

Climate Change: No Third Way for the Planet

Wednesday 17 October 2018, by [ARNOFF Kate](#) (Date first published: 15 May 2017).

An environmentalism that can actually save the planet must do battle with corporations. Mainstream environmental groups have done the opposite.

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One of the biggest problems with the neoliberal wings of the Democratic Party and the environmental movement is pretty simple: They both could kill us all.

For some time, the two tendencies have run parallel to one another. During the Reagan years, just before Bill Clinton began pushing for welfare reform and expanding the war on drugs, Fred Krupp, CEO of the Environmental Defense Fund, set out to chart his own “third way” for big greens. The “Third Stage,” as he called it, would swap the “relentlessly negative” tone of “polluter-pays” environmentalism for market-based approaches and partnerships with major corporations — fossil fuel companies included.

The strategy caught on, earning him the ears of both Bush administrations and Clinton. Green organizations’ staff in DC ballooned to help lobby and curry favor with politicians. All of a sudden, big business wasn’t the enemy anymore — they were the solution.

When Democrats and mainstream environmentalists tacked rightward in an effort to capture the center, they each lost touch not just with working people, but with the ability to imagine solutions of the scale needed to curb the greatest threat to human existence ever known, climate change. To avert the latter and fight the Trumpian right, each need to shake their enduring faith in the power of free markets.

Rather than Clinton-style market-friendly technocracy, we need an environmentalism that includes redistribution. It’s our only hope for digging out of this mess.

New Politics, No Solutions

Big greens didn’t shift right in a vacuum. Krupp’s pitch would be followed several years later by a similar one from the New Democrats, an extension of a shift that began in the 1970s.

“Stop trying to get elected for the right reasons,” conservative political consultant Dick Morris advised Bill Clinton in 1994. “Just try to get elected.” He would explain the approach at length for a PBS documentary years later:

“From the left, take the idea that we need day care and food supplements for people on welfare.

From the right, take the idea that they have to work for a living, and that there are time limits ... Get rid of the garbage of each position ... and move up to a third way. And that became a triangle, which was triangulation."

Triangulation would come to define the Democrats' strategy for the next several decades, just as the Third Stage of environmentalism would inform greens.

As Democrats endeavored to "end welfare as we know it," adopting the racist language of "superpredators" from the Right, greens worked with companies like Walmart and McDonalds on sustainability strategies — even as those same companies were facing down challenges from environmental justice advocates. By design, each warmed to the corporate world, embracing, as Ezra Klein would put it, "liberal ends through market means."

Environmentalists from the World Wildlife Fund to the Nature Conservancy cozied up to Republicans to craft corporate-friendly legislation. As Naomi Klein details in *This Changes Everything: Capitalism Versus the Climate*, some greens literally took to digging up fossil fuels directly.

The Third Stage and Third Way were far from mutually exclusive. Al Gore, Clinton's Vice President-turned-planetary crusader, has been among the loudest advocates for both. Gore has made a fortune since his tenure in the Oval Office as a sustainable investor. He was also among the first public luminaries to meet with Trump in the days after his election. Billionaire and former New York City Michael Bloomberg has had a market-friendly climate awakening as well, having just released a book cheerily titled *A Climate of Hope*.

Perhaps most infamously, the environmentalists' and the Democrats' Third Way tendencies found common ground in the doomed 2010 push for cap and trade, which would have allotted polluters a set number of credits denoting the quantity of greenhouse gasses (the "cap") they could spit into the atmosphere. The main body pushing for the bill was the US Climate Action Partnership, the primary members of which were the country's largest green groups.

With majorities in the House and Senate and a president recently elected on an enormous popular mandate, USCAP should have had no trouble passing climate legislation early on in Obama's first term. Instead, the bill imploded.

Its failure was thanks in no small part to Republican obstructionism and a well-funded disinformation campaign. But blame also fell squarely on the bill's advocates. Prioritizing getting a bill — any bill — through the legislature, USCAP members haggled behind closed doors with the GOP to eke out a compromise, prioritizing bipartisanship while abandoning both climate science and grassroots support.

From the jump, cap and trade was weighed down by a tangle of market-based incentives, ridden with outs for corporations to continue polluting. Explaining how the policy would bring down emissions was challenging enough. Convincing ordinary people why they should support it was even more of an uphill battle — not that the biggest organizations involved in pushing for cap-and-trade much cared.

The EDF worked tirelessly to bring big business into the fold. Through negotiations, the bill only got worse. Had it passed in its final form, Waxman-Markey would have restricted the EPA's authority to regulate carbon dioxide emissions — a goal now pursued by Trump's allies.

Why was the bill so terrible and the process of crafting it so inept? Analyzing the deal in a 2013 report, political sociologist Theda Skocpol issued a scathing critique of the organizations involved, with an eye to paths forward for greens and anyone else hoping to avert planetary-scale catastrophe.

“I find the global-warming movement to be tone-deaf to valid majority concerns about increased costs,” Skocpol summarizes. “Almost all families now use carbon-intensive forms of energy to light and warm their homes. Because these families have not seen real wage increases in decades, they are extremely sensitive to even modest price increases in life necessities.”

Technocratic demands like cap-and-trade, in other words, make it easy for the fossil fuel industry and the Right to paint climate change as a concern of elites, who can afford to drive hybrid cars, install solar panels on their homes, and bear the cost when corporations send regulatory fines downstream. Any politically viable climate policy will have to give working people a material stake in supporting it — not a fear that that they’ll be forced to shoulder its costs.

The Climate Is Already Great

The cap and trade debacle, following on the tails of the collapse of UN climate talks in Copenhagen the year prior, prompted a moment of reckoning for the climate movement. While even the most conservative of green groups remain communist specters to some on the Right, their allegiance to corporate interests — most egregiously the fossil fuel industry — has discredited the likes of the EDF and Nature Conservancy among the most dynamic parts of the climate movement. (Plenty of climate and environmental justice campaigners, rooted in communities dealing with the extractive industry’s toxic impacts, never trusted them in the first place.)

Compare such groups to 350.org, Friends of the Earth, and other confrontational environmentalist organizations that have strong track records of taking on oil tycoons, having developed strongly anti-corporate stances and campaigns since the advent of Occupy Wall Street and the fossil fuel divestment movement. No struggle seems to exemplify this more radical tendency better than those against the Keystone XL and Dakota Access pipelines, which, thanks largely to leadership from indigenous communities and communities along the pipelines’ routes, put the fossil fuel companies squarely in their aim.

Rather than cooperation between environmentalists and corporations, fights against Big Oil in the heartland have relied on deep and often difficult alliances between native tribes, ranchers, college students, and Beltway greens. Facing pressure from below, big green organizations came to rediscover an approach they had long shunned: militancy.

But even as its leading proponents have been relegated to the fringes of the climate movement, the Third Stage legacy has left a quieter, more pernicious footprint among environmentalists: A blind trust in the invisible hand’s ability to suck carbon out of the atmosphere.

Appropriately, Bloomberg articulates the position best. Coal plants, he wrote in the *New York Times* recently [1], “are closing because consumers are demanding energy from sources that don’t poison their air and water, and because energy companies are providing cleaner and cheaper alternatives ... no mandate from Washington is forcing these companies to act — just their own self-interest.”

As he and countless other headlines since the election have proclaimed, the momentum for clean energy and for climate action is too great for even Trump to stop. Investors and consumers have seen the light. Give them a level playing field, Bloomberg argues, and the invisible hand will sort the problem of climate change out for us. In other words, the climate is already great.

The reality is a bit harder to swallow.

It’s true that coal plants are closing, largely as a result of market forces. But driving that decline has

been an explosion in natural gas, the proliferation of which is hardly a sum positive for the planet. Despite impressive growth, renewables like solar and wind still only meet a tiny percentage of Americans' demand for electricity. Meanwhile, whatever piecemeal climate policy was created over the last four years is in the process of being systematically stripped away by the Trump administration.

The Affordable Care Act and Clean Power Plan — each on Trump's chopping block — could be seen as two sides of the same coin. Each are vitally needed, and could save millions of lives in the long-run. Yet both entrust government-created marketplaces to create solutions totally out of step with the crises they seek to address.

The Affordable Care Act will leave 28 million people uninsured by 2026. If enacted, the Clean Power Plan would cap emissions — in a best-case scenario — at levels far above the ones demanded by science.

Each have come under consistent attack from the Right and have sat firmly in the Trump administration's crosshairs since the inauguration. The ACA, however, has the benefit of having actually delivered some tangible benefit. When Congress threatened its "repeal and replacement" weeks back, stories emerged of people whose lives had been saved thanks to Obamacare. By contrast, the Clean Power Plan's now all-too-likely repeal has failed to evoke anywhere near the same kind of response.

Despite what might now be counted as two colossal failures, Democrats and big greens alike have continued clinging to market-based fixes. Though cap-and-trade has been deemed too toxic to pass, Beltway wonks have adopted a new climate cause célèbre: The carbon tax, which would put a price on polluters' emissions. Its backers now include the likes of Bernie Sanders, but one of its earliest supporters was none other than University of Chicago economist Milton Friedman.

As the "Put A Price On It" campaign website's URL blithely states, a carbon price is "*The Solution To Climate Change*," full stop. Its endorsers, the site boasts, include everyone from BP to ConocoPhillips to ExxonMobil CEO-cum-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. Within the White House, Steve Bannon and his allies have apparently taken to calling Goldman Sachs alum Gary Cohn "Carbon Tax Cohn" for his support of the policy.

Carbon pricing, per se, is an eminently reasonable and common-sense policy: Polluters should pay for what they pollute. Fortunately, its less dogmatic proponents — Sanders among them — see pricing as a piece of the climate puzzle rather than the whole thing. If there are conservatives willing to get behind it, so be it. But framing the carbon tax as a silver bullet for the planet's ills runs a deadly serious risk of obscuring how big the changes physics demands really are: Namely, sweeping transformations in nearly every sector of the economy, led by the state rather than the market, and a swift liquidation of the fossil fuel industry.

Decarbonization vs Trump

The technical term for this is "deep decarbonization," and a handful of climate scientists recently laid out a roadmap for what it should look like.

Starting in the 2020s, global carbon emissions need to be cut in half each decade until they reach zero by mid-century at the latest. In wealthy countries like the United States, combustion-powered cars should be phased out entirely by 2030. Several major cities should be carbon-neutral within the next fifteen years. Research into clean energy and negative emissions technologies needs to increase

by “an order of magnitude,” as massive public-works projects get underway to make huge swaths of the economy run off of electricity.

And that’s all just the tip of the iceberg. Nearly every solution required to scale back emissions within the timeline physics sets out runs counter to the fossil fuel industry’s modus operandi: To dig up as many fossil fuels as possible and ensure they are burned.

The sheer scale and speed of the transition is almost mind-numbing and totally out of step with reigning economic dogmas. As the hardly leftist consultancy PriceWaterHouse Coopers has put it, “The only way to avoid the pessimistic scenarios [of global warming] will be radical transformations in the ways the global economy currently functions.”

The biggest flaw of the market-as-panacea model of climate action, then, isn’t that it’s wed to a set of wrongheaded neoliberal beliefs about how the world works. It’s that it could be leading human civilization toward an untimely end.

Thankfully, climate solutions — considered in earnest — could present the Left’s biggest opportunity yet to transform America’s political economy. And they’re ready made for populist times.

Physics practically spells it out for us. In a panel from March, discussing climate change in the Trump era, climate scientist Kevin Anderson responded to a fellow panelist’s Bloomberg-esque optimism with a surprisingly hopeful message:

“I think people voted for Trump because between the two he was a clear alternative, and this group wanted to kick back against a system that had not cared about them for a long time...If you are genuinely serious about shifting to a low-carbon society within the timeframe we have, then it is an absolute agenda for jobs. You are guaranteeing full employment for thirty years if we think climate change is a serious issue. If we don’t, we can carry on with structural unemployment. Whether it’s building renewables, retrofitting our houses or electrifying our infrastructure, across the board we have thirty years of full employment to deliver on that. So you could rightly start to think of the concern that this group [of Trump voters] rightly has had—whether in the states or the UK—those concerns align quite well with a genuine commitment and agenda for delivering on the Paris 20C commitment.”

Simply put, voters abandoned by years of centrist, neoliberal governments are rebelling against them. States run by Trump, post-Brexit British Tories, and France’s National Front present formidable barriers to climate action in some of the world’s biggest economies. Curbing emissions means removing them from power. The only way to do that is to abandon the neoliberal politics now collapsing in on themselves on both sides of the Atlantic.

Those raising a middle finger to the political establishment want an alternative. Serious climate solutions could provide just that.

Democrats’ fixation on technocratic, market-based fixes has led them to desert vast swaths of the country. Greens have happily followed suit. Disturbingly, it has also made it almost impossible to imagine the kind of funding and state control over private companies needed to avert dystopia.

The results of third-way politics dominance have already been disastrous. It delivered Trump to the Oval Office and with him, the most treacherous terrain yet for climate action. If the fossil fuel industry’s operating logic is at odds with a livable future, so too are the political philosophies of people like the Clintons.

Voters shunted by decades of neoliberal governance are demanding something different, and the

Right have been the only ones willing to step in. While the climate has historically been a blind spot for progressives, the sheer scale of the crisis we're faced with makes redistributive solutions objectively reasonable. Wedding those to legislative and direct action campaigns and electoral fights might just hold the key to wresting power away from the Right. We might save the world in the process.

Given the political dynamics of 2017, doubling down on policies like a revenue-neutral carbon tax now would be the equivalent of running Hillary Clinton in 2020. We can do better. With disaster and authoritarianism looming, there really is no alternative.

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P.S.

- Jacobin, 05.10.2017:
<https://jacobinmag.com/2017/05/third-way-environment-third-stage-environmental-defense-fund-neoliberalism>
 - Kate Aronoff is a writing fellow at In These Times.
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Footnotes

[1] <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/31/opinion/climate-progress-with-or-without-trump.html?action=click&contentCollection=Opinion&module=RelatedCoverage®ion=EndOfArticle&pgtype=article>