

THE RIGHT IS RIGHT

The Revolutionary Power of Climate Change

“Climate scientists agree: climate change is happening here and now. Based on well-established evidence, about 97 percent of climate scientists have concluded that human-caused climate change is happening. This agreement is documented not just by a single study, but by a converging stream of evidence over the past two decades from surveys of scientists, content analyses of peer-reviewed studies, and public statements issued by virtually every membership organization of experts in this field.”

—Report by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, 2014¹

“There is no way this can be done without fundamentally changing the American way of life, choking off economic development, and putting large segments of our economy out of business.”

—Thomas J. Donohue, President of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce,
on ambitious carbon reduction²

There is a question from a gentleman in the fourth row.

He introduces himself as Richard Rothschild. He tells the crowd that he ran for county commissioner in Maryland's Carroll County because he had come to the conclusion that policies to combat global warming were actually “an attack on middle-class American capitalism.” His question for the panelists, gathered in a Washington, D.C., Marriott, is: “To what extent is this entire movement simply a green Trojan horse, whose belly is full with red Marxist socioeconomic doctrine?”³

At the Heartland Institute's Sixth International Conference on Climate Change, held in late June 2011, the premier gathering for those dedicated to denying the overwhelming scientific consensus that human activity is warming the planet, this qualifies as a rhetorical question. Like asking a meeting of German central bankers if Greeks are untrustworthy. Still, the panelists aren't going to pass up an opportunity to tell the questioner just how right he is.

First up is Marc Morano, editor of the denialists' go-to news site Climate Depot. "In America today we are regulated down to our shower heads, to our light bulbs, to our washing machines," he says. And "we're allowing the American SUV to die right before our eyes." If the greens have their way, Morano warns, we will be looking at "a CO₂ budget for every man, woman, and child on the planet, monitored by an international body."⁴

Next is Chris Horner, a senior fellow at the Competitive Enterprise Institute who specializes in harassing climate scientists with burdensome lawsuits and Freedom of Information Act fishing expeditions. He angles the table mic over to his mouth. "You can believe this is about the climate," he says darkly, "and many people do, but it's not a reasonable belief." Horner, whose prematurely silver hair makes him look like Anderson Cooper's frat boy doppelgänger, likes to invoke 1960s counterculture icon Saul Alinsky: "The issue isn't the issue." The issue, apparently, is that "no free society would do to itself what this agenda requires. . . . The first step to [doing] that is to remove these nagging freedoms that keep getting in the way."⁵

Claiming that climate change is a plot to steal American freedom is rather tame by Heartland standards. Over the course of this two-day conference, I will hear modern environmentalism compared to virtually every mass-murderous chapter in human history, from the Catholic Inquisition to Nazi Germany to Stalin's Russia. I will learn that Barack Obama's campaign promise to support locally owned biofuels refineries was akin to Chairman Mao's scheme to put "a pig iron furnace in everybody's backyard" (the Cato Institute's Patrick Michaels). That climate change is "a stalking horse for National Socialism" (former Republican senator and retired astronaut Harrison Schmitt, referencing the Nazis). And that environmentalists are like Aztec priests, sacrificing countless people to appease the gods and change the weather (Marc Morano again).⁶

But most of all, I will hear versions of the opinion expressed by the county commissioner in the fourth row: that climate change is a Trojan horse designed to abolish capitalism and replace it with some kind of "green communitarianism." As conference speaker Larry Bell succinctly puts it in his book *Climate of Corruption*, climate change "has little to do with the state of the environment and much to do with shackling capitalism and transforming the American way of life in the interests of global wealth redistribution."⁷

Yes, there is a pretense that the delegates' rejection of climate science is rooted in serious disagreement about the data. And the organizers go to some lengths to mimic credible scientific conferences, calling the gathering "Restoring the Scientific Method" and even choosing a name, the International Conference on Climate Change, that produces an organizational acronym, ICCO, just one letter off from that of the world's leading authority on climate change, the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), a collaboration of thousands of scientists and 195 governments. But the various contrarian theses presented at the Heartland conference—tree rings, sunspots, the Medieval Warm Period—are old news and were thoroughly debunked long ago. And most of the speakers are not even scientists but rather hobbyists: engineers, economists, and lawyers, mixed in with a weatherman, an astronaut, and a "space architect"—all convinced they have outsmarted 97 percent of the world's climate scientists with their back-of-the-envelope calculations.⁸

Australian geologist Bob Carter questions whether warming is happening at all, while astrophysicist Willie Soon acknowledges some warming has occurred, but says it has nothing to do with greenhouse emissions and is instead the result of natural fluctuations in the activity of the sun. Cato's Patrick Michaels contradicts them both by conceding that CO₂ is indeed increasing temperatures, but insists the impacts are so minor we should "do nothing" about it. Disagreement is the lifeblood of any intellectual gathering, but at the Heartland conference, this wildly contradictory material sparks absolutely no debate among the deniers—no one attempts to defend one position over another, or to sort out who is actually correct. Indeed as the temperature graphs are presented, several members of the mostly elderly audience seem to doze off.⁹

The entire room comes to life, however, when the rock stars of the movement take the stage—not the C-team scientists but the A-team ideological warriors like Morano and Horner. This is the true purpose of the gathering: providing a forum for die-hard denialists to collect the rhetorical cudgels with which they will attempt to club environmentalists and climate scientists in the weeks and months to come. The talking points tested here will jam the comment sections beneath every article and YouTube video that contains the phrase “climate change” or “global warming.” They will also fly from the mouths of hundreds of right-wing commentators and politicians—from Republican presidential hopefuls all the way down to county commissioners like Richard Rothschild. In an interview outside the sessions, Joseph Bast, president of the Heartland Institute, takes credit for “thousands of articles and op-eds and speeches . . . that were informed by or motivated by somebody attending one of these conferences.”¹⁰

More impressive, though left unspoken, are all the news stories that were never published and never aired. The years leading up to the gathering had seen a precipitous collapse of media coverage of climate change, despite a rise in extreme weather: in 2007, the three major U.S. networks—CBS, NBC, and ABC—ran 147 stories on climate change; in 2011 the networks ran just fourteen stories on the subject. That too is the denier strategy at work, because the goal was never just to spread doubt but also to spread fear—to send a clear message that saying anything at all about climate change was a surefire way to find your inbox and comment threads jammed with a toxic strain of vitriol.¹¹

The Heartland Institute, a Chicago-based think tank devoted to “promoting free-market solutions,” has been holding these confabs since 2008, sometimes twice a year. And at the time of the gathering, the strategy appeared to be working. In his address, Morano—whose claim to fame is having broken the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth story that helped sink John Kerry’s 2004 presidential bid—led the audience through a series of victory laps. Climate legislation in the U.S. Senate: dead! The U.N. summit on climate change in Copenhagen: failure! The climate movement: suicidal! He even projected on a screen a couple of quotes from climate activists beating up on themselves (as progressives do so well) and exhorted the audience to “celebrate!”¹²

The only things missing were balloons and confetti descending from the rafters.

When public opinion on the big social and political issues changes, the trends tend to be relatively gradual. Abrupt shifts, when they come, are usually precipitated by dramatic events. Which is why pollsters were so surprised by what had happened to perceptions about climate change in just four years. A 2007 Harris poll found that 71 percent of Americans believed that the continued burning of fossil fuels would alter the climate. By 2009 the figure had dropped to 51 percent. In June 2011 the number was down to 44 percent—well under half the population. Similar trends have been tracked in the U.K. and Australia. Scott Keeter, director of survey research at the Pew Research Center for People & the Press, described the statistics in the United States as “among the largest shifts over a short period of time seen in recent public opinion history.”¹³

The overall belief in climate change has rebounded somewhat since its 2010–11 low in the United States. (Some have hypothesized that experience with extreme weather events could be contributing, though “the evidence is at best very sketchy at this point,” says Riley Dunlap, a sociologist at Oklahoma State University who specializes in the politics of climate change.) But what remains striking is that on the right-wing side of the political spectrum, the numbers are still way down.¹⁴

It seems hard to believe today, but as recently as 2008, tackling climate change still had a veneer of bipartisan support, even in the United States. That year, Republican stalwart Newt Gingrich did a TV spot with Democratic congresswoman Nancy Pelosi, then Speaker of the House, in which they pledged to join forces and fight climate change together. And in 2007, Rupert Murdoch—whose Fox News channel relentlessly amplifies the climate change denial movement—launched an incentive program at Fox to encourage employees to buy hybrid cars (Murdoch announced he had purchased one himself).

Those days of bipartisanship are decidedly over. Today, more than 75 percent of self-identified Democrats and liberals believe humans are

changing the climate—a level that, despite yearly fluctuations, has risen only slightly since 2001. In sharp contrast, Republicans have overwhelmingly chosen to reject the scientific consensus. In some regions, only about 20 percent of self-identified Republicans accept the science. This political rift can also be found in Canada. According to an October 2013 poll conducted by Environics, only 41 percent of respondents who identify with the ruling Conservative Party believe that climate change is real and human-caused, while 76 percent of supporters of the left-leaning New Democratic Party and 69 percent of supporters of the centrist Liberal Party believe it is real. And the same phenomenon has once again been documented in Australia and the U.K., as well as Western Europe.¹⁵

Ever since this political divide opened up over climate change, a great deal of social science research has been devoted to pinpointing precisely how and why political beliefs are shaping attitudes toward global warming. According to Yale's Cultural Cognition Project, for example, one's "cultural worldview"—that would be political leanings or ideological outlook to the rest of us—explains "individuals' beliefs about global warming more powerfully than any other individual characteristic."¹⁶ More powerfully, that is, than age, ethnicity, education, or party affiliation.

The Yale researchers explain that people with strong "egalitarian" and "communitarian" worldviews (marked by an inclination toward collective action and social justice, concern about inequality, and suspicion of corporate power) overwhelmingly accept the scientific consensus on climate change. Conversely, those with strong "hierarchical" and "individualistic" worldviews (marked by opposition to government assistance for the poor and minorities, strong support for industry, and a belief that we all pretty much get what we deserve) overwhelmingly reject the scientific consensus.¹⁷

The evidence is striking. Among the segment of the U.S. population that displays the strongest "hierarchical" views, only 11 percent rate climate change as a "high risk," compared with 69 percent of the segment displaying the strongest "egalitarian" views.¹⁸

Yale law professor Dan Kahan, the lead author on this study, attributes the tight correlation between "worldview" and acceptance of climate science to "cultural cognition," the process by which all of us—regardless of political leanings—filter new information in ways that will protect our

"preferred vision of the good society." If new information seems to confirm that vision, we welcome it and integrate it easily. If it poses a threat to our belief system, then our brain immediately gets to work producing intellectual antibodies designed to repel the unwelcome invasion.¹⁹

As Kahan explained in *Nature*, "People find it disconcerting to believe that behavior that they find noble is nevertheless detrimental to society, and behavior that they find base is beneficial to it. Because accepting such a claim could drive a wedge between them and their peers, they have a strong emotional predisposition to reject it." In other words, it is always easier to deny reality than to allow our worldview to be shattered, a fact that was as true of die-hard Stalinists at the height of the purges as it is of libertarian climate change deniers today. Furthermore, leftists are equally capable of denying inconvenient scientific evidence. If conservatives are inherent system justifiers, and therefore bridle before facts that call the dominant economic system into question, then most leftists are inherent system questioners, and therefore prone to skepticism about facts that come from corporations and government. This can lapse into the kind of fact resistance we see among those who are convinced that multinational drug companies have covered up the link between childhood vaccines and autism. No matter what evidence is marshaled to disprove their theories, it doesn't matter to these crusaders—it's just the system covering up for itself.

This kind of defensive reasoning helps explain the rise of emotional intensity that surrounds the climate issue today. As recently as 2007, climate change was something most everyone acknowledged was happening—they just didn't seem to care very much. (When Americans are asked to rank their political concerns in order of priority, climate change still consistently comes in last.)²¹

But today there is a significant cohort of voters in many countries who care passionately, even obsessively, about climate change. What they care about, however, is exposing it as a "hoax" being perpetrated by liberals to force them to change their light bulbs, live in Soviet-style tenements, and surrender their SUVs. For these right-wingers, opposition to climate change has become as central to their belief system as low taxes, gun ownership, and opposition to abortion. Which is why some climate scientists report receiving the kind of harassment that used to be reserved for doctors who

perform abortions. In the Bay Area of California, local Tea Party activists have disrupted municipal meetings when minor sustainability strategies are being discussed, claiming they are part of a U.N.-sponsored plot to usher in world government. As Heather Gass of the East Bay Tea Party put it in an open letter after one such gathering: “One day (in 2035) you will wake up in subsidized government housing, eating government subsidized food, your kids will be whisked off by government buses to indoctrination training centers while you are working at your government assigned job on the bottom floor of your urban transit center village because you have no car and who knows where your aging parents will be but by then it will be too late! WAKE UP!!!!”²²

Clearly there is something about climate change that has some people feeling very threatened indeed.

Unthinkable Truths

Walking past the lineup of tables set up by the Heartland conference’s sponsors, it’s not terribly hard to see what’s going on. The Heritage Foundation is hawkng reports, as are the Cato Institute and the Ayn Rand Institute. The climate change denial movement—far from an organic convergence of “skeptical” scientists—is entirely a creature of the ideological network on display here, the very one that deserves the bulk of the credit for redrawing the global ideological map over the last four decades. A 2013 study by Riley Dunlap and political scientist Peter Jacques found that a striking 72 percent of climate denial books, mostly published since the 1990s, were linked to right-wing think tanks, a figure that rises to 87 percent if self-published books (increasingly common) are excluded.²³

Many of these institutions were created in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when U.S. business elites feared that public opinion was turning dangerously against capitalism and toward, if not socialism, then an aggressive Keynesianism. In response, they launched a counterrevolution, a richly funded intellectual movement that argued that greed and the limitless pursuit of profit were nothing to apologize for and offered the greatest hope for human emancipation that the world had ever known. Under this libera-

tionist banner, they fought for such policies as tax cuts, free trade deals, for the auctioning off of core state assets from phones to energy to water—the package known in most of the world as “neoliberalism.”

At the end of the 1980s, after a decade of Margaret Thatcher at the helm in the U.K. and Ronald Reagan in the United States, and with communism collapsing, these ideological warriors were ready to declare victory: history was officially over and there was, in Thatcher’s often repeated words, “no alternative” to their market fundamentalism. Filled with confidence, the next task was to systematically lock in the corporate liberation project in every country that had previously held out, which was usually best accomplished in the midst of political turmoil and large-scale economic crises, and further entrenched through free trade agreements and membership in the World Trade Organization.

It had all been going so well. The project had even managed to survive, more or less, the 2008 financial collapse directly caused by a banking sector that had been liberated of so much burdensome regulation and oversight. But to those gathered here at the Heartland conference, climate change is a threat of a different sort. It isn’t about the political preferences of Republicans versus Democrats; it’s about the physical boundaries of the atmosphere and ocean. If the dire projections coming out of the IPCC are left unchallenged, and business as usual is indeed driving us straight toward civilization-threatening tipping points, then the implications are obvious: the ideological crusade incubated in think tanks like Heartland, Cato, and Heritage will have to come to a screeching halt. Nor have the various attempts to soft-pedal climate action as compatible with market logic (carbon trading, carbon offsets, monetizing nature’s “services”) fooled these true believers one bit. They know very well that ours is a global economy created by, and fully reliant upon, the burning of fossil fuels and that a dependency that foundational cannot be changed with a few gentle market mechanisms. It requires heavy-duty interventions: sweeping bans on polluting activities, deep subsidies for green alternatives, pricey penalties for violations, new taxes, new public works programs, reversals of privatizations—the list of ideological outrages goes on and on. Everything, in short, that these think tanks—which have always been public proxies for far more powerful corporate interests—have been busily attacking for decades.

And there is also the matter of “global equity” that keeps coming up in the climate negotiations. The equity debate is based on the simple scientific fact that global warming is caused by the accumulation of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere over two centuries. That means that the countries that got a large head start on industrialization have done a great deal more emitting than most others. And yet many of the countries that have emitted least are getting hit by the impacts of climate change first and worst (the result of geographical bad luck as well as the particular vulnerabilities created by poverty). To address this structural inequity sufficiently to persuade fast-growing countries like China and India not to destabilize the global climate system, earlier emitters, like North America and Europe, will have to take a greater share of the burden at first. And there will obviously need to be substantial transfers of resources and technology to help battle poverty using low carbon tools. This is what Bolivia’s climate negotiator Angélica Navarro Llanos meant when she called for a Marshall Plan for the Earth. And it is this sort of wealth redistribution that represents the direst of thought crimes at a place like the Heartland Institute.

Even climate action at home looks suspiciously like socialism to them; all the calls for high-density affordable housing and brand-new public transit are obviously just ways to give backdoor subsidies to the undeserving poor. Never mind what this war on carbon means to the very premise of global free trade, with its insistence that geographical distance is a mere fiction to be collapsed by Walmart’s diesel trucks and Maersk’s container ships.

More fundamentally than any of this, though, is their deep fear that if the free market system really has set in motion physical and chemical processes that, if allowed to continue unchecked, threaten large parts of humanity at an existential level, then their entire crusade to morally redeem capitalism has been for naught. With stakes like these, clearly greed is not so very good after all. And that is what is behind the abrupt rise in climate change denial among hardcore conservatives: they have come to understand that as soon as they admit that climate change is real, they will lose the central ideological battle of our time—whether we need to plan and manage our societies to reflect our goals and values, or whether that task can be left to the magic of the market.

Imagine, for a moment, how all of this looks to a guy like Heartland president Joseph Bast, a genial bearded fellow who studied economics at the University of Chicago and who told me in a sit-down interview that his personal calling is “freeing people from the tyranny of other people.”²⁴ To Bast, climate action looks like the end of the world. It’s not, or at least it doesn’t have to be, but, for all intents and purposes, robust, science-based emission reduction is the end of *his* world. Climate change detonates the ideological scaffolding on which contemporary conservatism rests. A belief system that vilifies collective action and declares war on all corporate regulation and all things public simply cannot be reconciled with a problem that demands collective action on an unprecedented scale and a dramatic reining in of the market forces that are largely responsible for creating and deepening the crisis.

And for many conservatives, particularly religious ones, the challenge goes deeper still, threatening not just faith in markets but core cultural narratives about what humans are doing here on earth. Are we masters, here to subdue and dominate, or are we one species among many, at the mercy of powers more complex and unpredictable than even our most powerful computers can model? As Robert Manne, a professor of politics at La Trobe University in Melbourne, puts it, climate science is for many conservatives “an affront to their deepest and most cherished basic faith: the capacity and indeed the right of ‘mankind’ to subdue the Earth and all its fruits and to establish a ‘mastery’ over Nature.” For these conservatives, he notes, “such a thought is not merely mistaken. It is intolerable and deeply offensive. Those preaching this doctrine have to be resisted and indeed denounced.”²⁵

And denounce they do, the more personal, the better—whether it’s former Vice President Al Gore for his mansions, or famed climate scientist James Hansen for his speaking fees. Then there is “Climategate,” a manufactured scandal in which climate scientists’ emails were hacked and their contents distorted by the Heartlanders and their allies, who claimed to find evidence of manipulated data (the scientists were repeatedly vindicated of wrongdoing). In 2012, the Heartland Institute even landed itself in hot water by running a billboard campaign that compared people who believe in climate change (“warmists” in denialist lingo) to murderous cult leader Charles Manson and Unabomber Ted Kaczynski. “I still believe in Global

Warming. Do you?" the first ad demanded in bold red letters under a picture of Kaczynski. For Heartlanders, denying climate science is part of a war, and they act like it.²⁶

Many deniers are quite open about the fact that their distrust of the science grew out of a powerful fear that if climate change is real, the political implications would be catastrophic. As British blogger and regular Heartland speaker James Delingpole has pointed out, "Modern environmentalism successfully advances many of the causes dear to the left: redistribution of wealth, higher taxes, greater government intervention, regulation." Heartland president Joseph Bast puts it even more bluntly. For the left, "Climate change is the perfect thing. . . . It's the reason why we should do everything [the left] wanted to do anyway."²⁷

Bast, who has little of the swagger common to so many denialists, is equally honest about the fact he and his colleagues did not become engaged with climate issues because they found flaws in the scientific facts. Rather, they became alarmed about the economic and political implications of those facts and set out to disprove them. "When we look at this issue, we say, This is a recipe for massive increase in government," Bast told me, concluding that, "Before we take this step, let's take another look at the science. So conservative and libertarian groups, I think, stopped and said, Let's not simply accept this as an article of faith; let's actually do our own research."²⁸

Nigel Lawson, Margaret Thatcher's former chancellor of the exchequer who has taken to declaring that "green is the new red," has followed a similar intellectual trajectory. Lawson takes great pride in having privatized key British assets, lowered taxes on the wealthy, and broken the power of large unions. But climate change creates, in his words, "a new license to intrude, to interfere and to regulate." It must, he concludes, be a conspiracy—the classic teleological reversal of cause and effect.²⁹

The climate change denial movement is littered with characters who are twisting themselves in similar intellectual knots. There are the old-timer physicists like S. Fred Singer, who used to develop rocket technologies for the U.S. military and who hears in emissions regulation a distorted echo of the communism he fought during the Cold War (as documented compellingly by Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway in *Merchants of Doubt*). In a similar vein, there is former Czech president Václav Klaus, who spoke

at a Heartland climate conference while still head of state. For Klaus, whose career began under communist rule, climate change appears to have induced a full-fledged Cold War flashback. He compares attempts to prevent global warming to "the ambitions of communist central planners to control the entire society" and says, "For someone who spent most of his life in the 'noble' era of communism this is impossible to accept."³⁰

And you can understand that, from their perspective, the scientific reality of climate change must seem spectacularly unfair. After all, the people at the Heartland conference thought they had won these ideological wars—if not fairly, then certainly squarely. Now climate science is changing everything: how can you win an argument against government intervention if the very habitability of the planet depends on intervening? In the short term, you might be able to argue that the economic costs of taking action are greater than allowing climate change to play out for a few more decades (and some neoliberal economists, using cost-benefit calculations and future "discounting," are busily making those arguments). But most people don't actually like it when their children's lives are "discounted" in someone else's Excel sheet, and they tend to have a moral aversion to the idea of allowing countries to disappear because saving them would be too expensive.

Which is why the ideological warriors gathered at the Marriott have concluded that there is really only one way to beat a threat this big: by claiming that thousands upon thousands of scientists are lying and that climate change is an elaborate hoax. That the storms aren't really getting bigger, it's just our imagination. And if they are, it's not because of anything humans are doing—or could stop doing. They deny reality, in other words, because the implications of that reality are, quite simply, unthinkable.

So here's my inconvenient truth: I think these hard-core ideologues understand the real significance of climate change better than most of the "warmists" in the political center, the ones who are still insisting that the response can be gradual and painless and that we don't need to go to war with anybody, including the fossil fuel companies. Before I go any further, let me be absolutely clear: as 97 percent of the world's climate scientists attest, the Heartlanders are completely wrong about the science. But when it comes to the political and economic *consequences* of those scientific findings, specifically the kind of deep changes required not just to our energy consumption but to the underlying logic of our liberalized and profit-

seeking economy, they have their eyes wide open. The deniers get plenty of the details wrong (no, it's not a communist plot; authoritarian state socialism, as we will see, was terrible for the environment and brutally extractivist), but when it comes to the scope and depth of change required to avert catastrophe, they are right on the money.

About That Money . . .

When powerful ideologies are challenged by hard evidence from the real world, they rarely die off completely. Rather, they become cultlike and marginal. A few of the faithful always remain to tell one another that the problem wasn't with the ideology; it was the weakness of leaders who did not apply the rules with sufficient rigor. (Lord knows there is still a smattering of such grouplets on the neo-Stalinist far left.) By this point in history—after the 2008 collapse of Wall Street and in the midst of layers of ecological crises—free market fundamentalists should, by all rights, be exiled to a similarly irrelevant status, left to fondle their copies of Milton Friedman's *Free to Choose* and Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* in obscurity. They are saved from this ignominious fate only because their ideas about corporate liberation, no matter how demonstrably at war with reality, remain so profitable to the world's billionaires that they are kept fed and clothed in think tanks by the likes of Charles and David Koch, owners of the diversified dirty energy giant Koch Industries, and ExxonMobil.

According to one recent study, for instance, the denial-espousing think tanks and other advocacy groups making up what sociologist Robert Brulle calls the “climate change counter-movement” are collectively pulling in more than \$900 million per year for their work on a variety of right-wing causes, most of it in the form of “dark money”—funds from conservative foundations that cannot be fully traced.³¹

This points to the limits of theories like cultural cognition that focus exclusively on individual psychology. The deniers are doing more than protecting their personal worldviews—they are protecting powerful political and economic interests that have gained tremendously from the way Heartland and others have clouded the climate debate. The ties between the deniers and those interests are well known and well documented. Heart-

land has received more than \$1 million from ExxonMobil together with foundations linked to the Koch brothers and the late conservative funder Richard Mellon Scaife. Just how much money the think tank receives from companies, foundations, and individuals linked to the fossil fuel industry remains unclear because Heartland does not publish the names of its donors, claiming the information would distract from the “merits of our positions.” Indeed, leaked internal documents revealed that one of Heartland's largest donors is anonymous—a shadowy individual who has given more than \$8.6 million specifically to support the think tank's attacks on climate science.³²

Meanwhile, scientists who present at Heartland climate conferences are almost all so steeped in fossil fuel dollars that you can practically smell the fumes. To cite just two examples, the Cato Institute's Patrick Michaels, who gave the 2011 conference keynote, once told CNN that 40 percent of his consulting company's income comes from oil companies (Cato itself has received funding from ExxonMobil and Koch family foundations). A Greenpeace investigation into another conference speaker, astrophysicist Willie Soon, found that between 2002 and 2010, 100 percent of his new research grants had come from fossil fuel interests.³³

The people paid to amplify the views of these scientists—in blogs, op-eds, and television appearances—are bankrolled by many of the same sources. Money from big oil funds the Committee for a Constructive Tomorrow, which houses Marc Morano's website, just as it funds the Competitive Enterprise Institute, one of Chris Horner's intellectual homes. A February 2013 report in *The Guardian* revealed that between 2002 and 2010, a network of anonymous U.S. billionaires had donated nearly \$120 million to “groups casting doubt about the science behind climate change . . . the ready stream of cash set off a conservative backlash against Barack Obama's environmental agenda that wrecked any chance of Congress taking action on climate change.”³⁴

There is no way of knowing exactly how this money shapes the views of those who receive it or whether it does at all. We do know that having a significant economic stake in the fossil fuel economy makes one more prone to deny the reality of climate change, regardless of political affiliation. For example, the only parts of the U.S. where opinions about climate change are slightly less split along political lines are regions that are highly depen-

dent on fossil fuel extraction—such as Appalachian coal country and the Gulf Coast. There, Republicans still overwhelmingly deny climate change, as they do across the country, but many of their Democratic neighbors do as well (in parts of Appalachia, just 49 percent of Democrats believe in human-created climate change, compared with 72–77 percent in other parts of the country). Canada has the same kinds of regional splits: in Alberta, where incomes are soaring thanks to the tar sands, only 41 percent of residents told pollsters that humans are contributing to climate change. In Atlantic Canada, which has seen far less extravagant benefits from fossil fuel extraction, 68 percent of respondents say that humans are warming the planet.³⁵

A similar bias can be observed among scientists. While 97 percent of active climate scientists believe humans are a major cause of climate change, the numbers are radically different among “economic geologists”—scientists who study natural formations so that they can be commercially exploited by the extractive industries. Only 47 percent of these scientists believe in human-caused climate change. The bottom line is that we are all inclined to denial when the truth is too costly—whether emotionally, intellectually, or financially. As Upton Sinclair famously observed: “It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends upon his not understanding it!”³⁶

Plan B: Get Rich off a Warming World

One of the most interesting findings of the many recent studies on climate perceptions is the clear connection between a refusal to accept the science of climate change and social and economic privilege. Overwhelmingly, climate change deniers are not only conservative but also white and male, a group with higher than average incomes. And they are more likely than other adults to be highly confident in their views, no matter how demonstrably false. A much discussed paper on this topic by sociologists Aaron McCright and Riley Dunlap (memorably titled “Cool Dudes”) found that as a group, conservative white men who expressed strong confidence in their understanding of global warming were almost six times as likely to believe climate change “will never happen” as the rest of the adults surveyed. Mc-

Crigh and Dunlap offer a simple explanation for this discrepancy: “Conservative white males have disproportionately occupied positions of power within our economic system. Given the expansive challenge that climate change poses to the industrial capitalist economic system, it should not be surprising that conservative white males’ strong system-justifying attitudes would be triggered to deny climate change.”³⁷

But deniers’ relative economic and social privilege doesn’t just give them more to lose from deep social and economic change; it gives them reason to be more sanguine about the risks of climate change should their contrarian views turn out to be false. This occurred to me as I listened to yet another speaker at the Heartland conference display what can only be described as an utter absence of empathy for the victims of climate change. Larry Bell (the space architect) drew plenty of laughs when he told the crowd that a little heat isn’t so bad: “I moved to Houston intentionally!” (Houston was, at that time, in the midst of what would turn out to be Texas’s worst single-year drought on record.) Australian geologist Bob Carter offered that “the world actually does better from our human perspective in warmer times.” And Patrick Michaels said people worried about climate change should do what the French did after the devastating 2003 heat wave across Europe: killed nearly fifteen thousand people in France alone: “they discovered Walmart and air-conditioning.”³⁸

I listened to these zingers as an estimated thirteen million people in the Horn of Africa faced starvation on parched land. What makes this callousness among deniers possible is their firm belief that if they’re wrong about climate science, a few degrees of warming isn’t something wealthy people in industrialized countries have to worry much about.* (“When it rains, we find shelter. When it’s hot, we find shade,” Texas congressman Joe Barton explained at an energy and environment subcommittee hearing.)³⁹

As for everyone else, well, they should stop looking for handouts and get busy making money. (Never mind that the World Bank warned in a 2012

* Much of this confidence is based on fantasy. Though the ultra-rich may be able to buy a measure of protection for a while, even the wealthiest nation on the planet can fall apart in the face of a major shock (as Hurricane Katrina showed). And no society, no matter how well financed or managed, can truly adapt to massive natural disasters when one comes fast and furious on the heels of the last.

report that for poor countries, the increased cost of storms, droughts, and flooding is already so high that it “threatens to roll back decades of sustainable development.”) When I asked Patrick Michaels whether rich countries have a responsibility to help poor ones pay for costly adaptations to a warmer climate, he scoffed: There is no reason to give resources to countries “because, for some reason, their political system is incapable of adapting.” The real solution, he claimed, was more free trade.⁴⁰

Michaels surely knows that free trade is hardly going to help islanders whose countries are disappearing, just as he is doubtlessly aware that most people on the planet who are hit hardest by heat and drought can’t solve their problems by putting a new AC system on their credit cards. And this is where the intersection between extreme ideology and climate denial gets truly dangerous. It’s not simply that these “cool dudes” deny climate science because it threatens to upend their dominance-based worldview. It is that their dominance-based worldview provides them with the intellectual tools to write off huge swaths of humanity, and indeed, to rationalize profiting from the meltdown.

Recognizing the threat posed by this empathy-exterminating mind-set—which the cultural theorists describe as “hierarchical” and “individualistic”—is a matter of great urgency because climate change will test our moral character like little before. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce, in its bid to prevent the Environmental Protection Agency from regulating carbon emissions, argued in a petition that in the event of global warming, “populations can acclimatize to warmer climates via a range of behavioral, physiological, and technological adaptations.”⁴¹

It is these adaptations that worry me most of all. Unless our culture goes through some sort of fundamental shift in its governing values, how do we honestly think we will “adapt” to the people made homeless and jobless by increasingly intense and frequent natural disasters? How will we treat the climate refugees who arrive on our shores in leaky boats? How will we cope as freshwater and food become ever more scarce?

We know the answers because the process is already under way. The corporate quest for natural resources will become more rapacious, more violent. Arable land in Africa will continue to be seized to provide food and fuel to wealthier nations, unleashing a new stage of neocolonial plunder layered on

top of the most plundered places on earth (as journalist Christian Parenti documents so well in *Tropic of Chaos*). When heat stress and vicious storms wipe out small farms and fishing villages, the land will be handed over to large developers for mega-ports, luxury resorts, and industrial farms. Once self-sufficient rural residents will lose their lands and be urged to move into increasingly crowded urban slums—for their own protection, they will be told. Drought and famine will continue to be used as pretexts to push genetically modified seeds, driving farmers further into debt.⁴²

In the wealthier nations, we will protect our major cities with costly seawalls and storm barriers while leaving vast areas of coastline that are inhabited by poor and Indigenous people to the ravages of storms and rising seas. We may well do the same on the planetary scale, deploying techno-fixes to lower global temperatures that will pose far greater risks to those living in the tropics than in the Global North (more on this later). And rather than recognizing that we owe a debt to migrants forced to flee their lands as a result of our actions (and inactions), our governments will build ever more high-tech fortresses and adopt even more draconian anti-immigration laws. And, in the name of “national security,” we will intervene in foreign conflicts over water, oil, and arable land, or start those conflicts ourselves. In short our culture will do what it is already doing, only with more brutality and barbarism, because that is what our system is built to do.

In recent years, quite a number of major multinational corporations have begun to speak openly about how climate change might impact their businesses, and insurance companies closely track and discuss the increased frequency of major disasters. The CEO of Swiss Re Americas admitted, for instance, that “What keeps us up at night is climate change,” while companies like Starbucks and Chipotle have raised the alarm about how extreme weather may impact the availability of key ingredients. In June 2014, the Risky Business project, led by billionaire and former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg, as well as former U.S. treasury secretary Henry Paulson and hedge fund founder and environmental philanthropist Tom Steyer, warned that climate change would cost the U.S. economy billions of dollars each year as a result of rising sea levels alone, and that the corporate world must take such climate costs seriously.⁴³

This kind of talk is often equated with support for strong action to

prevent warming. It shouldn't be. Just because companies are willing to acknowledge the probable effects of climate change does not mean they support the kinds of aggressive measures that would significantly reduce those risks by keeping warming below 2 degrees. In the U.S., for instance, the insurance lobby has been, by far, the corporate sector most vocal about the mounting impacts, with the largest companies employing teams of climate scientists to help them prepare for the disasters to come. And yet the industry hasn't done much to push more aggressive climate policy—on the contrary, many companies and trade groups have provided substantial funding to the think tanks that created the climate change denial movement.⁴⁴

For some time, this seemingly contradictory dynamic played out within different divisions of the Heartland Institute itself. The world's premier climate denial institution houses something called the Center on Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate. Up until May 2012, it was pretty much a mouthpiece for the insurance industry, headed by conservative Washington insider Eli Lehrer. What made Lehrer different from his Heartland colleagues, however, is that he is willing to state matter-of-factly, "Climate change is obviously real and obviously caused to a significant extent by people. I don't really think there's room for serious debate on either of those points."⁴⁵

So even as his Heartland colleagues were organizing global conferences designed specifically to manufacture the illusion of a serious scientific debate, Lehrer's division was working with the insurance lobby to protect their bottom lines in a future of climate chaos. According to Lehrer, "In general there was no enormous conflict, day-to-day" between his work and that of his climate-change-denying colleagues.⁴⁶ That's because what many of the insurance companies wanted from Heartland's advocacy was not action to prevent climate chaos but rather policies that would safeguard or even increase their profits no matter the weather. That means pushing government out of the subsidized insurance business, giving companies greater freedom to raise rates and deductibles and to drop customers in high-risk areas, as well as other "free market" measures.

Eventually, Lehrer split away from the Heartland Institute after the think tank launched its billboard comparing people who believe in climate change to mass murderers. Since climate change believers include the insurance companies that were generously funding the Heartland Institute,

that stunt didn't sit at all well. Still, in an interview, Eli Lehrer was quick to stress that the differences were over public relations, not policy. "The public policies that Heartland supported are generally ones I still favor," he said.⁴⁷ In truth the work was more or less compatible. Heartland's denial division did its best to cast so much doubt on the science that it helped to paralyze all serious attempts to regulate greenhouse emissions, while the insurance arm pushed policies that would allow corporations to stay profitable regardless of the real-world results of those emissions.

And this points to what really lies behind the casual attitude about climate change, whether it is being expressed as disaster denialism or disaster capitalism. Those involved feel free to engage in these high-stakes gambles because they believe that they and theirs will be protected from the ravages in question, at least for another generation or so.

On a large scale, many regional climate models do predict that wealthy countries—most of which are located at higher latitudes—may experience some economic benefits from a slightly warmer climate, from longer growing seasons to access to shorter trade routes through the melting Arctic ice. At the same time, the wealthy in these regions are already finding ever more elaborate ways to protect themselves from the coming weather extremes. Sparked by events like Superstorm Sandy, new luxury real estate developments are marketing their gold-plated private disaster infrastructure to would-be residents—everything from emergency lighting to natural-gas-powered pumps and generators to thirteen-foot floodgates and watertight rooms sealed "submarine-style," in the case of a new Manhattan condominium. As Stephen G. Kliegerman, the executive director of development marketing for Halstead Property, told *The New York Times*: "I think buyers would happily pay to be relatively reassured they wouldn't be terribly inconvenienced in case of a natural disaster."⁴⁸

Many large corporations, meanwhile, have their own backup generators to keep their lights on through mass blackouts (as Goldman Sachs did during Sandy, despite the fact that its power never actually went out); the capacity to fortify themselves with their own sandbags (which Goldman also did ahead of Sandy); and their own special teams of meteorologists (FedEx). Insurance companies in the United States have even begun dispatching teams of private firefighters to their high-end customers when

their mansions in California and Colorado are threatened by wildfires, a “concierge” service pioneered by AIG.⁴⁹

Meanwhile, the public sector continues to crumble, thanks in large part to the hard work of the warriors here at the Heartland conference. These, after all, are the fervent dismantlers of the state, whose ideology has eroded so many parts of the public sphere, including disaster preparedness. These are the voices that have been happy to pass on the federal budget crisis to the states and municipalities, which in turn are coping with it by not repairing bridges or replacing fire trucks. The “freedom” agenda that they are desperately trying to protect from scientific evidence is one of the reasons that societies will be distinctly less prepared for disasters when they come.

For a long time, environmentalists spoke of climate change as a great equalizer, the one issue that affected everyone, rich or poor. It was supposed to bring us together. Yet all signs are that it is doing precisely the opposite, stratifying us further into a society of haves and have-nots, divided between those whose wealth offers them a not insignificant measure of protection from ferocious weather, at least for now, and those left to the mercy of increasingly dysfunctional states.

The Meaner Side of Denial

As the effects of climate change become impossible to ignore, the crueler side of the denial project—now lurking as subtext—will become explicit. It has already begun. At the end of August 2011, with large parts of the world still suffering under record high temperatures, the conservative blogger Jim Geraghty published a piece in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* arguing that climate change “will help the U.S. economy in several ways and enhance, not diminish, the United States’ geopolitical power.” He explained that since climate change will be hardest on developing countries, “many potentially threatening states will find themselves in much more dire circumstances.” And this, he stressed, was a good thing: “Rather than our doom, climate change could be the centerpiece of ensuring a second consecutive American Century.” Got that? Since people who scare Americans are unlucky enough to live in poor, hot places, climate change will cook them,

leaving the United States to rise like a phoenix from the flames of global warming.^{* 50}

Expect more of this monstrosity. As the world warms, the ideology so threatened by climate science—the one that tells us it’s everyone for themselves, that victims deserve their fate, that we can master nature—will take us to a very cold place indeed. And it will only get colder, as theories of racial superiority, barely under the surface in parts of the denial movement, make a raging comeback.^{† 51} In the grossly unequal world this ideology has done so much to intensify and lock in, these theories are not optional: they are necessary to justify the hardening of hearts to the largely blameless victims of climate change in the Global South and to the predominantly African American cities like New Orleans that are most vulnerable in the Global North.

In a 2007 report on the security implications of climate change, copublished by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, former CIA director R. James Woolsey predicted that on a much warmer planet “altruism and generosity would likely be blunted.”⁵² We can already see that emotional blunting on display from Arizona to Italy. Already, climate change is changing us, coarsening us. Each massive disaster seems to inspire less horror, fewer telethons. Media commentators speak of “compassion fatigue,” as if empathy, and not fossil fuels, was the finite resource.

As if to prove the point, after Hurricane Sandy devastated large parts of New York and New Jersey, the Koch-backed organization Americans for Prosperity (AFP) launched a campaign to block the federal aid package going to these states. “We need to suck it up and be responsible for taking care of ourselves,” said Steve Lonegan, then director of AFP’s New Jersey chapter.⁵³

* In early 2011, Joe Read, a newly elected representative to the Montana state legislature, made history by introducing the first bill to officially declare climate change a good thing. “Global warming is beneficial to the welfare and business climate of Montana,” the bill stated. Read explained, “Even if it does get warmer, we’re going to have a longer growing season. It could be very beneficial to the state of Montana. Why are we going to stop this progress?” The bill did not pass.

† In a telling development, the American Freedom Alliance hosted its own conference challenging the reality of climate change in Los Angeles in June 2011. Part of the Alliance’s stated mission is “to identify threats to Western civilization,” and it is known for its fearmongering about “the Islamic penetration of Europe” and similar supposed designs in the U.S. Meanwhile, one of the books on sale at the Heartland conference was *Going Green* by Chris Skates, a fictional “thriller” in which climate activists plot with Islamic terrorists to destroy America’s electricity grid.

And then there is Britain's *Daily Mail* newspaper. In the midst of the extraordinary 2014 winter floods, the tabloid ran a front-page headline asking its readers to sign a petition calling on the government "to divert some of the £11 billion a year spent on overseas aid to ease the suffering of British flood victims."⁵⁴ Within days, more than 200,000 people had signed onto the demand to cut foreign aid in favor of local disaster relief. Of course Britain—the nation that invented the coal-fired steam engine—has been emitting industrial levels of carbon for longer than any nation on earth and therefore bears a particularly great responsibility to increase, as opposed to claw back, foreign aid. But never mind that. Screw the poor. Suck it up. Everyone for themselves.

Unless we radically change course, these are the values that will rule our stormy future, even more than they already rule our present.

Coddling Conservatives

Some climate activists have attempted to sway deniers away from their hardened positions, arguing that delaying climate action will only make the government interventions required more extreme. The popular climate blogger Joe Romm, for instance, writes that "if you hate government intrusion into people's lives, you'd better stop catastrophic global warming, because nothing drives a country more towards activist government than scarcity and deprivation. . . . Only Big Government—which conservatives say they don't want—can relocate millions of citizens, build massive levees, ration crucial resources like water and arable land, mandate harsh and rapid reductions in certain kinds of energy—all of which will be inevitable if we don't act now."⁵⁵

It's true that catastrophic climate change would inflate the role of government to levels that would likely disturb most thinking people, whether left or right. And there are legitimate fears too of what some call "green fascism"—an environmental crisis so severe that it becomes the pretext for authoritarian forces to seize control in the name of restoring some kind of climate order. But it's also the case that there is no way to get cuts in emissions steep or rapid enough to avoid those catastrophic scenarios *without*

levels of government intervention that will never be acceptable to right-wing ideologues.

This was not always so. If governments, including in the U.S., had started cutting emissions back when the scientific consensus first solidified, the measures for avoiding catastrophic warming would not have been nearly so jarring to the reigning economic model. For instance, the first major international gathering to set specific targets for emission reductions was the World Conference on the Changing Atmosphere, held in Toronto in 1988, with more than three hundred scientists and policymakers from forty-six countries represented. The conference, which set the groundwork for the Rio Earth Summit, was a breakthrough, recommending that governments cut emissions by 20 percent below 1988 levels by 2005. "If we choose to take on this challenge," remarked one scientist in attendance, "it appears that we can slow the rate of change substantially, giving us time to develop mechanisms so that the cost to society and the damage to ecosystems can be minimized. We could alternatively close our eyes, hope for the best, and pay the cost when the bill comes due."⁵⁶

If we had heeded this advice and got serious about meeting that goal immediately after the 1992 signing of the U.N. climate convention in Rio, the world would have needed to reduce its carbon emissions by about 2 percent per year until 2005.⁵⁷ At that rate, wealthy countries could have much more comfortably started rolling out the technologies to replace fossil fuels, cutting carbon at home while helping to launch an ambitious green transition throughout the world. Since this was before the globalization juggernaut took hold, it would have created an opportunity for China and India and other fast-growing economies to battle poverty on low-carbon pathways. (Which was the stated goal of "sustainable development" as championed in Rio.)

Indeed this vision could have been built into the global trade architecture that would rise up in the early to mid-1990s. If we had continued to reduce our emissions at that pace we would have been on track for a completely de-carbonized global economy by mid-century.

But we didn't do any of those things. And as the famed climate scientist Michael Mann, director of the Penn State Earth System Science Center, puts it, "There's a huge procrastination penalty when it comes to emitting

carbon into the atmosphere”: the longer we wait, the more it builds up, the more dramatically we must change to reduce the risks of catastrophic warming. Kevin Anderson, deputy director of the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research, further explains: “Perhaps at the time of the 1992 Earth Summit, or even at the turn of the millennium, 2°C levels of mitigation could have been achieved through significant evolutionary changes within the political and economic hegemony. But climate change is a cumulative issue! Now, in 2013, we in high-emitting (post)industrial nations face a very different prospect. Our ongoing and collective carbon profligacy has squandered any opportunity for the ‘evolutionary change’ afforded by our earlier (and larger) 2°C carbon budget. Today, after two decades of bluff and lies, the remaining 2°C budget demands revolutionary change to the political and economic hegemony.”⁵⁸

Put a little more simply: for more than two decades, we kicked the can down the road. During that time, we also expanded the road from a two-lane carbon-spewing highway to a six-lane superhighway. That feat was accomplished in large part thanks to the radical and aggressive vision that called for the creation of a single global economy based on the rules of free market fundamentalism, the very rules incubated in the right-wing think tanks now at the forefront of climate change denial. There is a certain irony at work: it is the success of their own revolution that makes revolutionary levels of transformation to the market system now our best hope of avoiding climate chaos.

Some are advancing a different strategy to bring right-wingers back into the climate fold. Rather than trying to scare them with scenarios of interventionist governments if we procrastinate further, this camp argues that we need approaches to emission reduction that are less offensive to conservative values.

Yale’s Dan Kahan points out that while those who poll as highly “hierarchical” and “individualist” bridle at any mention of regulation, they tend to like big, centralized technologies that do not challenge their belief that humans can dominate nature. In one of his studies, Kahan and

his colleagues polled subjects on their views about climate change after showing some of them fake news stories. Some of the subjects were given a story about how global warming could be solved through “anti-pollution” measures. Others were given a story that held up nuclear power as the solution. Some were shown no story at all. The scientific facts about global warming were identical in all news stories. The researchers discovered that hard-core conservatives who received the nuclear solution story were more open to the scientific facts proving that humans are changing the climate. However, those who received the story about fighting pollution “were even more skeptical about these facts than were hierarchs and individualists in a control group that received no newspaper story.”⁵⁹

It’s not hard to figure out why. Nuclear is a heavy industrial technology, based on extraction, run in a corporatist manner, with long ties to the military-industrial complex. And as renowned psychiatrist and author Robert Jay Lifton has noted, no technology does more to confirm the notion that man has tamed nature than the ability to split the atom.⁶⁰

Based on this research, Kahan and others argue, environmentalists should sell climate action by playing up concerns about national security and emphasizing responses such as nuclear power and “geoengineering”—global-scale technological interventions that would attempt to reverse rapid warming by, for instance, blocking a portion of the sun’s rays, or by “fertilizing” the oceans so that they trap more carbon, among other untested, extraordinarily high-risk schemes. Kahan reasons that since climate change is perceived by many on the right as a gateway to dreaded anti-industry policies, the solution is “to remove what makes it threatening.” In a similar vein, Irina Feygina and John T. Jost, who have conducted parallel research at NYU, advise policymakers to package environmental action as being about protecting “our way of life” and a form of patriotism, something they revealingly call “system-sanctioned change.”⁶¹

This kind of advice has been enormously influential. For instance, the Breakthrough Institute—a think tank that specialized in attacking grassroots environmentalism for its supposed lack of “modernity”—is forever charting this self-styled middle path, pushing nuclear power, fracked natural gas, and genetically modified crops as climate solutions, while attacking renewable energy programs. And as we will see later on, some greens are even

warming up to geoengineering.⁶² Moreover, in the name of reaching across the aisle, green groups are constantly “reframing” climate action so that it is about pretty much anything other than preventing catastrophic warming to protect life on earth. Instead climate action is about all the things conservatives are supposed to care about more than that, from cutting off revenues to Arab states to reasserting American economic dominance over China.

The first problem with this strategy is that it doesn’t work: this has been the core messaging for many large U.S. green groups for five years (“Forget about climate change,” counsels Jonathan Foley, director of the Institute on the Environment at the University of Minnesota. “Do you love America?”⁶³) And as we have seen, conservative opposition to climate action has only hardened in this period.

The far more troubling problem with this approach is that rather than challenging the warped values fueling both disaster denialism and disaster capitalism, it actively reinforces those values. Nuclear power and geoengineering are not solutions to the ecological crisis; they are a doubling down on exactly the kind of reckless, short-term thinking that got us into this mess. Just as we spewed greenhouse gases into the atmosphere thinking that tomorrow would never come, both of these hugely high-risk technologies would create even more dangerous forms of waste, and neither has a discernible exit strategy (subjects that I will be exploring in greater depth later on). Hyper-patriotism, similarly, is an active barrier to coming up with any kind of global climate agreement, since it further pits countries against one another rather than encouraging them to cooperate. As for pitching climate action as a way to protect America’s high-consumerist “way of life”—that is either dishonest or delusional because a way of life based on the promise of infinite growth cannot be protected, least of all exported to every corner of the globe.

The Battle of Worldviews

I am well aware that all of this raises the question of whether I am doing the same thing as the deniers—rejecting possible solutions because they threaten my ideological worldview. As I outlined earlier, I have long been greatly concerned about the science of global warming—but I was propelled

into a deeper engagement with it partly because I realized it could be a catalyst for forms of social and economic justice in which I already believed.

But there are a few important differences to note. First, I am not asking anyone to take my word on the science; I think that all of us should take the word of 97 percent of climate scientists and their countless peer-reviewed articles, as well as every national academy of science in the world, not to mention establishment institutions like the World Bank and the International Energy Agency, all of which are telling us we are headed toward catastrophic levels of warming. Nor am I suggesting that the kind of equity-based responses to climate change that I favor are inevitable results of the science.

What I am saying is that the science forces us to choose how we want to respond. If we stay on the road we are on, we will get the big corporate, big military, big engineering responses to climate change—the world of a tiny group of big corporate winners and armies of locked-out losers that we have imagined in virtually every fictional account of our dystopic future, from *Mad Max* to *The Children of Men* to *The Hunger Games* to *Elysium*. Or we can choose to heed climate change’s planetary wake-up call and change course, steer away not just from the emissions cliff but from the logic that brought us careening to that precipice. Because what the “moderates” constantly trying to reframe climate action as something more palatable are really asking is: How can we create change so that the people responsible for the crisis do not feel threatened by the solutions? How, they ask, do you reassure members of a panicked, megalomaniacal elite that they are still masters of the universe, despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary?

The answer is: you don’t. You make sure you have enough people on your side to change the balance of power and take on those responsible, knowing that true populist movements always draw from both the left and the right. And rather than twisting yourself in knots trying to appease a lethal worldview, you set out to deliberately strengthen those values (“egalitarian” and “communitarian” as the cultural cognition studies cited here describe them) that are currently being vindicated, rather than refuted, by the laws of nature.

Culture, after all, is fluid. It has changed many times before and can change again. The delegates at the Heartland conference understand this, which is why they are so determined to suppress the mountain of evidence

proving that their worldview is a threat to life on earth. The task for the rest of us is to believe, based on that same evidence, that a very different worldview can be our salvation.

The Heartlanders understand that culture can shift quickly because they are part of a movement that did just that. “Economics are the method,” Margaret Thatcher said, “the object is to change the heart and soul.” It was a mission largely accomplished. To cite just one example, in 1966, a survey of U.S. college freshmen found that only about 44 percent of them said that making a lot of money was “very important” or “essential.” By 2013, the figure had jumped to 82 percent.⁶⁴

It’s enormously telling that as far back as 1998, when the American Geophysical Union (AGU) convened a series of focus groups designed to gauge attitudes toward global warming, it discovered that “Many respondents in our focus groups were convinced that the underlying cause of environmental problems (such as pollution and toxic waste) is a pervasive climate of rampant selfishness and greed, and since they see this moral deterioration to be irreversible, they feel that environmental problems are unsolvable.”⁶⁵

Moreover, a growing body of psychological and sociological research shows that the AGU respondents were exactly right: there is a direct and compelling relationship between the dominance of the values that are intimately tied to triumphant capitalism and the presence of anti-environment views and behaviors. While a great deal of research has demonstrated that having politically conservative or “hierarchical” views and a pro-industry slant makes one particularly likely to deny climate change, there is an even larger number of studies connecting materialistic values (and even free market ideology) to carelessness not just about climate change, but to a great many environmental risks. At Knox College in Illinois, psychologist Tim Kasser has been at the forefront of this work. “To the extent people prioritize values and goals such as achievement, money, power, status and image, they tend to hold more negative attitudes towards the environment, are less likely to engage in positive environmental behaviors, and are more likely to use natural resources unsustainably,” write Kasser and British environmental strategist Tom Crompton in their 2009 book, *Meeting Environmental Challenges: The Role of Human Identity*.⁶⁶

In other words, the culture that triumphed in our corporate age pits us

against the natural world. This could easily be a cause only for despair. But if there is a reason for social movements to exist, it is not to accept dominant values as fixed and unchangeable but to offer other ways to live—to wage, and win, a battle of cultural worldviews. That means laying out a vision of the world that competes directly with the one on harrowing display at the Heartland conference and in so many other parts of our culture, one that resonates with the majority of people on the planet because it is true: That we are not apart from nature but of it. That acting collectively for a greater good is not suspect, and that such common projects of mutual aid are responsible for our species’ greatest accomplishments. That greed must be disciplined and tempered by both rule and example. That poverty amidst plenty is unconscionable.

It also means defending those parts of our societies that already express these values outside of capitalism, whether it’s an embattled library, a public park, a student movement demanding free university tuition, or an immigrant rights movement fighting for dignity and more open borders. And most of all, it means continually drawing connections among these seemingly disparate struggles—asserting, for instance, that the logic that would cut pensions, food stamps, and health care before increasing taxes on the rich is the same logic that would blast the bedrock of the earth to get the last vapors of gas and the last drops of oil before making the shift to renewable energy.

Many are attempting to draw these connections and are expressing these alternative values in myriad ways. And yet a robust movement responding to the climate crisis is not emerging fast enough. Why? Why aren’t we, as a species, rising to our historical moment? Why are we so far letting “decade zero” slip away?

It’s rational for right-wing ideologues to deny climate change—to recognize it would be intellectually cataclysmic. But what is stopping so many who reject that ideology from demanding the kinds of powerful measures that the Heartlanders fear? Why aren’t liberal and left political parties around the world calling for an end to extreme energy extraction and full transitions to renewal and regeneration-based economies? Why isn’t climate change at the center of the progressive agenda, the burning basis for demanding a robust and reinvented commons, rather than an often for-

gotten footnote? Why do liberal media outlets still segregate stories about melting ice sheets in their “green” sections—next to viral videos of cuddly animals making unlikely friendships? Why are so many of us not doing the things that must be done to keep warming below catastrophic levels?

The short answer is that the deniers won, at least the first round. Not the battle over climate science—their influence in that arena is already waning. But the deniers, and the ideological movement from which they sprang, won the battle over which values would govern our societies. Their vision—that greed should guide us, that, to quote the late economist Milton Friedman, “the major error” was “to believe that it is possible to do good with other people’s money”—has dramatically remade our world over the last four decades, decimating virtually every countervailing power.⁶⁷ Extreme free-market ideology was locked in through the harsh policy conditions attached to much-needed loans issued by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. It shaped the model of export-led development that dotted the developing world with free trade zones. It was written into countless trade agreements. Not everyone was convinced by these arguments, not by a long shot. But too many tacitly accepted Thatcher’s dictum that there is no alternative.

Meanwhile, denigration of collective action and veneration of the profit motive have infiltrated virtually every government on the planet, every major media organization, every university, our very souls. As that American Geophysical Union survey indicated, somewhere inside each of us dwells a belief in their central lie—that we are nothing but selfish, greedy, self-gratification machines. And if we are that, then what hope do we have of taking on the grand, often difficult, collective work that will be required to save ourselves in time? This, without a doubt, is neoliberalism’s single most damaging legacy: the realization of its bleak vision has isolated us enough from one another that it became possible to convince us that we are not just incapable of self-preservation but fundamentally *not worth saving*.

Yet at the same time, many of us know the mirror that has been held up to us is profoundly distorted—that we are, in fact, a mess of contradictions, with our desire for self-gratification coexisting with deep compassion, our greed with empathy and solidarity. And as Rebecca Solnit vividly documents in her 2009 book, *A Paradise Built in Hell*, it is precisely when human-

itarian crises hit that these other, neglected values leap to the fore, whether it’s the incredible displays of international generosity after a massive earthquake or tsunami, or the way New Yorkers gathered to spontaneously meet and comfort one another after the 9/11 attacks. Just as the Heartlanders fear, the existential crisis that is climate change has the power to release these suppressed values on a global and sustained scale, to provide us with a chance for a mass jailbreak from the house that their ideology built—a structure already showing significant cracks and fissures.⁶⁸

But before that can happen, we need to take a much closer look at precisely how the legacy of market fundamentalism, and the much deeper cultural narratives on which it rests, still block critical, life-saving climate action on virtually every front. The green movement’s mantra that climate is not about left and right but “right and wrong” has gotten us nowhere. The traditional political left does not hold all the answers to this crisis. But there can be no question that the contemporary political right, and the triumphant ideology it represents, is a formidable barrier to progress.

As the next four chapters will show, the real reason we are failing to rise to the climate moment is because the actions required directly challenge our reigning economic paradigm (deregulated capitalism combined with public austerity), the stories on which Western cultures are founded (that we stand apart from nature and can outsmart its limits), as well as many of the activities that form our identities and define our communities (shopping, living virtually, shopping some more). They also spell extinction for the richest and most powerful industry the world has ever known—the oil and gas industry, which cannot survive in anything like its current form if we humans are to avoid our own extinction. In short, we have not responded to this challenge because we are locked in—politically, physically, and culturally. Only when we identify these chains do we have a chance of breaking free.