

POPULISM AND CLIMATE: THE ENDGAME

We are at the end of times in the battle between the destructive nature of right-wing populism and the climate crisis. The fate of humanity and life on the planet rests on the outcome of the eternal battle between man over nature and profit over people. To succeed we explore the populist mindset, their aim, and ways to solve the climate crisis. For the climate movement, this means provoking conflict to bring about a point of crisis where meaningful decisions have to be made about the fate of polluters. It also means adopting some of the tactics of populists and the fossil fuel industry in the systematic deconstruction of the apparatus of pollution. After all, as Greta Thunberg, the climate activist stated, “Our house is on fire.”

Sanjeev Kumar*



TURKISH POLICY
QUARTERLY

Fall 2019

* Sanjeev Kumar is the Founder of Change Partnership.

The climate crisis is the greatest threat to humanity, but the actual fight of our lifetime is as old as humanity. It intertwines the eternal struggle against uninhibited greed, plunder, and hate. The main difference from the past is that today, we are perilously close to hard planetary boundaries. This is why solving the climate crisis, rather than muddling through, is the only option.

There is a marked difference between the populist leaders today and those of the past. The 1920s-30s witnessed the militaristic capture of governments and countries. The current generation focuses on what the historian Jan-Werner Muller describes as the weaponizing of “culture war, patronage and mass clientelism.”¹ The machinery of government is taken over to reward loyalists whilst sham democratic systems remain in place to avoid the perils of the military regimes that caused significant bloodshed and ended in failure. In essence, they all have radical, simple, yet violent solutions and visions on how to restore morality, order, and lost national pride. “Populist,” “totalitarian,” “strongmen,” “neoliberal” or just plain “conservative”—these labels are all equally transferable in describing the front men of corporations and ideologies that put profits and greed above people, humanity, and the ecosystem upon which all life depends.

Moreover, it is a grave mistake to assume the climate crisis is only about science and the environment. These merely provide context and vocabulary to what is essentially a need to dismantle the political, social, and economic power to reconstitute a new socio-economic order. Either the populists win and destroy everything, or the climate catastrophe is averted at the expense of the fossil fuel industry and its champions. There is no in-between, no place for a runner-up.

Is Annihilation Really on the Cards?

The uninhibited greed and profit-oriented mindset displayed by conservatives has a long track record of destruction. Leopards really can’t change their spots. For example, the oil and gas industry has been a substantial beneficiary of the Trump administration. The CEO of Exxon Mobil, Rex Tillerson, became the Secretary of State and left after gutting its workforce.² Another example is Scott Pruitt, the climate sceptic, who was appointed as the 14th Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency. As a fossil fuel lobbyist, he set about dismantling the entire US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Not only references to climate change were removed from the agency’s website, but a plan to halve the EPA workforce by

¹ Jan-Werner Muller, “Populism and the People,” *London Review of Books*, Vol. 41, No. 10 (May 2019).

² Zack Beauchamp, “Rex Tillerson has been fired. Experts say he did damage that could last a generation,” *Vox*, 13 March 2018, <https://www.vox.com/world/2018/3/13/16029526/rex-tillerson-fired-state-department>

2020 at a cost of 79 million dollars was also initiated under Pruitt's leadership.³ He left office with 13 federal investigations into abuse of power, such as receiving a free home from a fossil fuel company in Washington and successfully initiating the process for the US to leave the UN Paris Agreement.⁴

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Such disregard is not confined to energy and climate issues or even the US. Overfishing to the point of extinction is driven largely by the EU, which is responsible for consuming 70 percent of all fish caught in seas. This is one of the few areas where a global solution can be determined by the EU alone. Quotas are set for the Total Allowable Catch (TAC) after independent scientific assessments on the stock of a species. Every year, the European Commission produces a State of the Seas assessment and highlights the dangerous level of overfishing. The 2018 report shows that key fish stocks are plundered close to the point of extinction in the Mediterranean Sea. Only six out of 47 measured stocks are not overfished there, whilst in the Black Sea, five out of six stocks measured are dangerously overfished.⁵

Bolsanaro allowing the Amazon rainforest burn for so long, and opening it to more logging, or Trump restarting oil and gas drilling on US Federal Lands should not be a surprise then. These populists are following a global tune played by large fossil fuel interests. Above all, they are implementing a deregulation agenda which has been hardwired into the psychology of conservatives.

The Populist Mind

George Lakoff, the cognitive linguist, highlights “strict father” morality in his seminal work *Don't Think of an Elephant*, which he defines as the lens through which conservatives see the world.⁶ In this world, the father is all important. It is he who gives rewards and punishments. Life is harsh and its harshness is an essential law

³ Madison Park, “EPA removes climate change references from website, report says,” *CNN*, 8 December 2017, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/12/08/politics/epa-climate-change-references/index.html>; John O'Grady, “The \$79 million plan to gut EPA staff,” *The Hill*, 16 February 2018, <https://thehill.com/opinion/energy-environment/374167-the-79-million-plan-to-gut-epa-staff>

⁴ Joey Mendolia, “All of the ways Scott Pruitt changed energy policy,” *PBS News Hour*, 5 July 2018, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/all-of-the-ways-embattled-epa-chief-scott-pruitt-has-changed-energy-policy>

⁵ European Commission, “State of play of the Common Fisheries Policy and Consultation on the Fishing Opportunities for 2019,” COM (2018) 452 Final, 11 June 2018.

⁶ George Lakoff, *Don't Think of an Elephant!: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate--The Essential Guide for Progressives* (Vermont: Chelsea Green, 2004).

of nature which discerns the strong from the weak. The word of the father is final as is the word of God. In this hierarchy, men are more powerful than women and children. The poor, who lack the discipline and belief in hard work to become rich, come next. Foreigners, and those with different religions, languages, and beliefs are placed at the bottom of this hierarchy. This hierarchy is a reflection of a world where strength is the main parameter. Listen to every speech made by right-wing populists, and tick off how many times they evoke these themes.

Populists and their basic answers gain mass popularity during times of bust when the majority of citizens face financial hardships. In other words, moderate people tend towards easy solutions due to the fear of, or even actual loss of their social and economic standing. This was the case when millions of Germans voted for a different type of politics out of despair in the 1930s due to their livelihoods and savings being at risk from continued economic decline.⁷ Donald Trump captured the angst of forgotten working and middle-class white men during his election campaign. The same audience was targeted in the process leading up to Brexit in the UK. Both countries needed to gain these votes in order to implement their respective political agendas. Little did these people know that they would be second in line once the foreigners were gone. As long as people continue to blame foreigners or other minorities for their problems, they will continue to be exploited and plundered with those they blame.

The Populist Charade

Many populist leaders spend considerable time positioning themselves as ordinary “men of the people”, fighting against corrupt elites, but facts do not always back this up. Donald Trump inherited billions from his father whilst Nigel Farage, the son of a stock trader, made his fortune working as a stockbroker in the London Metals Exchange upon leaving an exclusive public school. This is the “sleight of hand” at the heart of conservative and right-wing populist movements. Their neoliberal conservative agenda has to hide behind notions of acting on behalf of the working man while their actual intention is to continuously plunder them. A glance at the lack of public healthcare in the US and the inability to replace it is the perfect epitaph for this predicament. For the masquerade to be complete, leaders must convince their supporters that it is actually progressives, the center, and center-left who are the “corrupt elites” undermining their success.⁸

One of the central pillars of the conservative/populist agenda around climate change is to remove barriers to corporate profits. Large polluting corporations have been

⁷ A. J. P. Taylor, *Origins of the Second World War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1961).

⁸ George Lakoff, “The Strict Father Is at the Core of Conservative Ideology and Values,” *Truthout*, 20 November 2014, <https://truthout.org/articles/the-strict-father-is-at-the-core-of-conservative-ideology-and-values/>

at the forefront of the assault on climate science since the 1950s. They used the playbook developed by the tobacco industry that undermined the scientific evidence on nicotine addiction and cancer for a very long time.⁹ The oil industry was one of the first to recognize the dire consequences of its products, and then spent decades distorting science and buying its associated politics.

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Richard Nixon’s administration recognized that carbon dioxide “very clearly is a problem” and “one that can seize the imagination of a person normally indifferent to projects of apocalyptic change” as early as 1969.¹⁰ Every US President since Nixon was aware of carbon dioxide’s consequences but did nothing meaningful either because they did not want to upset their interest groups, or because the political institutions in the US prevented them from doing so—as was the case with the Clinton administration.

And here lies the key issue with the climate crisis: it requires deep transformative change across the corporate structure of the global economy. The most powerful corporations, the ones that have shaped foreign policy interventions since the 1900s, cannot not be allowed to sell their core product in a carbon-constrained world. There is no way out for fossil interests other than to move to a different, and possibly less lucrative, business model.

Oil and gas corporations are the vanguard of support for conservative policies and politicians. From the “dark money” used to advocate for corporate interests in political parties from the likes of the Koch brothers to sponsorships of think-tanks, university programs, and even government agencies,¹¹ their money buys influence and presence. Even independent bodies such as the International Energy Agency (IEA) are littered with fossil fuel industry secondments and sponsored programs to promote fossil interest messages. On the one hand, the IEA calls for urgent investment in clean energy technologies to avert dangerous climate change, whilst on the other, IEA CEO Fatih Birol states, “Our message to the oil industry here in Houston

⁹ Erik Conway and Naomi Oreskes, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010).

¹⁰ Daniel Moynihan, *Memorandum for John Ehrlichman*, 17 September 1969, <https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/virtuallibrary/documents/jul10/56.pdf>

¹¹ Jane Meyer, *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right* (New York: Anchor Books, 2017).

is invest, invest, invest” at the 2017 CERA Week Conference, and adds that “The IEA does not foresee any coming peak in oil demand.”¹²

Why It Was So Easy to Beat the Climate Movement in the Past

The environment, climate, the health and nurturing of children, or the prospects of generations to come rarely register in the populist and conservative mindset. Whilst everything is God’s creation, these topics are there to be used and abused in the pursuit of success. However, once the climate movement evolves out of the political shackles of environmentalism, and matures into a sophisticated political force, it will be able to challenge the ideologies and people that are the driving forces behind extreme conservatism. Only then the story will change.

The climate debate has been easy to ward off for too long. Sowing the seeds of doubt around climate science and putting the solutions up for debate has been relatively easy for the fossil fuel industry. Even in August 2017, the BBC was still airing the views of notorious climate denier Nigel Lawson on one of its popular radio programs about the latest scientific analysis on climate change.¹³ On that note, in contrast with the skills of the corporations and conservatives, the climate movement has been poor in its campaign strategy. This is partly due to three structural problems it faced in the past and continues to face today.

Firstly, the entire climate change narrative, including the term itself, was set by the fossil fuel industry. Frank Lutz, a political consultant to the George W. Bush administration, was key in shifting the words “global warming” to “climate change”, as focus groups he ran found that this was less intimidating and did not lean towards “catastrophic connotations”, whilst the latter lent itself to a “more controllable and less emotional challenge.”¹⁴ In essence, they sucked the energy, life, and emotion out of the crisis by changing the words used to describe the crisis.

Secondly, the policy solutions that have been debated for the last 40 years were pigeonholed into various forms of carbon pricing and offsetting rather than hard regulations. The trade-off between carbon markets and carbon taxation still rages today. For example, days before Chancellor Merkel flew to New York to take part

¹² Gregg Muttitt, Adam Scott et al., “Off Track: How The International Energy Agency Guides Energy Decisions Towards Fossil Fuel Dependence and Climate Change,” *Oilchange International*, (2018), <http://priceofoil.org/content/uploads/2018/04/OFF-TRACK-the-IEA-Climate-Change.pdf>

¹³ Mark Sweney, “BBC Radio 4 broke accuracy rules in Nigel Lawson climate change interview,” *The Guardian*, 9 April 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/apr/09/bbc-radio-4-broke-impartiality-rules-in-nigel-lawson-climate-change-interview>

¹⁴ Frank Lutz, “The Environment: A cleaner, safer, healthier America,” *The Lutz Research Companies - Straight Talk*, (2003), <https://www.sourcewatch.org/images/4/45/LutzResearch.Memo.pdf>

in the UN's 2019 Global Climate Summit, the German government's solution to decarbonizing its transport emissions was to introduce the flimsiest measures aimed at preserving the status quo rather than driving change.¹⁵ This is woeful, considering that the German automotive sector has been found cheating regulations to protect its interests in diesel-powered internal combustion engines whilst many of its competitors are rapidly moving toward electric vehicles. Even evidence of black carbon particles from motor vehicles being found on the fetal side of placentas was not enough to sway the coalition government to be more demanding of its leading polluting industry.¹⁶

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Finally, much of the solutions to displace the fossil industry have only become recently available. The cost of wind and solar energy has plummeted over the last decade as European civil society forced governments to adapt binding renewable energy targets to 2020. Although these targets are to be missed, they have done enough to accelerate investment in these solutions to the point that many new projects no longer require direct subsidies, and in some locations are already more competitive than natural gas or coal. Vattenfall, the Swedish utility company, won a competitive tender to build two wind farms off the shore of the Netherlands with a combined capacity of 1.5 GW with zero public subsidy.¹⁷ Meanwhile, the cost of solar panels have collapsed 99 percent over the last decades to the point where they have cost parity with new build energy capacity in the EU.¹⁸ Tesla and a host of other electric vehicle providers have begun to shrink the market for surface transport. This trend will only accelerate. None of these solutions were realistic alternatives to the fossil

¹⁵ Kalina Oroschakoff and Joshua Posaner, “Germany announces multi-billion euro climate plan,” *Politico Brussels*, 19 September 2019, <https://www.politico.eu/article/german-government-announces-multi-billion-euro-plan-climate-change/>

¹⁶ Damian Carrington, “Air pollution particles found on fetal side of placentas – study,” *The Guardian*, 17 September 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/sep/17/air-pollution-particles-found-on-foetal-side-of-placentas-study#targetText=Air%20pollution%20particles%20have%20been,breathed%20in%20by%20the%20mother>

¹⁷ Michelle Froese, “Vattenfall proves offshore wind can be profitable without subsidies,” *Wind Power Engineering*, 30 July 2019, <https://www.windpowerengineering.com/vattenfall-proves-offshore-wind-can-be-profitable-without-subsidies/>

¹⁸ David Chandler, “Explaining the plummeting cost of solar power,” *MIT News*, 20 November 2018, <http://news.mit.edu/2018/explaining-dropping-solar-cost-1120>

industry 20 or 40 years ago. However, they are now. There are far fewer technological barriers holding back endeavors in clean technology today.

What Next?

The climate crisis has galvanized popular public opinion. It is hard to avoid the issue at any serious political debate. Democratic Party candidates for the 2020 US Presidential election all have climate policies. There was even a series of questions during televised hustings. Opinion polls undertaken by the Pew Center indicate that there is strong public support to address climate change. The most concerned voters are in Greece, where 90 percent of respondents put climate as the priority issue. Even in countries such as the US, over 50 percent of voters polled identified climate as the main threat to their peace and security.¹⁹

But being the topic of discussion is a long way from successfully solving the problem. This requires different pressure points as the current crop of politicians are adept only at sound bites and doing the least required while dressing it up as a major breakthrough.

Thanks to Extinction Rebellion and Greta Thunberg, the leader of the school strike movement, the language and rules of engagement have radically changed. The young and committed have come together to drive home their desire for change. Thunberg speaks with the clarity and political astuteness that climate scientists, and even civil society, does not have. Thunberg's statement, "I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I do every day. And then I want you to act..." shocked leaders at the World Economic Forum in Davos more so than the statements of most scientific leaders and politicians.²⁰ This was in part because Thunberg's solitary protest became a powerful global uprising of young people speaking the truth to power unlike any scientist or politician has in a generation. Meanwhile, Extinction Rebellion has locked down major cities and prepared ordinary people to be ready to face arrest for civil disobedience in name of the climate crisis.

The very first climate election took place in May 2019 to elect representatives to the European Parliament. The success of this is not measured in the record number of Green candidates who won their seats, but in the manner in which all mainstream political parties adopted climate action as a central priority. This is the first such election where climate was on the ballot against hate and climate denial, and it will not be the last.

¹⁹ Moira Fagan and Christine Huang, "A look at how people around the world view climate change," *Pew Research Center*, (2018), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/04/18/a-look-at-how-people-around-the-world-view-climate-change/>

²⁰ Greta Thunberg, "Our House is on Fire," World Economic Forum, 25 January 2019, available at: https://www.fridaysforfuture.org/greta-speeches#greta_speech_jan25_2019

It is essential to push for debates and decisions regarding climate change so that politicians recognize that failure to deliver will negatively impact their political future. The newly appointed European Commission President, Ursula Von Der Leyen, was forced to mainstream climate across her portfolio and compel all of her Commissioners to address the crisis. This is a start. In the coming months and years, it is crucial for the climate movement to adopt some of the “strict father” attitude to ruthlessly dismantle the fossil fuel industry’s ability to influence debates, people, and processes. This is the key to success, not compromise.