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## Capitalism vs. the Climate

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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, DC, Marriott Hotel in late June, is this: "To what extent is this entire movement simply a green Trojan horse, whose belly is full with red Marxist socioeconomic doctrine?"

Here at the Heartland Institute's Sixth International Conference on Climate Change, 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.

Chris Horner, a senior fellow at the Competitive Enterprise Institute who specializes in harassing climate scientists with nuisance lawsuits and Freedom of Information fishing expeditions, 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 a right-wing Anderson Cooper, likes to invoke 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 that is to remove these nagging freedoms that keep getting in the way."

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 learn that Obama's campaign promise to support locally owned biofuels refineries was really about "green communitarianism," akin to the "Maoist" 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). And that environmentalists are like Aztec priests, sacrificing countless people to appease the gods and change the weather (Marc Morano, editor of the denialists' go-to website, ClimateDepot.com).

Most of all, however, 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 eco-socialism. As conference speaker Larry Bell succinctly puts it in his new 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."

Yes, sure, 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 adopting the organizational acronym ICCC, a mere one letter off from the world's leading authority on climate change, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). But the scientific theories presented here are old and long discredited. And no attempt is made to explain why each speaker seems to contradict the next. (Is there no warming, or is there warming but it's not a problem? And if there is no warming, then what's all this talk about sunspots causing temperatures to rise?)

In truth, several members of the mostly elderly audience seem to doze off while the temperature graphs are projected. They come to life only 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 baseball bats with which they will club environmentalists and climate scientists in the weeks and months to come. The talking points first 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 exit the mouths of hundreds of right-wing commentators and politicians—from Republican presidential candidates like Rick Perry and Michele Bachmann all the way down to county commissioners like Richard Rothschild. In an interview outside the sessions, Joseph Bast, president of the Heartland Institute, proudly takes credit for "thousands of articles and op-eds and speeches...that were informed by or motivated by somebody attending one of these conferences."

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 the strategy appears to be working. At the end of day one, Morano—whose claim to fame is having broken the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth story that sank John Kerry's 2004 presidential campaign—leads the gathering through a series of victory laps. Cap and trade: dead! Obama at the Copenhagen summit: failure! The climate movement: suicidal! He even projects a couple of quotes from climate activists beating up on themselves (as progressives do so well) and exhorts the audience to "celebrate!"

There were no balloons or confetti descending from the rafters, but there may as well have been.

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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 are so surprised by what has happened to perceptions about climate change over a span of just four years. A 2007 Harris poll found that 71 percent of Americans believed that the continued burning of fossil fuels would cause the climate to change. By 2009 the figure had dropped to 51 percent. In June 2011 the number of Americans who agreed was down to 44 percent—well under half the population. According to Scott Keeter, director of survey research at the Pew Research Center for People and the Press, this is "among the largest shifts over a short period of time seen in recent public opinion history."

Even more striking, this shift has occurred almost entirely at one end of the political spectrum. As recently as 2008 (the year Newt Gingrich did a climate change TV spot with Nancy Pelosi) the issue still had a veneer of bipartisan support in the United States. Those days are decidedly over. Today, 70–75 percent of self-identified Democrats and liberals believe humans are changing the climate—a level that has remained stable or risen slightly over the past decade. In sharp contrast, Republicans, particularly Tea Party members, have overwhelmingly chosen to reject the scientific consensus. In some regions, only about 20 percent of self-identified Republicans accept the science.

Equally significant has been a shift in emotional intensity. Climate change used to be something most everyone said they cared about—just not all that much. When Americans were asked to rank their political concerns in order of priority, climate change would reliably come in last.

But now there is a significant cohort of Republicans who care passionately, even obsessively, about climate change—though what they care about 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 worldview as low taxes, gun ownership and opposition to abortion. Many climate scientists report receiving death threats, as do authors of articles on subjects as seemingly innocuous as energy conservation. (As one letter writer put it to Stan Cox, author of a book critical of air-conditioning, “You can pry my thermostat out of my cold dead hands.”)

This culture-war intensity is the worst news of all, because when you challenge a person’s position on an issue core to his or her identity, facts and arguments are seen as little more than further attacks, easily deflected. (The deniers have even found a way to dismiss a new study confirming the reality of global warming that was partially funded by the Koch brothers, and led by a scientist sympathetic to the “skeptic” position.)

The effects of this emotional intensity have been on full display in the race to lead the Republican Party. Days into his presidential campaign, with his home state literally burning up with wildfires, Texas Governor Rick Perry delighted the base by declaring that climate scientists were manipulating data “so that they will have dollars rolling into their projects.” Meanwhile, the only candidate to consistently defend climate science, Jon Huntsman, was dead on arrival. And part of what has rescued Mitt Romney’s campaign has been his flight from earlier statements supporting the scientific consensus on climate change.

But the effects of the right-wing climate conspiracies reach far beyond the Republican Party. The Democrats have mostly gone mute on the subject, not wanting to alienate independents. And the media and culture industries have followed suit. Five years ago, celebrities were showing up at the Academy Awards in hybrids, *Vanity Fair* launched an annual green issue and, in 2007, the three major US networks ran 147 stories on climate change. No longer. In 2010 the networks ran just thirty-two climate change stories; limos are back in style at the Academy Awards; and the “annual” *Vanity Fair* green issue hasn’t been seen since 2008.

This uneasy silence has persisted through the end of the hottest decade in recorded history and yet another summer of freak natural disasters and record-breaking heat

worldwide. Meanwhile, the fossil fuel industry is rushing to make multibillion-dollar investments in new infrastructure to extract oil, natural gas and coal from some of the dirtiest and highest-risk sources on the continent (the \$7 billion Keystone XL pipeline being only the highest-profile example). In the Alberta tar sands, in the Beaufort Sea, in the gas fields of Pennsylvania and the coalfields of Wyoming and Montana, the industry is betting big that the climate movement is as good as dead.

If the carbon these projects are poised to suck out is released into the atmosphere, the chance of triggering catastrophic climate change will increase dramatically (mining the oil in the Alberta tar sands alone, says NASA's James Hansen, would be "essentially game over" for the climate).

All of this means that the climate movement needs to have one hell of a comeback. For this to happen, the left is going to have to learn from the right. Denialists gained traction by making climate about economics: action will destroy capitalism, they have claimed, killing jobs and sending prices soaring. But at a time when a growing number of people agree with the protesters at Occupy Wall Street, many of whom argue that capitalism-as-usual is itself the cause of lost jobs and debt slavery, there is a unique opportunity to seize the economic terrain from the right. This would require making a persuasive case that the real solutions to the climate crisis are also our best hope of building a much more enlightened economic system—one that closes deep inequalities, strengthens and transforms the public sphere, generates plentiful, dignified work and radically reins in corporate power. It would also require a shift away from the notion that climate action is just one issue on a laundry list of worthy causes vying for progressive attention. Just as climate denialism has become a core identity issue on the right, utterly entwined with defending current systems of power and wealth, the scientific reality of climate change must, for progressives, occupy a central place in a coherent narrative about the perils of unrestrained greed and the need for real alternatives.

Building such a transformative movement may not be as hard as it first appears. Indeed, if you ask the Heartlanders, climate change makes some kind of left-wing revolution virtually inevitable, which is precisely why they are so determined to deny its reality. Perhaps we should listen to their theories more closely—they might just understand something the left still doesn't get.

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The deniers did not decide that climate change is a left-wing conspiracy by uncovering some covert socialist plot. They arrived at this analysis by taking a hard look at what it would take to lower global emissions as drastically and as rapidly as climate science demands. They have concluded that this can be done only by radically reordering our economic and political systems in ways antithetical to their "free market" belief system. As British blogger and Heartland regular 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's 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."

Here's my inconvenient truth: they aren't wrong. 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. The heat-trapping gases released into the atmosphere through the burning of fossil fuels are already causing temperatures to increase. If we are not on a radically different energy path by the end of this decade, we are in for a world of pain.

But when it comes to the real-world 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 economic system, the crowd gathered at the Marriott Hotel may be in considerably less denial than a lot of professional environmentalists, the ones who paint a picture of global warming Armageddon, then assure us that we can avert catastrophe by buying “green” products and creating clever markets in pollution.

The fact that the earth’s atmosphere cannot safely absorb the amount of carbon we are pumping into it is a symptom of a much larger crisis, one born of the central fiction on which our economic model is based: that nature is limitless, that we will always be able to find more of what we need, and that if something runs out it can be seamlessly replaced by another resource that we can endlessly extract. But it is not just the atmosphere that we have exploited beyond its capacity to recover—we are doing the same to the oceans, to freshwater, to topsoil and to biodiversity. The expansionist, extractive mindset, which has so long governed our relationship to nature, is what the climate crisis calls into question so fundamentally. The abundance of scientific research showing we have pushed nature beyond its limits does not just demand green products and market-based solutions; it demands a new civilizational paradigm, one grounded not in dominance over nature but in respect for natural cycles of renewal—and acutely sensitive to natural limits, including the limits of human intelligence.

So in a way, Chris Horner was right when he told his fellow Heartlanders that climate change isn’t “the issue.” In fact, it isn’t an issue at all. Climate change is a message, one that is telling us that many of our culture’s most cherished ideas are no longer viable. These are profoundly challenging revelations for all of us raised on Enlightenment ideals of progress, unaccustomed to having our ambitions confined by natural boundaries. And this is true for the statist left as well as the neoliberal right.

While Heartlanders like to invoke the specter of communism to terrify Americans about climate action (Czech President Vaclav Klaus, a Heartland conference favorite, says that attempts to prevent global warming are akin to “the ambitions of communist central planners to control the entire society”), the reality is that Soviet-era state socialism was a disaster for the climate. It devoured resources with as much enthusiasm as capitalism, and spewed waste just as recklessly: before the fall of the Berlin Wall, Czechs and Russians had even higher carbon footprints per capita than their counterparts in Britain, Canada and Australia. And while some point to the dizzying expansion of China’s renewable energy programs to argue that only centrally controlled regimes can get the green job done, China’s command-and-control economy continues to be harnessed to wage an all-out war with nature, through massively disruptive mega-dams, superhighways and extraction-based energy projects, particularly coal.

It is true that responding to the climate threat requires strong government action at all levels. But real climate solutions are ones that steer these interventions to systematically disperse and devolve power and control to the community level, whether through

community-controlled renewable energy, local organic agriculture or transit systems genuinely accountable to their users.

Here is where the Heartlanders have good reason to be afraid: arriving at these new systems is going to require shredding the free-market ideology that has dominated the global economy for more than three decades. What follows is a quick-and-dirty look at what a serious climate agenda would mean in the following six arenas: public infrastructure, economic planning, corporate regulation, international trade, consumption and taxation. For hard-right ideologues like those gathered at the Heartland conference, the results are nothing short of intellectually cataclysmic.

## **1. Reviving and Reinventing the Public Sphere**

After years of recycling, carbon offsetting and light bulb changing, it is obvious that individual action will never be an adequate response to the climate crisis. Climate change is a collective problem, and it demands collective action. One of the key areas in which this collective action must take place is big-ticket investments designed to reduce our emissions on a mass scale. That means subways, streetcars and light-rail systems that are not only everywhere but affordable to everyone; energy-efficient affordable housing along those transit lines; smart electrical grids carrying renewable energy; and a massive research effort to ensure that we are using the best methods possible.

The private sector is ill suited to providing most of these services because they require large up-front investments and, if they are to be genuinely accessible to all, some very well may not be profitable. They are, however, decidedly in the public interest, which is why they should come from the public sector.

Traditionally, battles to protect the public sphere are cast as conflicts between irresponsible leftists who want to spend without limit and practical realists who understand that we are living beyond our economic means. But the gravity of the climate crisis cries out for a radically new conception of realism, as well as a very different understanding of limits. Government budget deficits are not nearly as dangerous as the deficits we have created in vital and complex natural systems. Changing our culture to respect those limits will require all of our collective muscle—to get ourselves off fossil fuels and to shore up communal infrastructure for the coming storms.

## **2. Remembering How to Plan**

In addition to reversing the thirty-year privatization trend, a serious response to the climate threat involves recovering an art that has been relentlessly vilified during these decades of market fundamentalism: planning. Lots and lots of planning. And not just at the national and international levels. Every community in the world needs a plan for how it is going to transition away from fossil fuels, what the Transition Town movement calls an “energy descent action plan.” In the cities and towns that have taken this responsibility seriously, the process has opened rare spaces for participatory democracy, with neighbors packing consultation meetings at city halls to share ideas about how to reorganize their communities to lower emissions and build in resilience for tough times ahead.

Climate change demands other forms of planning as well—particularly for workers whose jobs will become obsolete as we wean ourselves off fossil fuels. A few “green jobs” trainings aren’t enough. These workers need to know that real jobs will be waiting for them on the other side. That means bringing back the idea of planning our economies based on collective priorities rather than corporate profitability—giving laid-off employees of car plants and coal mines the tools and resources to create jobs, for example, with Cleveland’s worker-run green co-ops serving as a model.

Agriculture, too, will have to see a revival in planning if we are to address the triple crisis of soil erosion, extreme weather and dependence on fossil fuel inputs. Wes Jackson, the visionary founder of the Land Institute in Salina, Kansas, has been calling for “a fifty-year farm bill.” That’s the length of time he and his collaborators Wendell Berry and Fred Kirschenmann estimate it will take to conduct the research and put the infrastructure in place to replace many soil-depleting annual grain crops, grown in monocultures, with perennial crops, grown in polycultures. Since perennials don’t need to be replanted every year, their long roots do a much better job of storing scarce water, holding soil in place and sequestering carbon. Polycultures are also less vulnerable to pests and to being wiped out by extreme weather. Another bonus: this type of farming is much more labor intensive than industrial agriculture, which means that farming can once again be a substantial source of employment.

Outside the Heartland conference and like-minded gatherings, the return of planning is nothing to fear. We are not talking about a return to authoritarian socialism, after all, but a turn toward real democracy. The thirty-odd-year experiment in deregulated, Wild West economics is failing the vast majority of people around the world. These systemic failures are precisely why so many are in open revolt against their elites, demanding living wages and an end to corruption. Climate change doesn’t conflict with demands for a new kind of economy. Rather, it adds to them an existential imperative.

### **3. Reining in Corporations**

A key piece of the planning we must undertake involves the rapid re-regulation of the corporate sector. Much can be done with incentives: subsidies for renewable energy and responsible land stewardship, for instance. But we are also going to have to get back into the habit of barring outright dangerous and destructive behavior. That means getting in the way of corporations on multiple fronts, from imposing strict caps on the amount of carbon corporations can emit, to banning new coal-fired power plants, to cracking down on industrial feedlots, to shutting down dirty-energy extraction projects like the Alberta tar sands (starting with pipelines like Keystone XL that lock in expansion plans).

Only a very small sector of the population sees any restriction on corporate or consumer choice as leading down Hayek’s road to serfdom—and, not coincidentally, it is precisely this sector of the population that is at the forefront of climate change denial.

### **4. Relocalizing Production**

If strictly regulating corporations to respond to climate change sounds somewhat radical it’s because, since the beginning of the 1980s, it has been an article of faith that the role

of government is to get out of the way of the corporate sector—and nowhere more so than in the realm of international trade. The devastating impacts of free trade on manufacturing, local business and farming are well known. But perhaps the atmosphere has taken the hardest hit of all. The cargo ships, jumbo jets and heavy trucks that haul raw resources and finished products across the globe devour fossil fuels and spew greenhouse gases. And the cheap goods being produced—made to be replaced, almost never fixed—are consuming a huge range of other nonrenewable resources while producing far more waste than can be safely absorbed.

This model is so wasteful, in fact, that it cancels out the modest gains that have been made in reducing emissions many times over. For instance, the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* recently published a study of the emissions from industrialized countries that signed the Kyoto Protocol. It found that while they had stabilized, that was partly because international trade had allowed these countries to move their dirty production to places like China. The researchers concluded that the rise in emissions from goods produced in developing countries but consumed in industrialized ones was *six times* greater than the emissions savings of industrialized countries.

In an economy organized to respect natural limits, the use of energy-intensive long-haul transport would need to be rationed—reserved for those cases where goods cannot be produced locally or where local production is more carbon-intensive. (For example, growing food in greenhouses in cold parts of the United States is often more energy-intensive than growing it in the South and shipping it by light rail.)

Climate change does not demand an end to trade. But it does demand an end to the reckless form of “free trade” that governs every bilateral trade agreement as well as the World Trade Organization. This is more good news—for unemployed workers, for farmers unable to compete with cheap imports, for communities that have seen their manufacturers move offshore and their local businesses replaced with big boxes. But the challenge this poses to the capitalist project should not be underestimated: it represents the reversal of the thirty-year trend of removing every possible limit on corporate power.

## **5. Ending the Cult of Shopping**

The past three decades of free trade, deregulation and privatization were not only the result of greedy people wanting greater corporate profits. They were also a response to the “stagflation” of the 1970s, which created intense pressure to find new avenues for rapid economic growth. The threat was real: within our current economic model, a drop in production is by definition a crisis—a recession or, if deep enough, a depression, with all the desperation and hardship that these words imply.

This growth imperative is why conventional economists reliably approach the climate crisis by asking the question, How can we reduce emissions while maintaining robust GDP growth? The usual answer is “decoupling”—the idea that renewable energy and greater efficiencies will allow us to sever economic growth from its environmental impact. And “green growth” advocates like Thomas Friedman tell us that the process of developing new green technologies and installing green infrastructure can provide a



huge economic boost, sending GDP soaring and generating the wealth needed to “make America healthier, richer, more innovative, more productive, and more secure.”

But here is where things get complicated. There is a growing body of economic research on the conflict between economic growth and sound climate policy, led by ecological economist Herman Daly at the University of Maryland, as well as Peter Victor at York University, Tim Jackson of the University of Surrey and environmental law and policy expert Gus Speth. All raise serious questions about the feasibility of industrialized countries meeting the deep emissions cuts demanded by science (at least 80 percent below 1990 levels by 2050) while continuing to grow their economies at even today’s sluggish rates. As Victor and Jackson argue, greater efficiencies simply cannot keep up with the pace of growth, in part because greater efficiency is almost always accompanied by more consumption, reducing or even canceling out the gains (often called the “Jevons Paradox”). And so long as the savings resulting from greater energy and material efficiencies are simply plowed back into further exponential expansion of the economy, reduction in total emissions will be thwarted. As Jackson argues in *Prosperity Without Growth*, “Those who promote decoupling as an escape route from the dilemma of growth need to take a closer look at the historical evidence—and at the basic arithmetic of growth.”

The bottom line is that an ecological crisis that has its roots in the overconsumption of natural resources must be addressed not just by improving the efficiency of our economies but by reducing the amount of material stuff we produce and consume. Yet that idea is anathema to the large corporations that dominate the global economy, which are controlled by footloose investors who demand ever greater profits year after year. We are therefore caught in the untenable bind of, as Jackson puts it, “trash the system or crash the planet.”

The way out is to embrace a managed transition to another economic paradigm, using all the tools of planning discussed above. Growth would be reserved for parts of the world still pulling themselves out of poverty. Meanwhile, in the industrialized world, those sectors that are not governed by the drive for increased yearly profit (the public sector, co-ops, local businesses, nonprofits) would expand their share of overall economic activity, as would those sectors with minimal ecological impacts (such as the caregiving professions). A great many jobs could be created this way. But the role of the corporate sector, with its structural demand for increased sales and profits, would have to contract.

So when the Heartlanders react to evidence of human-induced climate change as if capitalism itself were coming under threat, it’s not because they are paranoid. It’s because they are paying attention.

## **6. Taxing the Rich and Filthy**

About now a sensible reader would be asking, How on earth are we going to pay for all this? The old answer would have been easy: we’ll grow our way out of it. Indeed, one of the major benefits of a growth-based economy for elites is that it allows them to constantly defer demands for social justice, claiming that if we keep growing the pie, eventually there will be enough for everyone. That was always a lie, as the current inequality crisis reveals, but in a world hitting multiple ecological limits, it is a nonstarter.

So the only way to finance a meaningful response to the ecological crisis is to go where the money is.

That means taxing carbon, as well as financial speculation. It means increasing taxes on corporations and the wealthy, cutting bloated military budgets and eliminating absurd subsidies to the fossil fuel industry. And governments will have to coordinate their responses so that corporations will have nowhere to hide (this kind of robust international regulatory architecture is what Heartlanders mean when they warn that climate change will usher in a sinister “world government”).

Most of all, however, we need to go after the profits of the corporations most responsible for getting us into this mess. The top five oil companies made \$900 billion in profits in the past decade; ExxonMobil alone can clear \$10 billion in profits in a single quarter. For years, these companies have pledged to use their profits to invest in a shift to renewable energy (BP’s “Beyond Petroleum” rebranding being the highest-profile example). But according to a study by the Center for American Progress, just 4 percent of the big five’s \$100 billion in combined 2008 profits went to “renewable and alternative energy ventures.” Instead, they continue to pour their profits into shareholder pockets, outrageous executive pay and new technologies designed to extract even dirtier and more dangerous fossil fuels. Plenty of money has also gone to paying lobbyists to beat back every piece of climate legislation that has reared its head, and to fund the denier movement gathered at the Marriott Hotel.

Just as tobacco companies have been obliged to pay the costs of helping people to quit smoking, and BP has had to pay for the cleanup in the Gulf of Mexico, it is high time for the “polluter pays” principle to be applied to climate change. Beyond higher taxes on polluters, governments will have to negotiate much higher royalty rates so that less fossil fuel extraction would raise more public revenue to pay for the shift to our postcarbon future (as well as the steep costs of climate change already upon us). Since corporations can be counted on to resist any new rules that cut into their profits, nationalization—the greatest free-market taboo of all—cannot be off the table.

When Heartlanders claim, as they so often do, that climate change is a plot to “redistribute wealth” and wage class war, these are the types of policies they most fear. They also understand that, once the reality of climate change is recognized, wealth will have to be transferred not just within wealthy countries but also from the rich countries whose emissions created the crisis to poorer ones that are on the front lines of its effects. Indeed, what makes conservatives (and plenty of liberals) so eager to bury the UN climate negotiations is that they have revived a postcolonial courage in parts of the developing world that many thought was gone for good. Armed with irrefutable scientific facts about who is responsible for global warming and who is suffering its effects first and worst, countries like Bolivia and Ecuador are attempting to shed the mantle of “debtor” thrust upon them by decades of International Monetary Fund and World Bank loans and are declaring themselves creditors—owed not just money and technology to cope with climate change but “atmospheric space” in which to develop.

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So let’s summarize. Responding to climate change requires that we break every rule in the free-market playbook and that we do so with great urgency. We will need to rebuild

the public sphere, reverse privatizations, relocalize large parts of economies, scale back overconsumption, bring back long-term planning, heavily regulate and tax corporations, maybe even nationalize some of them, cut military spending and recognize our debts to the global South. Of course, none of this has a hope in hell of happening unless it is accompanied by a massive, broad-based effort to radically reduce the influence that corporations have over the political process. That means, at a minimum, publicly funded elections and stripping corporations of their status as “people” under the law. In short, climate change supercharges the pre-existing case for virtually every progressive demand on the books, binding them into a coherent agenda based on a clear scientific imperative.

More than that, climate change implies the biggest political “I told you so” since Keynes predicted German backlash from the Treaty of Versailles. Marx wrote about capitalism’s “irreparable rift” with “the natural laws of life itself,” and many on the left have argued that an economic system built on unleashing the voracious appetites of capital would overwhelm the natural systems on which life depends. And of course indigenous peoples were issuing warnings about the dangers of disrespecting “Mother Earth” long before that. The fact that the airborne waste of industrial capitalism is causing the planet to warm, with potentially cataclysmic results, means that, well, the naysayers were right. And the people who said, “Hey, let’s get rid of all the rules and watch the magic happen” were disastrously, catastrophically wrong.

There is no joy in being right about something so terrifying. But for progressives, there is responsibility in it, because it means that our ideas—informed by indigenous teachings as well as by the failures of industrial state socialism—are more important than ever. It means that a green-left worldview, which rejects mere reformism and challenges the centrality of profit in our economy, offers humanity’s best hope of overcoming these overlapping crises.

But imagine, for a moment, how all of this looks to a guy like Heartland president Bast, who studied economics at the University of Chicago and described his personal calling to me as “freeing people from the tyranny of other people.” It looks like the end of the world. It’s not, of course. But it is, for all intents and purposes, the end of *his* world. Climate change detonates the ideological scaffolding on which contemporary conservatism rests. There is simply no way to square a belief system that vilifies collective action and venerates total market freedom with a problem that demands collective action on an unprecedented scale and a dramatic reining in of the market forces that created and are deepening the crisis.

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At the Heartland conference—where everyone from the Ayn Rand Institute to the Heritage Foundation has a table hawking books and pamphlets—these anxieties are close to the surface. Bast is forthcoming about the fact that Heartland’s campaign against climate science grew out of fear about the policies that the science would require. “When we look at this issue, we say, This is a recipe for massive increase in government.... 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.” This is a crucial point to

understand: it is not opposition to the scientific facts of climate change that drives denialists but rather opposition to the real-world implications of those facts.

What Bast is describing—albeit inadvertently—is a phenomenon receiving a great deal of attention these days from a growing subset of social scientists trying to explain the dramatic shifts in belief about climate change. Researchers with Yale’s Cultural Cognition Project have found that political/cultural worldview explains “individuals’ beliefs about global warming more powerfully than any other individual characteristic.”

Those 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. On the other hand, 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 get what we deserve) overwhelmingly reject the scientific consensus.

For example, among the segment of the US 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. Yale law professor Dan Kahan, the lead author on this study, attributes this tight correlation between “worldview” and acceptance of climate science to “cultural cognition.” This refers to the process by which all of us—regardless of political leanings—filter new information in ways designed to protect our “preferred vision of the good society.” As Kahan explained in *Nature*, “People find it disconcerting to believe that behaviour that they find noble is nevertheless detrimental to society, and behaviour 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 watch your worldview get shattered, a fact that was as true of die-hard Stalinists at the height of the purges as it is of libertarian climate deniers today.

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 true believers 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. We have these types on the Stalinist left, and they exist as well on the neo-Nazi right. By this point in history, free-market fundamentalists should be exiled to a similarly marginal status, left to fondle their copies of *Free to Choose* and *Atlas Shrugged* in obscurity. They are saved from this fate only because their ideas about minimal government, 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, and ExxonMobil.

This points to the limits of theories like “cultural cognition.” The deniers are doing more than protecting their cultural worldview—they are protecting powerful interests that stand to gain from muddying the waters of the climate debate. The ties between the deniers and those interests are well known and well documented. Heartland has received more than \$1 million from ExxonMobil together with foundations linked to the Koch brothers and Richard Mellon Scaife (possibly much more, but the think tank has stopped

publishing its donors' names, claiming the information was distracting from the "merits of our positions").

And 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 conference keynote, once told CNN that 40 percent of his consulting company's income comes from oil companies, and who knows how much of the rest comes from coal. A Greenpeace investigation into another one of the conference speakers, astrophysicist Willie Soon, found that since 2002, 100 percent of his new research grants had come from fossil fuel interests. And fossil fuel companies are not the only economic interests strongly motivated to undermine climate science. If solving this crisis requires the kinds of profound changes to the economic order that I have outlined, then every major corporation benefiting from loose regulation, free trade and low taxes has reason to fear.

With so much at stake, it should come as little surprise that climate deniers are, on the whole, those most invested in our highly unequal and dysfunctional economic status quo. One of the most interesting findings of the 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 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 Aaron McCright and Riley Dunlap (memorably titled "Cool Dudes") found that confident conservative white men, as a group, were almost six times as likely to believe climate change "will never happen" than the rest of the adults surveyed. McCright 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."

But deniers' relative economic and social privilege doesn't just give them more to lose from a new economic order; it gives them reason to be more sanguine about the risks of climate change in the first place. 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, whose bio describes him as a "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 the state'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 a devastating 2003 heat wave killed 14,000 of their people: "they discovered Walmart and air-conditioning."

Listening to these zingers as an estimated 13 million people in the Horn of Africa face starvation on parched land was deeply unsettling. What makes this callousness possible is the firm belief that if the deniers are wrong about climate change, a few degrees of warming isn't something wealthy people in industrialized countries have to worry 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.)

As for everyone else, well, they should stop looking for handouts and busy themselves getting unpoor. When I asked Michaels whether rich countries have a responsibility to help poor ones pay for costly adaptations to a warmer climate, he scoffed that there is no reason to give money to countries "because, for some reason, their political system is incapable of adapting." The real solution, he claimed, was more free trade.

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This is where the intersection between hard-right 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 in the developing world. Recognizing the threat posed by this empathy-exterminating mindset is a matter of great urgency, because climate change will test our moral character like little before. The US 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." These adaptations are what I worry about most.

How will we 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? Will we open our borders, recognizing that we created the crisis from which they are fleeing? Or will we build ever more high-tech fortresses and adopt ever more draconian antiimmigration laws? How will we deal with resource scarcity?

We know the answers already. The corporate quest for scarce resources will become more rapacious, more violent. Arable land in Africa will continue to be grabbed to provide food and fuel to wealthier nations. Drought and famine will continue to be used as a pretext to push genetically modified seeds, driving farmers further into debt. We will attempt to transcend peak oil and gas by using increasingly risky technologies to extract the last drops, turning ever larger swaths of our globe into sacrifice zones. We will fortify our borders and intervene in foreign conflicts over resources, or start those conflicts ourselves. "Free-market climate solutions," as they are called, will be a magnet for speculation, fraud and crony capitalism, as we are already seeing with carbon trading and the use of forests as carbon offsets. And as climate change begins to affect not just the poor but the wealthy as well, we will increasingly look for techno-fixes to turn down the temperature, with massive and unknowable risks.

As the world warms, the reigning ideology 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. 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 in predominately African-American cities like New Orleans.

In *The Shock Doctrine*, I explore how the right has systematically used crises—real and trumped up—to push through a brutal ideological agenda designed not to solve the problems that created the crises but rather to enrich elites. As the climate crisis begins to bite, it will be no exception. This is entirely predictable. Finding new ways to privatize the commons and to profit from disaster are what our current system is built to do. The process is already well under way.

The only wild card is whether some countervailing popular movement will step up to provide a viable alternative to this grim future. That means not just an alternative set of policy proposals but an alternative worldview to rival the one at the heart of the ecological crisis—this time, embedded in interdependence rather than hyper-individualism, reciprocity rather than dominance and cooperation rather than hierarchy.

Shifting cultural values is, admittedly, a tall order. It calls for the kind of ambitious vision that movements used to fight for a century ago, before everything was broken into single “issues” to be tackled by the appropriate sector of business-minded NGOs. Climate change is, in the words of the *Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change*, “the greatest example of market failure we have ever seen.” By all rights, this reality should be filling progressive sails with conviction, breathing new life and urgency into longstanding fights against everything from free trade to financial speculation to industrial agriculture to third-world debt, while elegantly weaving all these struggles into a coherent narrative about how to protect life on earth.

But that isn’t happening, at least not so far. It is a painful irony that while the Heartlanders are busily calling climate change a left-wing plot, most leftists have yet to realize that climate science has handed them the most powerful argument against capitalism since William Blake’s “dark Satanic Mills” (and, of course, those mills were the beginning of climate change). When demonstrators are cursing out the corruption of their governments and corporate elites in Athens, Madrid, Cairo, Madison and New York, climate change is often little more than a footnote, when it should be the coup de grâce.

Half of the problem is that progressives—their hands full with soaring unemployment and multiple wars—tend to assume that the big green groups have the climate issue covered. The other half is that many of those big green groups have avoided, with phobic precision, any serious debate on the blindingly obvious roots of the climate crisis: globalization, deregulation and contemporary capitalism’s quest for perpetual growth (the same forces that are responsible for the destruction of the rest of the economy). The result is that those taking on the failures of capitalism and those fighting for climate action remain two solitudes, with the small but valiant climate justice movement—drawing the connections between racism, inequality and environmental vulnerability—stringing up a few swaying bridges between them.

The right, meanwhile, has had a free hand to exploit the global economic crisis to cast climate action as a recipe for economic Armageddon, a surefire way to spike household costs and to block new, much-needed jobs drilling for oil and laying new pipelines. With virtually no loud voices offering a competing vision of how a new economic paradigm could provide a way out of both the economic and ecological crises, this fearmongering has had a ready audience.

Far from learning from past mistakes, a powerful faction in the environmental movement is pushing to go even further down the same disastrous road, arguing that the way to win on climate is to make the cause more palatable to conservative values. This can be heard from the studiously centrist Breakthrough Institute, which is calling for the movement to embrace industrial agriculture and nuclear power instead of organic farming and decentralized renewables. It can also be heard from several of the researchers studying the rise in climate denial. Some, like Yale's Kahan, point 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 confirm their belief that humans can dominate nature. So, he and others argue, environmentalists should start emphasizing responses such as nuclear power and geoengineering (deliberately intervening in the climate system to counteract global warming), as well as playing up concerns about national security.

The first problem with this strategy is that it doesn't work. For years, big green groups have framed climate action as a way to assert "energy security," while "free-market solutions" are virtually the only ones on the table in the United States. Meanwhile, denialism has soared. The more troubling problem with this approach, however, is that rather than challenging the warped values motivating denialism, it reinforces them. Nuclear power and geoengineering are not solutions to the ecological crisis; they are a doubling down on exactly the kind of short-term hubristic thinking that got us into this mess.

It is not the job of a transformative social movement to reassure members of a panicked, megalomaniacal elite that they are still masters of the universe—nor is it necessary. According to McCright, co-author of the "Cool Dudes" study, the most extreme, intractable climate deniers (many of them conservative white men) are a small minority of the US population—roughly 10 percent. True, this demographic is massively overrepresented in positions of power. But the solution to that problem is not for the majority of people to change their ideas and values. It is to attempt to change the culture so that this small but disproportionately influential minority—and the reckless worldview it represents—wields significantly less power.

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Some in the climate camp are pushing back hard against the appeasement strategy. Tim DeChristopher, serving a two-year jail sentence in Utah for disrupting a compromised auction of oil and gas leases, commented in May on the right-wing claim that climate action will upend the economy. "I believe we should embrace the charges," he told an interviewer. "No, we are not trying to disrupt the economy, but yes, we do want to turn it upside down. We should not try and hide our vision about what we want to change—of the healthy, just world that we wish to create. We are not looking for small shifts: we want a radical overhaul of our economy and society." He added, "I think once we start talking about it, we will find more allies than we expect."

When DeChristopher articulated this vision for a climate movement fused with one demanding deep economic transformation, it surely sounded to most like a pipe dream. But just five months later, with Occupy Wall Street chapters seizing squares and parks in hundreds of cities, it sounds prophetic. It turns out that a great many Americans had



been hungering for this kind of transformation on many fronts, from the practical to the spiritual.

Though climate change was something of an afterthought in the movement's early texts, an ecological consciousness was woven into OWS from the start—from the sophisticated “gray water” filtration system that uses dishwater to irrigate plants at Zuccotti Park, to the scrappy community garden planted at Occupy Portland. Occupy Boston's laptops and cellphones are powered by bicycle generators, and Occupy DC has installed solar panels. Meanwhile, the ultimate symbol of OWS—the human microphone—is nothing if not a postcarbon solution.

And new political connections are being made. The Rainforest Action Network, which has been targeting Bank of America for financing the coal industry, has made common cause with OWS activists taking aim at the bank over foreclosures. Anti-fracking activists have pointed out that the same economic model that is blasting the bedrock of the earth to keep the gas flowing is blasting the social bedrock to keep the profits flowing. And then there is the historic movement against the Keystone XL pipeline, which this fall has decisively yanked the climate movement out of the lobbyists' offices and into the streets (and jail cells). Anti-Keystone campaigners have noted that anyone concerned about the corporate takeover of democracy need look no further than the corrupt process that led the State Department to conclude that a pipeline carrying dirty tar sands oil across some of the most sensitive land in the country would have “limited adverse environmental impacts.” As 350.org's Phil Aroneanu put it, “If Wall Street is occupying President Obama's State Department and the halls of Congress, it's time for the people to occupy Wall Street.”

But these connections go beyond a shared critique of corporate power. As Occupiers ask themselves what kind of economy should be built to displace the one crashing all around us, many are finding inspiration in the network of green economic alternatives that has taken root over the past decade—in community-controlled renewable energy projects, in community-supported agriculture and farmers' markets, in economic localization initiatives that have brought main streets back to life, and in the co-op sector. Already a group at OWS is cooking up plans to launch the movement's first green workers' co-op (a printing press); local food activists have made the call to “Occupy the Food System!”; and November 20 is “Occupy Rooftops”—a coordinated effort to use crowd-sourcing to buy solar panels for community buildings.

Not only do these economic models create jobs and revive communities while reducing emissions; they do so in a way that systematically disperses power—the antithesis of an economy by and for the 1 percent. Omar Freilla, one of the founders of Green Worker Cooperatives in the South Bronx, told me that the experience in direct democracy that thousands are having in plazas and parks has been, for many, “like flexing a muscle you didn't know you had.” And, he says, now they want more democracy—not just at a meeting but also in their community planning and in their workplaces.

In other words, culture is rapidly shifting. And this is what truly sets the OWS moment apart. The Occupiers—holding signs that said GREED IS GROSS and I CARE ABOUT YOU—decided early on not to confine their protests to narrow policy demands. Instead, they took aim at the underlying values of rampant greed and individualism that created

the economic crisis, while embodying—in highly visible ways—radically different ways to treat one another and relate to the natural world.

This deliberate attempt to shift cultural values is not a distraction from the “real” struggles. In the rocky future we have already made inevitable, an unshakable belief in the equal rights of all people, and a capacity for deep compassion, will be the only things standing between humanity and barbarism. Climate change, by putting us on a firm deadline, can serve as the catalyst for precisely this profound social and ecological transformation.

Culture, after all, is fluid. It can change. It happens all the time. The delegates at the Heartland conference know 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.

[Naomi Klein](#)

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