

Democracy and Climate Change

David W. Orr¹

The rise of Donald Trump and the alt-right are not accidents, but rather a logical, if extreme, outcome of a half-century of neo-liberal economics and hard-right politics that energized a predictable undertow of fear, insecurity, resentment, and ignorance.² We would do well to remember that history and understand how it grew into a force strong enough to threaten democracy, civic order, quite possibly world peace, and increase the already substantial possibility of rapid climate change. Let's begin with you and me.

Over the past half-century, most environmentalists believed that if the public had the right information they would do the right thing. Our model was that of the rational actor who provided with accurate information would vote, purchase, and behave accordingly. In that quaint belief we wrote books, published articles, blogged, did ever more diligent research, created organizations and networks, and convened conferences in exotic places while mostly ignoring politics and political organizing especially in places now colored in red. All the while, the “anti” side, heavily funded by oil and mining companies, was taking over school boards, local governments, state houses, governorships, Congressional committees and Senate seats, the Courts, building up their own “news” networks, creating “astro-turf” groups, talking to millions of Americans

¹ Counselor to the President Oberlin College, author of [Dangerous Years: Climate Change, the Long Emergency, and the Way Forward](#) (Yale University Press, 2016), and [Down to the Wire: Confronting Climate Collapse](#) (Oxford University Press, 2009).

² Philosopher Richard Rorty in [Achieving Our Country](#) (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997, pp. 89-91) saw it coming.

on right-wing talk radio, and learning to use the internet to misinform and cultivate hatred.

The anti-history began with Richard Nixon's "southern strategy" in 1968 that used "dog whistle" racial prejudice to build a core Southern and rural constituency. Three years later Richmond attorney and later Supreme Justice Lewis Powell wrote the famous memo that launched a counterattack by corporations against labor unions, anti-war protesters, environmentalists, civil rights activists, and progressive politicians. They funded a network of organizations including the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, the American Enterprise Institute, and the Federalist Society to give respectability to discredited ideas from the era of Robber Barons and Social Darwinists. Ronald Reagan built on these organizations to create a movement around the slogan that "government is the problem" and thereby deflected attention away from corporate thievery, lavish tax cuts bestowed on the wealthy, and reduced spending for government agencies, infrastructure, and public programs. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990 deprived American politics of a dependably loathsome enemy in the form of "Godless Communism" that justified wars, secret interventions, and excessive military spending in the cause of "protecting freedom." Newt Gingrich stepped into the breach launching a "cultural war" that targeted fellow citizens as enemies of true Americans on grounds of race, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, and politics. That smokescreen of contrived vilification became the core of Fox "News" programming and conservative talk radio. The result was to divide the country while concealing the heist underway and the social, economic, and ecological wreckage. Supreme Court decisions, most egregiously

Citizens United opened the floodgates of unlimited dark money for conservative causes and candidates.

For those like Dick Cheney and other members of the Project for a New American Century who thought that the U.S. needed another Pearl Harbor kind of event to wake it to do its imperial duty, Osama bin Laden and 911 was a Godsend. History has seldom been more generous to a bad idea. The war on terrorism (a method) is without an end and seemingly without any limits. It has become an obsession now blended into the fabric of our lives, politics, national budgets, and foreign policy. It justifies torture of bodies, logic, and morality alike. The fear of terrorism is the cause of foolish wars and international subterfuge that are draining the treasury and exhausting an over-extended military. It supposedly justifies domestic surveillance, the loss of once guaranteed freedoms, and politics at the extreme edge. In the turbulent currents of our time fear of terrorism merged with the accumulated resentments—some real, some phony—that gave rise to the Tea Party movement funded in part by the Koch brothers who spend lavishly to divert attention from the nasty effects of their various fossil fuel enterprises.

With their support, and that of others similarly inclined, the Tea Party arrived on the scene as a well-funded, hard-core, anti-government, and eventually unmanageable movement, the last step in the path to the Trump Presidency. His rise to power is, again, no anomaly. It is rather a logical result of a series of decisions over several decades to reorient the Republican Party from a principled conservatism to a ruthless libertarianism and now to a hard right “America First” nationalism energized by a deep vein of fear, resentment, and anger. That transformation, however, is otherwise

inexplicable without radical changes in the Republican Party by which it became “an insurgent outlier—ideologically extreme; contemptuous of the inherited social and economic policy regime; scornful of compromise; unpersuaded by conventional understanding of facts, evidence, and science and dismissive of the legitimacy of its political opposition.”³ In Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson words: “it’s now tearing down a constitutional order that wasn’t designed to cope with a party like the modern GOP.”⁴ Nor the bizarre and unyielding narcissistic megalomania of a Donald Trump.

Denial of climate change and environmental deterioration is the core of the right wing cause. Environmental protection and the transition to a future without fossil fuels poses a mortal threat to the prevailing powers. Their counter-strategy is the same as that used by cigarette companies who knew that they could not win on the science but they could sow doubt for a time, bamboozle a drowsy public, and keep the ball in play. The delay was worth hundreds of billions of dollars for a handful of corporations; the cost was an impaired human future and untold death and suffering. A good attorney investigating corporate funding of climate denial—as the crime that it is—would know to follow the money and the muddy footprints go back to a few corporate offices and are attributable to the fact that selling fossil fuels is the most profitable business ever. There is no mystery in the climate denying behavior of EXXON-Mobil, BP, Chevron, and the Koch Brothers and none at all in the willingness of those who enjoy their largesse and sell their votes, services, and more for a chunk of it. All the rest is window dressing.

³ Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein, It’s Even Worse Than it Looks. New York: Basic Books, 2012, p. xiv.

⁴ Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson, American Amnesia. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1916, p. 240.

The strange election of 2016, in other words, was a half-century or more in the making. It required a substantial moral deterioration of one political party and the hollowing out of the other. The dénouement was a brazen, nation-wide con that deflected the understandable anger from growing inequality, de-industrialization, and the further enrichment of the already-too-rich onto Hillary Clinton with the help of the Director of the FBI, Vladimir Putin, and purveyors of fake news. It is the most sordid and surreal chapter in U.S. political history. The upshot is a depleted and demoralized Democratic party now largely confined to its blue bi-coastal enclaves and a few wealthier cities. Even so, a large majority of Americans voted in opposition to Donald Trump, and public opinion polls consistently show majorities of Americans in favor of progressive policies across the board. But the bridge that ought to connect public opinion with public policy is broken.

Differently said, American democracy is rather like a house suffering years of deferred maintenance: sagging floors, broken plumbing, roof leaks, and cracked windows and is now the site of a large and exuberant frat party. When the storm finally hit the unthinkable, but predictable, happened. A large percentage of the public had gone AWOL as the active and informed citizens that Thomas Jefferson and James Madison regarded as the bedrock of democracy. Even in the best of times, however, democracies are vulnerable to demagoguery, autocracy, hyper-factionalism, citizen incompetence, and war. James Madison himself thought the Republic he had helped to create might last a century at best. There are many reasons for pessimism and even cynicism about democracy but as Winston Churchill once famously noted all of the alternatives ever tried are even worse.

Democracy was born in an “empty” and slower agrarian world. We now live in a full, fast, fragile, technologically driven, urban world threatened by a destabilizing climate and political distemper of our own making. The question is whether democracy—real democracy—is still possible and whether it could rise to meet the challenges of our time. If so, what must be done to repair the decades of deterioration that led to Donald Trump.

The work to restore democracy will take place in difficult circumstances. A destabilizing climate will amplify every important political, economic, and social problem here and elsewhere. Prolonged instability typically invites demagoguery, scapegoating, and war. It is possible, then, that Donald Trump is “a preview of what’s to come . . . a test that the leaders of a major American political party are failing.”⁵ Trump’s base is “the civically disintegrated” left behind in the neo-liberal rush to globalization. Without radical changes, by which I mean the kind that get to the roots of our problems and lead to systemic change, democracy itself is in jeopardy.

Even so, it would be presumptuous to say what we must do and how to do it, but the starting point is to recognize the large forces of our time summarized in two curves that will determine much of the human prospect in this century and beyond. One is the declining costs of both renewable energy and energy efficiency; the other, the rising accumulation of CO₂ in the atmosphere. One is the harbinger of the solar-powered economy; the other has darker consequences. Both are true, but not equally important. One shows the acceleration of human ingenuity harnessed by alert governments and

⁵ Robinson Meyer, “Donald Trump is the First Demagogue of the Anthropocene,” *The Atlantic*, October 19, 2016.

robust markets; the other the accumulating consequences of our long and continuing dependence on fossil fuels and poor management of soils and forests. One demonstrates the power of technological innovation and entrepreneurial spirit; the other a gross failure of leadership. Each system, in varying degrees, is unpredictable with complex second and third order effects. The global transition to renewable energy, however, involves the well-known process of technological diffusion that, with luck, could cap the level of CO₂ before we cross the threshold of irreversible and catastrophic warming. On the other hand, the many effects of rising levels of heat-trapping gases in the atmosphere are not predictable because of the complexity of Earth systems, the time scales involved, and the possibility (or likelihood) of sudden and unpredictable changes as a warming climate lurches from one state to another.

Both curves represent intertwined, self-reinforcing, and complex patterns of cause and effect. Trends like rapid market penetration of electric cars, advances in affordable battery storage, and product dematerialization positively reinforce each other while also reducing costs of manufacturing and operation. Positive feedback loops manifest differently in the second curve. Rising CO₂ levels and the increasing temperature of Earth contributes to declining biodiversity, ocean acidification, and changes in Earth processes that reduce the capacity of ecosystems to absorb carbon and may trigger large releases of methane from boreal soils and seabeds that would further amplify warming.

Both the market system that drives technological diffusion and the climate system have time lags between cause and effect. The rapid deployment of solar and wind technologies is the result of investments in research and development made

decades ago as well as the shrinking time between the laboratory and market saturation. Earth systems are far more complex but show similar lags between cause and effect. Emissions from tail pipes and smokestacks, for example, take two to three decades to affect real-time weather and temperature, but that lag will diminish as oceans become more acidic and warmer.

The two curves also reveal different psychological reactions to present circumstances. Those focused on human ingenuity and the rapid deployment of renewable energy and the resulting economic opportunities, job growth, and investment returns are inclined thereby to be optimistic about the future. Those who focus on the implications of rising levels of heat-trapping gases for forests, agriculture, oceans, coastal cities, storms, ecologies, human health, biodiversity, and social systems are seldom so inclined. Between these two poles, opinions vary about how to motivate people to respond positively. On one side are those who believe that people can be motivated to act only when presented with a positive vision of jobs and opportunity—what Gus Speth calls “happy talk.” From the other perspective, however, the reality is not so happy. The effects of changes in Earth systems now underway will last hundreds to thousands of years as the climate shifts unpredictably from the Holocene to the Anthropocene and to a new and less agreeable steady state. But do we say this publicly? If so, how?

Between these two positions deeper differences exist. For example, those who prefer to limit the problem to issues of technology and economics avoid fundamental questions such as: Why has our response to decades of scientific warnings been so lethargic and inadequate? For what great cause have we put our descendants and the

hard-won gains of civilization in peril? How is climate change related to other issues of justice, fairness, war, peace, governance, social resilience, and the durability of civilization? Most people who consider themselves optimists are aware, I think, of such questions, but rather like a Doctor who only writes prescriptions and refuses to diagnose causes, they “do solutions, not problems.” That being so, the transition to a solar powered world requires little improvement in our institutions, politics, laws, economy, and national purposes, only a somewhat smarter version of capitalism. But the unwillingness to address larger issues, I think, increases the possibility that we may be inadvertently stumble into a future that is solar-powered, efficient, and sustainable in some fashion, but also dominated by corporate behemoths, undemocratic, highly inequitable, brittle, militarized, and fascist—a military-industrial-surveillance-entertainment state.

From the other perspective, climate change is a symptom of deeper problems rooted in culture, demographics, politics, economy, education, and even in our evolution. It has, in other words, a history, multiple causes, and links to many other problems. It is the most “wicked” of wicked problems and is not thereby reducible to the particulars of technology and prices, as important as these are. Accordingly, the path forward is rather like working a quadratic equation with multiple components that have to be solved correctly. Dealing with the underlying causes of rapid climate change will require system-scale responses but we are not very adept at managing or solving problems at this scale or avoiding dilemmas that are by definition not solvable. That is, I believe, the heart of our predicament.

We have reached an impasse. Barring catastrophe of one kind or another, trends suggest a transition to a solar-powered society is possible over the next half-century. Whether that will be sufficient to prevent a 1.5- 2°C warming thought to be the outer limit of “safety,” is unknown and likely unknowable until too late to change course. What we do know, however, is that in the foreseeable future we are committed to substantial and accelerating changes throughout the biosphere and that these will have massive long-term effects on rainfall, agriculture, coastal communities, human health, human psychology, social cohesion, economic stability, and will further roil international politics

Against that backdrop the two curves define very different views about the management of public affairs and protection of the global commons. Those focused primarily on the rapid growth of renewable energy believe that markets plus continually improving technology will be sufficient to navigate the transition to a solar powered world thereby solving many other problems and obviating the need for political reform. Accordingly, they are inclined to avoid the messy perplexities of governance, politics, economics, Constitutional law, corporate personhood, equity, and management of technology. On the other hand, it is implausible to me that growth-oriented capitalism on its own can be reformed and harmonized with Earth systems any time soon, if ever. Doing so would require development of traits contrary to the ethos of capitalism: foresight beyond the corporate balance sheet, a willingness to put the public interest above profit, collaboration beyond competition, honest pricing, a genuine concern for labor, fair distribution of costs-benefits-risks, and a precautionary approach to technological change.

The logical conclusion is that if we are serious about coming through the dangerous years of climate chaos intact as a robust, strong democracy—not just a solarized society—we will have to repair the cumulative damage to our political system and our collective capacity to foresee and solve problems before they grow into global catastrophes. In other words, the future of democracy and our hopes to stabilize the climate and build a decent future for humankind are the same causes. Our capacity to act effectively on the latter depends on restoring democracy. But as David Frum of *The Atlantic* writes “We are living through the most dangerous challenge to the free government of the United States that anyone alive has encountered.”⁶ History perhaps will show that to be an understatement. The outcome of the next four or eight years depends very much on what we, the people, do and how thoughtfully and courageously we do it. The defense of democracy transcends the conservative and liberal spectrum. It is the work of real patriots defending the cause of law, open, transparent, and accountable government. The kind of people who know that there is no such thing as “alternative facts,” only reality and that there is no other planet to which we might retreat if we destroy the Earth. The cause of democracy and that of reversing the ruin of Earth are one and the same.

⁶ David Frum, “How to Build an Autocracy,” *The Atlantic*, March, 2017, pp. 49-59.