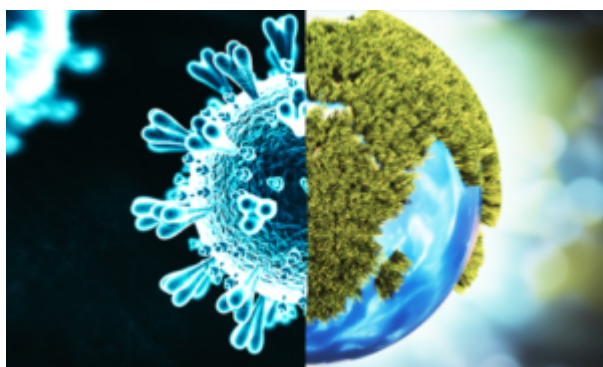
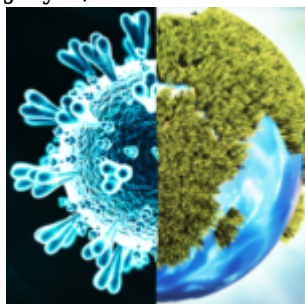


# A Green Recovery and the Fight Ahead to Avoid a Return to Business-as-Usual

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Even before healthcare systems, mainly in Europe and Asia, finally had a chance to breathe, we saw the emphasis of the pandemic response shift from health to economics. Post-COVID-19 recovery scenarios are now a matter of debate as long-term economic pain is likely to remain, unless stronger recovery plans are set on the table.

Neoliberal elites, financiers, corporate leaders and their lobbyists, are on the offensive to take control of the recovery ahead. The same elites that meet every year at Davos to continue pushing for the well-known recipe of deregulation, free trade and free capital movement and who want the decarbonization of the economy to be done at a snail pace, if at all, are back at it again. Their initial fear of higher taxes, in order to pay for the fiscal stimuli undertaken by governments across the world has however vanished as they see an opportunity to hijack the recovery that any future stimulus is meant to accomplish. They are, one must not forget, the same think tanks, politicians and business leaders who have successfully persuaded people that good governments are those that are limited in their responsibilities and starved of revenues. They now realize that hijacking the economic recovery is not only possible, but ideal, because it can come with the added benefit of ditching the emission targets set in the Paris Accords.

Yet, making sure that those targets remain can make the difference between recovery and dystopia. Keeping those targets in place can be the fastest way to end and revert the neoliberal route of the past four decades as well as to shift power back to governments. The leading role that governments take now against the current crisis, as well as in the achievement of the Paris Accords, is a steppingstone in dispelling the ideological core behind ineffective governing.

We know that greenhouse gas emissions must fall to net zero by mid-century to meet the goals of the Paris Accords. The Atlantic Council has already warned that the pandemic will weaken global investments in clean energy and, as result, the broader efforts to reduce emissions. European Union leaders have already come under pressure to abandon the block's Green Deal initiative, to focus on

shoring up airlines and in the US oil and gas companies. This scenario would send us down a path of greater emissions over the medium and long-term. The next three years will determine whether the decade will be lost and whether the 1.5°C target, set for the turn of the century, has any chance of being met.

The economic panic that has accompanied the pandemic, with hundreds of millions of jobs lost worldwide, has given corporate elites and alt-right movements a unique chance to leave their differences behind and work together to ensnare the economic recovery. Nationalism and nativism are common tropes of the alt-right which have, in the past, clashed with the globalizing mindset of the Davos' elites and have kept the two groups at odds with each other. Today, however, they both see in active governments and the renewed interest in international cooperation a common enemy. Both groups detest the idea of fiscal stimuli strengthening investments in renewable energy and of governments having an active role in directing that investment. A prompt return to business as usual, either side has concluded, is their shared political objective.

We've already seen a return to business as usual become the rallying call of the alt-right's denunciation of lockdowns as seemingly motivated by environmentalist forces. Such presentation of social conflict as an essential battle between traditional cultural values and progressive liberal values is certainly not new, but rather the continuation of the culture wars that have defined American politics for the past half a century. Yet, beyond that, what the rest of us must recognize is the stark choice we face. The business as usual response to the COVID-19 crisis presents a real risk of using the recovery to hurl us towards a truly dystopian form of inequality and asymmetry of power. At the same time the crisis, and this is what the elites and the alt-right fear, also presents a unique opportunity to use the recovery for setting a tangible path towards decarbonization and the demise of neoliberal capitalism.

One of the lessons of Foucault's *The Birth of Biopolitics* was that unlike classical liberalism, Neoliberalism understands that creating a free-market society required both the transformation of physical markets, as well as the reconstruction of moral and cultural values that would be antithetical to its project. From think tanks to political movements Neoliberalism has been very successful in deploying a multilayered strategy to advance its interests, understood as the combination of Austro-libertarian economics, popular culture and technocracy.

The constant stream of Austro-libertarian economics channeled through think tanks and academic institutions, what Mirowski calls a thought collective, has granted authority to its ideology, but most importantly has created an revolving door between such think tanks and policy makers. The use of popular culture to present consumerism as essential to individual fulfillment lies at the core of the experience of capitalism of so called Millennials. Next to this, one of the consequences of consumer culture has been the reduction of citizens to consumers which, in turn, alienates citizens from political debate. Technocratic government has been Neoliberalism's response to this separation of civic duty from politics, making up the third element of its layered deployment. Ganesh Sitaraman in *The New Republic* defines it as "an ideology that holds that the problems in the world are technical problems that require technical solutions". The consequence of technocracy is the adoption of a mode of governance that presents itself as free of politics and the disappearance of political debate as a positive outcome; consumers can give up their duty as citizens by handing over government to an enlightened circle of supposedly benevolent and apolitical bureaucrats.

Neoliberalism's approach to the present crisis is no different in this respect: it still uses those three elements to take control of the crisis and steer the policy response. What has changed is its alliance with alt-right movements and the inclusion of their tactics to form a consolidated front. In our current context, where a global economic depression is still a very likely scenario without strong government intervention, neoliberals and the alt-right will attempt to hijack the recovery, while

burying the emission targets of the Paris Accords, by paying little more than lip service to those commitments. I will argue there are 3 phases to the strategies they are already deploying to achieve this: 1) Shifting gears on the assault on environmental science, 2) persuading the middle-class that green investments are inadequate amidst an economic depression and 3) presenting a return to business as usual as the only desirable form of recovery.

### 1. **Shifting gears on the assault on environmental science and the climate movement**

Typical disinformation campaigns against climate science have been losing steam, pushing the right towards a change in tactics. They have moved from a typical defense of culture and tradition towards the adoption of postmodern rhetorical analysis and deconstruction as a way to sow doubt about the objective nature of climate science.

Angela Nagle's *Kill All Normies* argued that the new right or alt-right has coopted some of the transgressive tactics used by postmodern forms of critique against institutionalized authority. While in the past transgression has been associated with the left, with figures like Bataille or Debord, this same strategy is becoming appropriated by the alt-right today. Nagle argues that although seemingly successful in challenging moralism in the past, transgression was always a bargain with the devil. It was always a double edge sword, because making the case against economic inequality, among other forms of inequality, has always been essentially a moral stance. Today, she claims the alt-right has realized that it can use the same tools to excuse and present skepticism of science as transgressive and scientific production as ideologically motivated. In short, she argues the rise of people like Milo, Molyneux, McInnes and the alt-right is not a return of conservatism, but the "absolute hegemony of the culture of non-conformism, self-expression, transgression and irreverence for its own sake- an aesthetic that suits those who believe in nothing but the liberation of the individual and the id". Nagle has recently been highly criticized, and rightly so, in my view, for her anti-immigration stance. Notwithstanding, her understanding of alt-right tactics remains valid and her latest misstep should probably not be seen as a rapprochement with right-wing politics.

It is not difficult to find alt-right figures today fully embracing rhetoric and intertextuality as valid forms criticisms against climate science. In perfect postmodern guise they create a long prose focused on the terms and the language used to describe climate phenomena rather than on the actual science. For example, instead of challenging the methodology or conclusions from climate science they point out the supposed alarmism of terms like "climate emergency" and conclude, for instance, that an IPCC report uses language that is entirely subject to interpretation, while obscuring authoritarian motivations behind a thick curtain. In other words, their strategy is to sow doubt on the integrity of scientists rather than on the validity of their claims.

Self-described Marxist Libertarian and columnist to a variety of alt-right and conservative publications, Brandan O'Neill, states, along these lines, that there is something profoundly ugly in this headline from the Guardian: "Covid-19 is nature's wake-up call to our complacent civilization". It is ugly and violent, he continues, because its ultimate message is to somehow suggest that "disgusting mankind" needs to be punished.

Claims of misanthropy and symbolic violence have by now become almost tropes of the alt-right's critique of climate science. In a separate article O'Neill uses the same logic to claim that what we must learn from the pandemic is that a world under lockdown, where most activities are restricted, is precisely the type of world that environmental activists dream of. He argues, "The truth is that if the Covid-19 crisis has shown us anything, it is how awful it would be to live in the kind of world greens dream about. Right now, courtesy of a horrible new virus, our societies look not dissimilar to the kind of societies Greta Thunberg, Extinction Rebellion, green parties and others have long been agitating for".

Ultimately, O’Neill wants us to believe, that Monbiot, the Guardian and environmentalists are nothing more than Misanthropes in disguise: “It’s ideology masquerading as science, or rather using science as a cover for its seemingly unspeakable black heart; which is misanthropy, a feeling of disgust for modern human society and its psychologically immature inhabitants.”.

There is no longer even the slightest interest in actually criticizing the science. Instead, all efforts are redirected into what the alt-right has realized is probably a more effective way of breeding unfounded skepticism. It is an approach that allows them to be highly hyperbolic, going as far so as to state that organizations like the IPCC are nothing but a secular version of Iran’s Guardian Council.

It can be difficult to take such arguments seriously, but we must take them seriously, because whether it is about protesting the use of masks during Covid-19, the supposedly totalitarian nature of a modest program like Obamacare or the dismissal of Black Lives Matters as a movement funded by George Soros and the elites, this brew of transgressive counter culture, in the name of freedom, is highly effective at keeping their bases rallied. It is the effectiveness of such type of ad hominem criticism that allows them to claim, without raising any eyebrows, that the problem with the idea of a climate-crisis is that weather data does not support it.

They know that when a form of transgression, which reduces freedom to nonconformity and skepticism, becomes a political goal, actual political discourse goes out the window. They know too that by using this form of transgression that portrays all collective endeavors as essentially authoritarian and oppressive, then this opens the door towards opposing any economic recovery guided by collective concerns. In practice this means supporting even greater deregulation, opposing fiscal stimulus and policy coordination across borders. These practical implications are precisely what makes the alt-right a great ally of Neoliberalism.

## **2. Persuading the middle-class that green investments are inadequate amidst a depression**

Neoliberal elites realize, given the magnitude of the recession we face, that pushing for austerity could spell disaster. It would certainly generate immense political backlash but, most pressingly, austerity could throw the global economy into a lost decade, as was the case for much of the EU after the 2008 crisis. It is for this reason that this time around they see fiscal stimulus as inevitable and their goal is to capture it and shape it, rather than try to avoid it.

One of the ways in which they are already mobilizing to do this is through their network of thinktanks like the CATO institute, Americans for Prosperity and The Global Warming Policy Foundation (GWPF). These think tanks use technocratic recipes and their seemingly scientific tone to erode support for the environmental movement. Their strategy is not to deny global warming, but to argue that the left is not serious about climate change. To accomplish this they argue, for instance, that if environmental movements are not open to nuclear energy or carbon capture it must be because they are more worried about political posturing than about climate change.

This accusation of insincerity is used, in particular, when creating a message for those in the political center. Those who, in the past, have been most susceptible to the façade of impartiality and presumed benevolence of technocratic jargon. A perfect example is Carbon Taxation, which even the *Washington Post* has in the past called a bipartisan solution to achieve a reduction of emissions. While it is true that carbon taxes are a commonsense first step to emission reduction, it is absolutely disingenuous, as the WaPo suggests, to say that it is a solution embraced by the right. Even its support by the center-right is doubtful as the fight for initiative 732 in Washington State has clearly shown. Yet more dishonest, however, is to see how these same thinktanks (CATO and GWPF)

criticize environmental movements for supposedly not being open to carbon taxation, while also opposing recently passed carbon taxes in Canada.

Deploying technocratic arguments may be little more than a rhetorical tool meant to persuade those who believe in benevolent technocracies. It is, nonetheless, anything but harmless. It is still being used to effectively sow doubts on the sincerity of environmental movements and on the effectiveness of initiatives like the Green New Deal (GND). Take for instance the inflated assertion that the GND would cost almost 7 trillion a year (over 30% of the US economy), which is presented as an impartial technocratic concern, but is clearly intended to scare those who tend to carry the largest burden of taxation; namely the middle-classes.

This very same technocratic clout is already being used by Neoliberal thinktanks to argue that green investments are an inadequate tool to spark the type of economic recovery that is needed to overcome the pandemic recession. They claim that allocating future stimulus money to renewable energies is inadequate for the task of kickstarting the economy, because they are low productivity investments. They are investments that have a long-term return, rather than the short-term boost that is needed today. In other words, you have the same people that criticize Keynesian economic policies for being short-sighted, turning around and dismissing initiatives like the GND, because — as Keynes once put it — *in the long run, we are all dead*.

### **3. Presenting a return to business as usual as the only desirable form of recovery**

In the best-case scenario, Neoliberal elites would appear to concede that climate change is real, and it would be a good idea to prevent it. I say they only appear to do so, because they also argue that in order to kick-start the economy, we need cheap energy sources, namely coal, oil and gas. Turning away from these resources at these times, they continue, would risk prolonging the recession. This is of course a terrifying prospect for people who are already jobless, indebted or both. As the story goes, if we want to get the economy back up and running, we need to return to business as usual ASAP and double down on it, while we are at it. To do this, they claim after having received unprecedented bailouts, market forces need to be set free, entirely doing away with regulations. Deregulation has been the trojan horse of Neoliberalism since its inception, so it's not surprising to see it entering the debate today. More worrying, however, is to see that their efforts have already succeeded in the US, where previously banned land has been open for fossil fuel drilling in Alaska and pollution standards have been watered down, next to an array of additional policies intended to increase fossil fuel production as well as mining and logging.

But deregulation alone will not do the trick. Using the horrific impact on healthcare providers to get their point across though seems to be now their preferred choice. They want us to willingly accept that we can either strengthen the economy and prepare for the next pandemic or keep the emission targets, but we cannot do both.

Rupert Darwall, senior fellow at the Real Clear Foundation and author of "Green Tyranny: Exposing the Totalitarian Roots of the Climate Industrial Complex" recently stated that "resilience against the next pandemic is only possible if we put a hold on emission targets." He argues that, if we take Singapore and South Korea as successful examples of how to best manage a pandemic, then we should consider that their responses were successful because they could afford to get prepared. It sounds obvious, yet this argument is a bizarre case of conflating causation with correlation. Darwall states that both countries have built very strong economies, whose strength is primarily measured apparently, by the ballooning size of its carbon emissions in the past thirty years. He claims, the only way in which a country can prepare itself for the next pandemic is by building equally carbon-intensive economies. The absurd conclusion he arrives at is that in order to prepare for the next pandemic a country must not just allow, but also encourage soaring greenhouse emissions. The

higher its greenhouse gases the stronger its economy. Fool-proof logic. Even if one wanted his argument to hold, it is very much out in the open that the richest and very carbon-intensive US economy was grossly unprepared for the pandemic. Its soaring emissions in the past decades did absolutely nothing to create resilience against it.

Yet, there is not only stupidity behind a claim like this. There is the persistence of an ideology that dictates that economic growth is the unquestionable goal of modern societies, that such growth can only be achieved in the same way that it was achieved in the past century and, most absurdly, that the effects of climate change will not have a negative impact on future economic growth.

Peddling the need to return to business as usual, against all common sense, is becoming so transparent that even in the advertising industry a creative writer claimed, in an article that went viral, that “What is about to be unleashed on American society will be the greatest campaign ever created to get you to feel normal again.” He’s right, except this is not only true in America.

### **The path to progress is not closed and we must make our stand**

Under the demands of social distancing, teenage activist Greta Thunberg shifted her growing climate movement online, where it has, to a great extent, dropped out of public sight. The UN ended up deciding to cancel this year’s COP meeting. Both things have certainly decreased the visibility that climate change has across mainstream media today.

On the policy front, Brussels has been feeling upward pressure to delay and even freeze green regulation. Czech prime minister Andrej Babiš has been a loud voice in this respect, telling reporters that the EU should scrap its €1 trillion plan to achieve a net-zero economy by 2050. His and other loud voices seem to be jointly shouting the same message: Europe should forget about its Green Deal and focus on the pandemic recovery.

Under such pressure and given the enormous imbalance of power it would seem that the cause is lost and all we can do is brace for the consequences. This is not an option.

There are glimmers of hope that should help us gather strength and refocus some of our attention. In the US support for the GND has increased and jobs and economic growth have become the main reasons behind such support, signaling it is not simply a key issue for environmentalists. The EU recently announced its interest in producing 1 million tons of clean hydrogen. Hydrogen is a source of energy with enormous application potential particularly in vehicles and the byproduct of its exploitation is uniquely clean: drinking water. Producing hydrogen is today possible, but it hasn’t been a carbon friendly alternative, because it is done through the gasification of coal or the reformation of methane. It is precisely the switch of this production towards water electrolysis what could truly make it a green alternative. Shifting gears to ensure that big electrolyzers, currently in short supply, and more plentiful supplies of renewable electricity become available through this initiative could be a steppingstone in the right direction.

Along these lines, the currently under discussion EU stimulus plan, set to be the block’s pandemic rescue plan, has been built around its Green Deal and its aim is to make the union carbon neutral by 2050.

Such policies, while imperfect, can be conducive to more decarbonization initiatives becoming viable, as well as helping us do away with the myth of government intervention being inherently bad, as mentioned earlier. Beyond that, being able to use green investments to directly tackle unemployment and precarious employment conditions (gig economy) will help us erode the support that far-right parties have amassed among the working poor. Without such support the uneasy

alliance between the alt-right and Neoliberalism is unlikely to last

Opposition from the alt-right to the GND in the US was expected. In Europe coal producers like Poland on one side, as well as from the infamous frugal four on the other, are putting the spoke on the wheel. Yet the momentum is there and pressure by climate movements, as well as from green parties within the block, could make a difference.

The Green Block with ten percent of the European Parliament has already important leverage and the political gains by green parties in France, Germany and the Netherlands make them a force to reckon. As lockdowns ease, we must restart our efforts turn up the volume. We must restart our presence on the streets, solidifying movements like Extinction Rebellion, and we must not allow the Neoliberal elites and their alt-right allies to coopt the conversation around the economic recovery. We must keep in mind that their tactics are predictable, but ours are not. If there was ever a time to mobilize social discontent, it is now.