



Ending climate change requires the end of capitalism Have we got the stomach for it?

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sink at this with a total rethink of our relationship to
ownership, work and capital

"Even in sinister times of post-truth, some truth might dawn"
JG

Climate change activism is increasingly the domain of the young, such as 16-year-old Greta Thunberg, the unlikely face of the school strike for climate movement, which has seen many thousands of children walk out of school to demand that their parents' generation takes responsibility for leaving them a planet to live on. In comparison, the existing political establishment looks more and more like an impediment to change. The consequences of global warming have moved from the merely theoretical and predicted to observable reality over the past few years, but this has not been matched by an uptick in urgency. The need to keep the wheels of capitalism well-oiled takes precedence even against a backdrop of fires, floods and hurricanes.

Today's children, as they become more politically aware, will be much more radical than their parents, simply because there will be no other choice for them. This emergent radicalism is already taking people by surprise. The Green New Deal (GND), a term presently most associated with 29-year-old US representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, has provoked a wildly unhinged backlash from the "pro free market" wing, who argue that it's a Trojan horse, nothing more than an attempt to piggyback Marxism onto the back of climate legislation.

The criticism feels ridiculous. Partly because the GND is far from truly radical and already represents a compromise solution, but mainly because the radical economics isn't a hidden clause, but a headline feature. Climate change is the result of our current economic and industrial system. GND-style proposals marry sweeping environmental policy changes with broader socialist reforms because the level of disruption required to keep us at a temperature anywhere below "absolutely catastrophic" is fundamentally, on a deep structural level, incompatible with the status quo.

Right now we can, with a massive investment of effort by 2030, just about keep the warming level below 1.5C. This is "bad, but manageable" territory. Failing to put that effort in sees the world crossing more severe temperature barriers that would lead to outcomes like ecosystem collapse, ocean acidification, mass desertification, and coastal cities being flooded into inhabitability.

We will simply have to throw the kitchen sink at this. Policy tweaks such as a carbon tax won't do it. We need to fundamentally re-evaluate our relationship to ownership, work and capital. The impact of a dramatic reconfiguration of the industrial economy require similarly large changes to the welfare state. Basic incomes, large-scale public works programmes, everything has to be on the table to ensure that the oncoming system shocks do not leave vast swathes of the global population starving and destitute. Perhaps even more fundamentally, we cannot continue to treat the welfare system as a tool for disciplining the supposedly idle underclasses. Our system must be reformed with a more humane view of worklessness, poverty and migration than we have now.

Unfortunately for our children, the people they have to convince of all this are the people who have done very well out of this system, and are powerfully incentivized to deny that it is all that bad. Already, Joke Schauvliege, a Belgian environment minister, has been forced to resign after falsely claiming that she had been told by Belgian state security

services that “ghosts” behind the scenes were behind demonstrations in Belgium.

This conspiracism of the elite, these claims that genuine mass movement can’t possibly really exist and must be in some way being guided by agents provocateurs, is just one of the ways in which those currently running things have resorted to a kind of political gaslighting in an attempt to maintain their grip on power.

Gaslighting is a term I don’t use lightly, because it describes a genuine form of emotional abuse, where an abuser will deny reality in an attempt to get their victim to literally doubt their own sanity, and this should not be diluted by overuse. Yet I struggle to think of another word that adequately sums up the way in which “sensible” adults are doubling down on their tactic of manufacturing a political reality which bears no relationship to the world we see around us. It’s the Marxism of Groucho rather than Karl: “Who are you going to believe? The serious political professionals or your own lying eyes?”

US Senator Dianne Feinstein’s meeting with schoolchildren petitioning her to take action over the issue went viral because of the way she condescended to them for, basically, asking her to leave them a planet behind to live on. “I’ve been doing this for 30 years,” she said, “I know what I’m doing.” The obvious response is, of course, that messing something up for 30 years is quite long enough, thanks. Long tenure without results is not the same thing as expertise.

This is a tough and bitter pill to swallow for the political professionals whose feet are firmly under the table. It is increasingly obvious that all their tactics have done almost nothing except run down the clock, but still they insist that it’s the young who just don’t get it and that things aren’t that simple. They’re the living embodiment of the famous New Yorker cartoon, with a suited man sat in a post-apocalyptic landscape telling his young audience “Yes, the planet got destroyed. But for a beautiful moment in time we created a lot of value for shareholders.”

This is reality v the vested interests of the powerful. Any meaningful policy has to upset the established power base and the political donor class. Any policy that doesn’t upset these people will be useless. To pretend that we can compromise our way through this while we wait for a magical, technological bullet that will keep temperatures down without costing us anything is beyond willful ignorance now. It is a question of basic morality.

Many of today’s climate strikers won’t even be 30 by the time the 1.5C deadline comes around in 2030. They are asking us to consider a simple question: is their future worth more than preserving our reputations? What will our response to them be?