the

characteristics of liberal societies is precisely that people with different ways of life and views can manage to live together without aiming to convert the other side.

That doesn't mean that progressive activists should abandon their aspirations for social justice, but a better understanding of the moral foundations of many ordinary people will help create a more complete and more workable vision.

A more transversal movement should emphasise its own oneness and the factors that bind people together. Only by truly listening to the rural working-class people can trust be regained. The ecological transformation of our societies cannot continue to be an elite project, which it has been up to this moment in time.

Psychologist Renée Lertzman offers some advice on how to take climate change and the broader ecological crisis out of the trenches of political warfare and engage people to ultimately bring them

on board and join the movement: “As our work addressing climate change evolves to meet the pressing need for large-scale engagement, we would all be well served by tapping into the research and insights into how our minds work. [...] It requires building capacities for engagement that take into account the central role of ‘affect’ – how these issues make us feel, and how overwhelming they can be for many people. Pushing solutions is itself not the only solution. Helping people see themselves as empowered actors in changing our world, framing the issue as an opportunity not a burden, is where we can find our greatest headwind. Empathy is a critical ingredient in this mix, if we are to be effective”.⁴²

Here it might be helpful that people who live in rural areas often still have a much closer connection with the natural environment than urban cosmopolites. This includes the many people who work in agriculture, forest management etc. It won't be an artificial exercise of empowerment, because their

knowledge and experience will be very much in need when we have to transform our relationship with the natural environment. They are important actors in changing our world.

⁴² Renee Lertzman, 'Tackling Apathy and Denial', originally published in UNA-UK's *Climate 2020*, 18 Sep 2017.

7 OUTLOOK

The ideas and recommendations in this little guide are just the beginning of what we hope will become a deeper understanding of what needs to be done to improve the conversation on our most pressing issues and come together to tackle them. We hope that we have inspired some change agents across civil society to join us on the journey with The Protopia Lab.

Our aim is not the perfect world, but protopia, which is a process that takes into account multiple perspectives, acknowledges that there are always multiple trade-offs to consider and avoids throwing the baby out with the bathwater when making changes to the system. Nobody has all the answers for how a better system will ultimately work and look like. We propose a process of trial and error, an

evolutionary search process towards protopia.

We will focus on the core question that guides The Protopia Lab: How can we become wise agents of change to help make lasting change in our complex world so that life on Earth can flourish?



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**THINKING ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE
AND POLARISATION TOGETHER**

HOW TO START A NEW CONVERSATION_