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Climate Obstruction: How Denial, Delay and Inaction are Heating the Planet

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Abstract

Climate Obstruction compiles a vast quantity of literature from diverse fields to posit "climate obstruction" as a comprehensive conceptual framework encompassing various manifestations of global climate denial, scepticism, and delay. Crafted in a captivating and accessible prose, this publication resonates with a broad audience, extending beyond the realms of climate change research and academia. It serves to elucidate the foundational rationales contributing to environmental and climate inaction.

- 1 *Climate Obstruction* opens with the prominent proclamation delivered by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres, in March 2022, that: “[w]e are sleepwalking to a climate catastrophe”.¹ This recognition and the underlying reasons for our continued inaction, or insufficient action, are the core themes this book grapples with. The authors propose the framework of climate *obstruction* to understand this insufficient, lack of, or at times even active push back against, climate and environmental action. In breaking down climate obstruction into primary, secondary and tertiary typologies, the authors highlight its complex and multi-faceted nature. Furthermore, these typologies tackle the “conceptual deadlock” of the term “climate denialism” which does not allow for a sophisticated understanding of the different, at times insidious, forms of climate obstruction.²
- 2 The book touches on a wide range of important topics that define the climate crisis and the obstructions to its mitigation. With the global threat of the far right becoming ever more imminent, Geert Wilders having come out victorious in the recent elections in the Netherlands, and Javier Milei becoming the next president of Argentina, the focal point remaining at this intersection between the far right and climate obstruction remains relevant. Exploring the far right climate denial machine also sheds light onto climate obstruction across the political spectrum.
- 3 This research lies within an established field of literature that the authors themselves heavily engage with. This ranges from the renowned German climate scientist Stefan Ramsdorf who identifies his own climate scepticism typology, to the influential *Merchants of Doubt* by Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, which uncovers parallels between climate denial and controversies and denial regarding issues such as tobacco

smoking and acid rain.³ *Climate Obstruction* also draws on a plethora of research linking the current era of neoliberal economics and policy making to the climate crisis, as well as the intersection between the far right and climate obstruction, drawing on Bernhard Forchtner’s own terrific research.⁴ However, at times this leads to an over-reliance on or misunderstanding of secondary material, for example when citing Jeremy Walker’s definition of neoliberal economics.⁵ The diverse backgrounds and research interests of the authors, ranging from sociology to technology and environmental studies, are represented and synergised effectively making for fascinating insights that bridge the gap between these different disciplines.

³ Stefan Rahmsdorf, “The Climate Sceptics”, in Hartmut Grassl, *Weather Catastrophes and Climate Change: Is There Still Hope for Us?* (Munich: Munich Re, 2005), 76–83; Stefan Rahmstorf and Urs Neu, “Klimawandel und CO₂: haben die ‘Skeptiker’ recht”. January 2004. Url: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/252535246_Klimawandel_und_CO2_haben_die_Skeptiker_recht; Naomi Oreskes, Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2012).

⁴ On Neoliberalism and the climate: Jeremy Walker, *More Heat than Life: The Tangled Roots of Ecology, Energy, and Economics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London: Verso, 2013); Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown* (London: Verso, 2013). On the far right and the climate: Bernhard Forchtner, *The Far Right and the Environment: Politics, Discourse and Communication*, 1st ed. Routledge Studies in Fascism and the Far Right (London: Routledge, 2019); Bernhard Forchtner, “Climate Change and the Far Right”, *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews. Climate Change*, vol. 10, n° 5, 2019; Andreas Malm, *White Skin, Black Fuel: On the Danger of Fossil Fascism* (London: Verso, 2021); Matthew Lockwood, “Right-Wing Populism and the Climate Change Agenda: Exploring the Linkages”, *Environmental Politics*, vol. 27, n° 4, 2018, 712–32.

⁵ Walker, *More Heat than Life* (cf. note 4). Ekberg et al. cite “in neoliberal economic models, the very notion of land and finitude was excluded as the economic system was understood as an autonomous system with little or no relation to underlying material factors.” This is an oversimplification of neoliberal thought, which at times did include finitude in its analysis which resulted in economic solutions to the climate crisis such as emissions trading. See Troy Vettese, “Limits and Cornucopianism: A History of Neo-Liberal Environmental Thought, 1920–2007” (Ph.D diss., New York University, 2019).

¹ Kristoffer Ekberg, Bernhard Forchtner, Martin Hultman, Kristi M. Jylhä, *Climate Obstruction: How Denial, Delay and Inaction Are Heating the Planet* (Abingdon and New York, NY: Routledge, 2023), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 8.

- 4 Since the climate crisis is such a far reaching and all-encompassing issue and the reasons for climate obstruction are manifold and, at times, complex, 145 pages are insufficient to deal with the entirety of the issue in great depth. Consequently, certain topics, such as the link between colonial exploitation and the climate crisis, are merely touched upon or explored insufficiently. Nevertheless, the book has been dutifully researched and stands on a bed of established literature that can be taken up for further reading. Moreover, the short format enables a vast quantity of information to be accessible, which the authors have done so engagingly. This allows the book, which tackles issues that should reach audiences beyond academia, to attract a wide-ranging audience, potentially even beyond those who aren't already interested in tackling the climate crisis.
- 5 The book begins with an overview of climate obstruction and its three typologies: primary obstruction pertaining to “wilful or ignorant activities” which are identified with “denialism and epistemic/evidence scepticism”.⁶ Secondary obstruction refers to arguments that do not deny anthropocentric climate change, yet do not see mitigation as a priority, in other words they “delay or forestall meaningful climate action”.⁷ Finally, tertiary obstruction denotes those processes by which often well-meaning individuals live their lives in denial – inaction, in other words, is regarded as a form of action.
- 6 The ensuing chapter delves into the historical trajectory of fossil capitalism and the pervasive influence of fossil fuels in our modern way of life. A comprehensive and engaging overview of how fossil capital became integral to our lifestyle unfolds, complemented by an examination of the historical roots of climate science and global warming, extending back to the 19th C. Until approximately the 1980s, evidence about anthropocentric climate change was rejected or construed favourably within the precincts of the fossil fuel industry and its advocates. *Climate*
- Obstruction* underscores the pivotal shift that occurred as the science proving the adverse nature of anthropocentric climate change became increasingly accessible and difficult to ignore. The fossil fuel industry consequentially adopted strategic measures to safeguard the continued utilisation of fossil fuels. Examples include the “incorporation of critique and myth-making” tactics such as producing scenario tools that ensured the industry’s continued existence, supported by arguments that they were guarantors of global welfare and stability as well as financing research that portrayed the necessity of the continued use of fossil fuel products.⁸ A key insight from this chapter is that climate obstruction is not “part of a diabolical plan”, but rather enabled by a system that relies on and is fuelled by fossil fuels.⁹
- The third chapter focuses on understanding the history of the climate denial machine, or the primary obstruction apparatus. From the late 1988-90 “actors with vested interests in fossil fuel production” began shaping and maintaining this machine to continue and further entrench fossil fuel dependency in modern society.¹⁰ Despite research undertaken by fossil fuel companies themselves, which proved the presence and adverse effects of anthropocentric climate change, these actors undertook various efforts to prevent such information from reaching the public and enabling this narrative from becoming mainstream.
- The authors begin by exploring primary obstruction, which included spreading distrust about climate science, the very science these actors were themselves involved with. Following this is a discussion of secondary obstruction which cultivates a narrative of market and technology centred optimism that promises to find solutions to the climate crisis through the marketisation of carbon emissions, climate engineering and “innovative”, “green” new technologies. Such secondary obstruction is arguably, at times, more

⁶ Ekberg et al., *Climate Obstruction*, 11 (cf. note 1).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

dangerous than primary obstruction, as it creates a false sense of success and complacency and consequential passivity about climate and environmental issues, not just within the private sector, but wider society as well, and appeals to individuals across the political spectrum.

9 As the authors explore later on in the chapter, many companies that perpetuate fossil fuel dependency, such as Daimler, Chrysler, and Texaco, inevitably had to publicly accept the reality of anthropocentric climate change in the 21st C. and thus sought other, less obvious methods of climate obstruction such as electric cars and carbon capture and storage. The book could have therefore benefitted from a deeper exploration of such market-centric, techno-optimistic greenwashing practices, rather than tracing the, rather well known, roots of climate denial propaganda back to the fossil fuel industry.¹¹ Similarly, the exploration of climate denial conspiracy theories and the fuelling of science scepticism and thus also the undermining of trust in climate science, is a familiar tale.¹² Nevertheless, this chapter does uncover some interesting insights in tracing the early opposition to climate change, in the 1980s, to Cold War ideology and the fear of socialism. The environmental movement was often linked to the latter – symbolised by its opponents as watermelons – “green on outside and red on the inside”.¹³

10 Climate change denial conspiracy theories and scepticism of science and scientific research is especially prevalent on the extremes of the political spectrum, the far right in particular, which is the focal point of the fourth chapter. The connection between the far right and climate denialism is an increasingly popular topic of research that the authors address diligently and comprehensively. The authors find that the inherent

structures, norms, and values that underlie far right ideology, aptly described as the “essentialisation of (what is actually socially constructed) inequality” lend themselves to climate denial or eco-fascism.¹⁴ This essentialisation justifies the far rights’ ideas of social hierarchy and therefore their racist, misogynistic and anti-democratic world views. This further underscores the notion of human superiority over nature and non-human life forms, a perspective that is prevalent across the political spectrum. Far right ideology and climate denialism is therefore mutually reinforcing, a symbiosis that the author’s highlight using the example of Walter Lüftl, an Austrian engineer, who shows a “direct line from his Holocaust denialism to the denial of climate change”.¹⁵

This denialism is also sustained by the populist notion that efforts to mitigate climate change are linked to a global, cosmopolitan perspective and are typically perceived as an “elite” initiative meant for the benefit of the elite. Perhaps with valid reasons, given the prevailing political landscape of neoliberalism that both generates new inequalities and sustains existing ones, individuals on the far right harbour concerns that the burden of climate change mitigation policies will disproportionately fall on the “common” or the “little” people, rather than on the “cosmopolitan elite”.¹⁶

12 Once again, the authors highlight how, less direct, or secondary, forms of obstruction are equally as harmful to climate change mitigation efforts. Some on the far right accept climate science and the fact that we are witnessing anthropocentric climate change, yet do not consider it a priority in policy. Tied in with anti-elite sentiment and an entrenched and far-reaching market-centrism, the far right contends that issues such as economic maintenance and job preservation far outweigh any commitment to addressing the climate crisis. This perspective is substantiated by arguments asserting that climate change

¹¹ See for example Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam-Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (London: Verso, 2016); Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy* (cf. note 4).

¹² See for example Oreskes, *Merchants of Doubt* (cf. note 3).

¹³ Ekberg et al., *Climate Obstruction*, 56 (cf. note 1); Michael Mann, *The Hockey Stick and the Climate Wars: Dispatches from the Front Lines* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2012).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 80.

mitigation poses threats to national sovereignty and the integrity of the nation-state in general. Another line of argumentation revolves around the perceived irrationality of climate change debates which allegedly perpetuate narratives of exaggeration, specifically “alarmism, hysteria and the so-called climate religion”.¹⁷ Notably, this narrative extends beyond the far right and has found resonance in various mainstream media outlets as well.

13 The chapter subsequently engages with the intersection of the far right, climate change and gender with much analytical rigour and insight. The authors find that “the very logic of fossil-fuel-driven industrial modernity is bound up with images of what it means to be a man”.¹⁸ This builds on existing research that deconstructs “industrial/breadwinner masculinities” and “petro masculinity”.¹⁹ Renewable energies, especially wind, are therefore considered to be more feminine, perpetuated by the fact that “wind is not bounded” and as such “is not longed for in the same way as resources which can be hoarded as national treasures” such as coal and oil.²⁰ The authors also briefly touch on the intersection between the far right, climate change and race, with the “natural environment” having “long served as a boundary mechanism, insisting on ‘our’ territory staying ‘pure’”.²¹ This feeds into eco-fascist arguments that are also on the rise, evidenced by horrific terror attacks such as those committed by Brenton Tarrant in 2019 who killed 51 people in Christchurch, New Zealand using eco-fascist reasoning.

14 The fifth chapter is the most interesting and innovative chapter that bridges the gap between climate science, sociology, and psychology. The authors endeavour to comprehend and unravel the “attitude-behaviour gap”, wherein individuals possess awareness of the issues related to and underlying climate change but fail to undertake

the requisite actions accordingly.²² Naturally, there is only so much an individual can do, a narrative that has been used to justify apathy and inaction. Nevertheless, certain lifestyle modifications, such as diminishing meat consumption and curtailing air travel, are within the reach of individuals across the Western world, yet a considerable number opt not to embrace them. This chapter effectively attempts to understand these contradictions.

One reason for this is a concern about the free-rider effect, i.e. people are “more prone to engaging in climate action if they can be sure that others also do their part”.²³ A further reason is cognitive dissonance, a state of “mental discomfort that people tend to ease” by “altering ones views and behaviours” to make sense of the contradictions they live by.²⁴ This state of discomfort can at times come from the knowledge that the climate is worsening, however believing that there aren’t sufficient resources to tackle this. A sense of efficacy of one’s actions is essential to motivate individuals and collectives to engage in climate issues and change their behaviour. However, on a deeper level, fossil fuels are deeply “intertwined with our comforts and customs” and shape what we understand to be the “good life” with global travel, cars and meat heavy dishes being synonymous with luxury and wealth.²⁵ We lack creativity and imagination of how this “good life” could be decoupled from fossil fuels.

The chapter then dives deep into the psychology and epistemology of climate obstruction, exploring both “top-down”, so from the outside, such as political communication, or “bottom-up”, so from within, for example personality dispositions, factors that shape our responses. A “top-down” example would be our reliance on climate scientists to provide information and clarify research results, which enables certain “fake experts” to hijack narratives and confuse public opinion. Furthermore, a general criticism

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 81.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 83.

²² *Ibid.*, 96.

²³ *Ibid.*, 99.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 101.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 99.

and scepticism of science and mistrust in political institutions can result in a general criticism, and potentially even rejection, of climate science. This is especially true when the social reforms required to mitigate the problems climate scientists bring forward are unpopular and/or require too much perceived “inconvenient” change. A further significant epistemological reason for climate obstruction is confirmation bias, in which individuals seek out or tend to trust sources and information that confirms their existing ideas and assumptions. Individuals who are sceptical of climate science, therefore seek out information that would confirm these beliefs.

17 The chapter then continues exploring the psychology of the far right and climate obstruction. Expanding on the themes of the previous chapter, the authors explore the presumed connection between climate policies and leftist or centre-left political parties, and the ways in which this may cause aversion to such policies amongst individuals with different political affiliations. The theme of gender is also explored from a psychological perspective. Identities, especially far right identities are prone to gender socialisation. Basing their argument on existing research, the authors find that “compared to a traditional upbringing of women, men are socialised to a lesser extent – or even punished for – being considerate, kind and sensitive” which could partially explain “why they tend to express less concern for the environment”.²⁶ A further crucial aspect of far right thinking that is explored from an epistemological standpoint is the thinking in and rationalisation of social hierarchies. This underlies the rationale behind the ongoing dominance of humans over nature and the lack of consideration for those most adversely affected by climate change and environmental degradation, namely “disadvantaged people, nonhuman animals and future generations”.²⁷ The far right generally identifies with “racial attitudes, opposition to immigration, anti-feminist views and other forms of exclusionary attitudes”.²⁸

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 105–6.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 107.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 108.

18 While the authors detail the global threat posed by the far right and how its psychologies contribute to a broader understanding of climate obstruction, this chapter leans excessively toward an exploration of the far right. Further investigations into the reasons why individuals on the political left or “ordinary” people across the political spectrum maintain certain lifestyle choices would provide insights into a phenomenon that remains perplexing to many dedicated to mitigating climate change. Nevertheless, in bridging the gap between psychology, climate science and climate policy, this chapter provides some innovative insights into climate obstruction.

19 The conclusion adeptly synthesises the diverse chapters, identifying “commonalities in the landscape of obstruction” that provide a coherent depiction of why efforts to mitigate the climate crisis are insufficient and suggests potential avenues for addressing this challenge.²⁹ The authors’ findings are succinctly encapsulated in Amitav Ghosh’s well-known statement that “it is easier to imagine an end to the world than an end to capitalism”.³⁰ The authors therefore advocate for a comprehensive systemic transformation that eliminates the centrality of fossil fuel dependency and fossil capitalism.

20 In the conclusion, the authors also address the crucial factor of colonial exploitation in understanding the climate crisis and climate obstruction – a factor that could have benefited from exploration earlier on in the book as it is deeply intertwined with ideas about social hierarchy and fossil dependency. While “green transitions” are underway in the developed world, the exploitation of the developing world persists, sometimes even to facilitate these very green transitions. For example, as the world moves towards electric cars and renewable grids, demand for lithium is wreaking havoc on countries such as Chile.³¹ Lithium mines in Chile occupy more than 78 square kilometres and the entire process uses

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 120.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 120–121.

³¹ Thea Riofrancos, “The Rush to ‘Go Electric’ Comes with a Hidden Cost: Destructive Lithium Mining”, *The Guardian*, 14 June 2021.

enormous quantities of water in an already parched environment.³² A report from *The Guardian* finds that, as a result, “freshwater is less accessible to the 18 indigenous Atacameño communities that live on the flat’s perimeter, and the habitats of species such as Andean flamingoes have been disrupted”.³³ This situation is “exacerbated by climate breakdown-induced drought and the effects of extracting and processing copper, of which Chile is the world’s top producer”.³⁴ The reliance on fossil fuels in the developed world is intricately linked with post-colonial exploitation, a phenomenon that is equally ingrained into the system.

- 21 The recommendations provided by the authors to address these obstacles are remarkably thorough and insightful, deserving communication to policymakers worldwide. Tackling primary obstruction involves tackling our fossil fuel dependencies and undertaking significant structural and systemic changes. Those accountable for most pollution, i.e. the “super rich” should also be required to cut their emissions the most.³⁵ Utilising and changing the law is also crucial, the authors cite the example of “including ecocide in the Rome Statute as a crime against humanity”.³⁶ Support and expansion of social movements such as *Extinction Rebellion* and *Ende Gelände* are further avenues for genuine climate change mitigation, initiatives that most individuals – even those that state concern about the climate crisis – do not engage in.
- 22 A further very important point the authors make, that builds on previous research, is the

importance of the ways in which climate change and climate change mitigation is communicated to the public. Rather than framing the issue and its solutions as requiring restriction and limitation, as the degrowth movement often does, environmental action should be framed in terms of the benefits and enrichment that it would bring to our lives. As the authors state: “acting on climate change means changing destructive practices ... to less destructive ones” which will naturally have a net positive effect on people’s lives and futures.³⁷ Furthermore, emphasising how “climate change affects our everyday lives in the present” rather than “simply pointing to an apocalyptic future” might also inspire more action and involvement in the environmental movement. The authors once again stress the need to deconstruct our fossil fuel dependent conception of the good life and the identities, values and norms that underlie this. Naturally, this is an incredibly difficult endeavour and will require out of the box thinking and new and creative imaginations of the future.

Overall, *Climate Obstruction*, is an engaging and important read that could appeal to individuals across disciplines and beyond academia. By connecting different bodies of literature, the authors uncover innovative insights into the reasons behind our inadequate efforts in mitigating climate change. Proposing the comprehensive framework of “climate obstruction” not only enhances comprehension of this issue but also opens avenues for its application in similar studies on the hindrances to and climate change mitigation.

³² *Id.*

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ Ekberg et al., *Climate Obstruction*, 124 (cf. note 1).

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 127.

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