

Fighting the New Climate Change Denialism

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Today, climate change and its real effects on our world are undeniable. Confronted with this reality, even the US fossil fuel industry has changed tack: from supporting outright climate change deniers to influencing the inevitable policies to mitigate climate change. In her new book, *Overheated: How Capitalism Broke the Planet - And How We Fight Back*, Kate Aronoff describes how a new type of denialism is taking hold in the fossil fuel industry, a bid to ward off systemic change and protect the business model. As a staunch defender of the Green New Deal, she also aims to show how to fight back.

Olaf Bruns: Your book discusses how capitalism, and specifically its neoliberal variant, has first led us to push the planet's life support systems to the brink, and now keeps undercutting our very efforts to save them. This leads to a double question: How has capitalism broken the planet? And how does it scupper our current efforts to save it?

Kate Aronoff: Capitalism demands endless extraction: of land, of labour, and of people. It has this constant hunger to explore new frontiers for profit, which precedes any school of neoliberalism. In the case of the United States, we had an expansion into the continent of North America that was based on slaughter and genocide and a development of capitalism that was based on slavery. There are indeed particular faults of neo-liberalism, but there is also a broader dynamic of capitalism: fossil fuel capitalism develops as a logical consequence of capitalism's dynamic of boundless extraction.

But it is neoliberalism, in particular, that has destroyed our efforts to deal with the climate crisis. I describe in the book how James E. Hansen, a NASA scientist, gave his testimony before the US Congress back in 1988, exposing realities about climate change that are common knowledge today. But in the US, those facts were taken off the table by a 50, 60-year project on behalf of the neoliberal right. It started before the Reagan and Thatcher era in the 1980s, with the creation of institutions like the American Enterprise Institute and the Heritage Foundation, which undertook a very ambitious and elaborate project to take certain ideas out of the public discussion and present a radically new economic doctrine. It's crucial to understand the political project of neoliberalism, which is both to shrink the state but also to redistribute it among the institutions that protect capital and markets and insulate them from democracy.

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In parallel, fossil fuel companies have done a similar job to undermine climate science, before changing tack and concentrating on influencing climate policies.

Exactly. For so long, the climate conversation in the US – and we exported these ideas to Europe and Australia – has revolved around questions like whether the climate is actually changing or not, whether we *believe* in it or not, which is like asking if you believe in gravity! Fossil fuel companies have funded think tanks to cast doubt on the science of global warming.

But over the last 15 years, these companies have rather attempted to present themselves as good-faith partners in the debate about climate policy. We see this in a very particular way in the US, where companies such as Exxon were very aggressive in the past about, if not denying climate change or funding climate deniers, then ignoring the problem. But that has shifted. Now, companies like ExxonMobil and Chevron have started to behave a bit more like the European producers who were already present at the UN climate talks in the 1990s, looking to fight off carbon taxes in favour of a carbon pricing mechanism, to avoid any radical shifts in their business model.

And even the myth of “personal responsibility” as a way to combat climate change, which has been shown to be ineffective, was entirely cooked up by the industry.

Indeed! BP really taps into this, when, in the mid-2000s, they put this [carbon calculator](#) on their website that asks you whether you drive or bike to work, and tells you to turn off the lights when you leave the house. As if the responsibility of any individual person could be comparable to that of a multinational fossil fuel company, which is drilling for oil and warping politics around the globe to keep doing so.

But it also taps into something deeper – the very spine of neo-liberalism – which is this notion of individual responsibility, and individuals as the prime units by which society operates. Because, as Margaret Thatcher said, “there is no such thing as society” – there are only individuals! So, BP didn’t invent that framework out of nowhere, but it’s been a very convenient one for the fossil fuel industry to tap into, to shift their responsibility on to everyone else.

The book contains the line: “denialism is dead [the full-on denialism], long live denialism”. It’s a new denialism that denies what needs to be done now.

There are several facets to the new denialism. One is this idea of individual responsibility that fossil fuel companies are trying to propagate, but another is simply that fossil fuel companies can never be good-faith actors in the climate fight. As if they did not have a business model whose prime directive is to continue to dig up and burn as many fossil fuels as possible, which are killing the planet! That is denialism as it denies the basic fact that the business model of the fossil fuel industry is directly at odds with the future of humans on a habitable planet.

A further aspect is the scale of what needs to happen, to meet the very ambitious target of the Paris Agreement to keep warming to well below 2 degrees Celsius. The scale of what we need to do to achieve that is massive, including bringing vast amounts of activity onto the

electric grid: the combustion engines of cars and the heating systems that in many places run on natural gas for example. It's a thorough transformation of society that needs to happen to displace what has been built by industrial capitalism. There is simply no way to meet the 2-degrees target without radical changes in our use of fossil fuels.

A myth has developed over the last couple of years that individual companies can put out targets to get to net zero and that these very soft commitments will somehow be enough. Even if every major company, and every government, says in 2021 that they are going to get to net zero in 2050, it's denialism to think that that is going to happen. There is no evidence that it will!

At the level of policy, there is also a radical difference between cautiously incentivising and radically reining in.

Especially in the US, things are changing a bit: there is a move away from some of the market mechanisms that have been core to the conversation here for so long: that we could just tweak markets, send the right price signal, and that will encourage fossil fuel companies to give up fossil fuels like coal, oil, and gas. Or that at least that it will create a more competitive playing field for solar and wind. But that, as we now know, hasn't worked. The implementation of emissions trading systems, or carbon pricing, where it has happened, has not defeated the fossil fuel industry.

I've talked to climate scientists who say that perhaps 20 years ago there was a point at which we could have done these sorts of subtle market tweaks – a little carbon pricing here, a couple of more stringent regulations there – and that might have dealt with the problem. But now we have wasted far too much time in failing to deal with the problem, and we really need a very radical transformation.

Some see at least a mild transformation: against the backdrop of the failed austerity response to the 2008 crisis, and the more state-interventionist attempts to stem the Covid-19 crisis, many now argue that neoliberalism is dead. Do you agree?

Certainly not! The neoliberals of today are probably in the European Union. It's true that the US Republican Party is not anymore as doctrinaire neoliberal as it was under Ronald Reagan. And the Democrats, who were the originators of a lot of neoliberal policies in the US, are not as fond of neoliberalism as they were under Bill Clinton. So, there's some more acceptance that we can spend a lot of money, at least in a crisis, and some of the big neoliberal doctrines are fading away. But there is still this latent attachment to have markets doing the planning. Any talk of state planning is still very, very far off. This wasn't the case in the New Deal, nor during World War II. Talk of neo-liberalism being dead is unfortunately a bit premature.

But you also say we need to be realistic: we won't overthrow capitalism with the speed required to save the planet, so we'll have to do the job with it. But what would be your recipe to tame it?

I think in the long run, the logic of capitalism is really ill equipped for a sustainable society. But I also think that we will have capitalist markets that produce, for example, solar panels,

wind turbines, and electric cars, and which perform types of electrification. But what we can't do is to leave those sorts of planning decisions up to private markets. We have 30, 40 years of evidence that they will not plan a way out of the climate crisis.

We're not going to dismantle a 300-year-old system of production and distribution in time to solve the climate crisis, but there needs to be a very different relationship between states and the private sector in order to handle this crisis.

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You also have a strong warning about a future without this kind of radical transformation, where the people that are the hardest hit by climate change, whilst having contributed very little to it, increasingly lose out. You use the term “eco-apartheid”, what do you mean by this?

The simplest definition of eco-apartheid would be continuing the social relations we have today into a climate change future. All the racism and xenophobia that have been present in US history, but which have really surged in a very ugly way the last couple of years, are setting us up for a very scary next couple of decades! Eco-apartheid can sound like a scary dystopian future, but here in the US, Republicans have been carrying out eco-apartheid policies for a long time, for example by hardening our borders and passing regressive anti-immigration legislation.

There is no legal definition of “climate migrant” yet, and it's hard to draw those lines, but we are already seeing a militarised immigration system being enforced against people who are being forced by floods, fires, hurricanes, and drought to come to the US, people who, by most definitions, would qualify as climate migrants.

The US has such a massive footprint all over the world – not only a carbon footprint! As an empire, we have driven all kinds of regressive trade policies, certainly throughout South America. It is precisely our extraction of land and labour elsewhere that has made the US such a wealthy place. E. Tendayi Achiume (Faculty Director of the Institute for Human Rights at the University of California and special UN rapporteur on Racism), suggests that the US should offer citizenship to people who have been on the losing end of US politics. The US – among others – has played a big role in rendering parts of the planet uninhabitable and that uninhabitable stretch of the planet will grow immensely in the next several decades. At the very least, we should be offering a safe and habitable place to these people.

The second part of your book's subheading is: “how we fight back”, and you advocate the Green New Deal (GND). How does the EU's “Green Deal” measure up in comparison to the demands for a GND?

I haven't followed it as closely as some of your readers might have. But in Europe, you still see the idea of incentivising private capital as an approach to green finance, of which the

EU Green Deal is an example. There is still a reluctance to use state planning and a real deference to the private market to provide for decarbonisation and conduct the energy transition.

But I also understand why, from the US perspective, people are excited about something like the European Commission's "[Fit for 55](#)" plan. It's certainly more ambitious than anything we have here. The US has never had a comprehensive climate policy. So, it's obviously good to have governments aligned around the basic idea that climate policy can happen.

Turning to “how we fight back”: the Green New Deal has been around since at least 2008, and gained prominence when Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez introduced it to the US Congress. But what would be the essential building blocks of the GND?

On the one hand, the Green New Deal is a large-scale programme of public investment, like the New Deal in the US, that responds to a crisis with the scale and speed it requires. It's about massive investments in renewable energy, electrification, and the deep decarbonisation necessary to tackle the climate crisis.

It's a pretty big intervention, but it's desperately needed at a time when so much of the conversation about climate change has been about shrinking our individual carbon footprint. The GND says it's not about sacrifice but about redistributing the abundance! The US is the wealthiest country that has ever existed in the history of the world, and there is no shortage of cash around. The question is: how do we put this cash in the right places?

At the same time, the GND is also a political strategy. What happened after the Obama administration's answer to the 2008 crisis, which was similar to austerity? By 2016, Democrats had lost the House, the Senate, and the White House. So, what is needed is a political strategy to carry out the decarbonisation – which will outlast any presidential term – but which ensures majorities at the same time.

What the GND says is that climate policy needs to make a credible promise to improve people's lives: giving people jobs, making real investments in communities, as well as ensuring Democratic majorities for years and years to come.

It's the basic logic of the New Deal in the 1930s: if you give people stuff, they'll probably vote for you. But that idea got lost due to the triumph of neoliberalism over the course of the second half of the 20th century in the US. The GND is attempting to bring that very basic political logic back: making climate policy something which people have a reason to support

How does your conception of a “low-carbon populism” come in here, and how do you save the concept of populism, which has a bad reputation in the public debate – certainly in Europe?

It's about the basic realisation that politics happens from below. There are movements of people that are the engines of history. When I talk about low-carbon populism, I'm referring to a much more expansive definition of what a lower-carbon world could look like, including proposals like a four-day workweek, so that people have more time to undertake forms of

consumption that are usually less carbon-intensive than activities like online shopping.

Activities that people really enjoy tend to be low-carbon intensive. I'll speak for myself, but I can spend a long day in the park with friends drinking wine. Low-carbon populism is a vision for how this transition can actually make life better in ways that are not very utopian, but rather pretty common sense. It's a route to making our lives better, more pleasurable, and more leisurely!



Kate Aronoff is a staff writer and a climate reporter at the The New Republic. She is the author of several books, including *Overheated: How Capitalism Broke the Planet – And How We Fight Back* (2021).



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