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Eve Darian-Smith

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Deadly global alliance: antidemocracy and anti-environmentalism

Eve Darian-Smith 

Department of Global & International Studies, University of California, Irvine, Irvine, CA, USA

ABSTRACT

This essay explores the connections between the global rise of anti-democratic governments and the escalation of the human-driven climate emergency. As political leaders and corporations (particularly those in fossil fuel and energy industries) work together in the pursuit of profits and power, anti-environment policies that favour these industries have become politicised and weaponised. We see this occurring in many liberal democracies as well as in more explicit autocratic regimes. Focusing primarily on the United States under former US president Donald Trump, it is argued that the rolling back of environmental policies facilitated by his antidemocratic government connects the political erosion of liberal democracy with the corrosion of the environment. Degradation of the environment in turn accelerates the negative impacts of climate change, disproportionately harming marginalised and racialised communities from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The implications of this deadly alliance between accelerating environmental destruction and the weakening of peoples' electoral rights and ability to oppose anti-environmental policy in the Global North and Global South are nothing short of catastrophic.

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This essay explores two structural trends that have become very marked over the past two decades but are often not discussed together – the global lean towards antidemocratic governance and the escalating human-driven environmental crisis. My central argument is that the global rise of antidemocracy¹ in recent years has been facilitated and deepened by extreme-right leaders politicising and weaponising anti-environmental ideology and policy. We see this convergence between antidemocracy and anti-environmentalism very clearly in the United States, but it is also evident in other liberal democracies such as Australia, Brazil, Turkey, Israel, Britain, Poland, Hungary, Italy, India and so on. Despite historical, social, institutional and ideological differences between these countries, what they increasingly share is a political agenda that favours the fossil fuel industry over citizens' concerns about health, air pollution, rising oceans, water and food security, biodiversity loss, and catastrophic fires and floods. Many of these countries' leaders are actively rolling back or stalling on environmental protection policy and legislation. At the same time, many leaders are also rolling back liberal democratic principles and institutions such as the right to vote and publicly assemble, a free press, an independent judiciary, and public access to education and health.

The overall goal of this essay is to explore the rise of antidemocracy and ask How does anti-environmentalism fit into this global political trend?

Declining democracy, increasing climate emergency

According to the Washington-based non-profit organisation Freedom House, the number of countries designated as democracies has dropped consecutively for 17 years. Its *Nations in Transition Report 2021* states:

A contestation that began with Vladimir Putin's 'sovereign democracy' in the mid-2000s, and continued with Viktor Orbán's 'illiberal democracy' a decade later, has expanded, and forms of governance that are decidedly not democratic are taking root. Antidemocratic politicians are also sharing practices and learning from one another, accelerating the turn toward alternatives. (Freedom House 2021)

V-Dem, an independent research group based in Sweden, similarly noted in its *Democracy Report 2022* that the last 30 years of democratic advances are now 'eradicated'. The report continues that the democratic decline is especially evident in Asia Pacific, Eastern Europe, Central Asia and parts of Latin America, and that 70% of the world's populations now live under dictatorships (V-Dem 2022).

Putting this differently, in 2020, four out of five permanent members of the United Nations (UN) Security Council were led by extreme-right leaders or autocrats (UK, USA, Russia, China), with the fifth member, France, experiencing widespread support for far-right leader Marine Le Pen in her 2022 bid for presidency. According to the political commentator Moisés Naím in his book *The Revenge of Power*, 'Such [autocratic] drift is not the marginal phenomenon it looked like a decade ago. And while in many of these countries it has mobilized hugely passionate countervailing forces in society, it is far from certain today whether democrats in those societies will have the wherewithal to restore democratic normalcy'. Naím goes on: 'The threat to global democracy could not be more real. The assaults on freedom are global, sustained, and formidable' (Naím 2022, 228, 245; see also Brown 2019; Applebaum 2020; Berberoglu 2020).

At the same time as a worldwide decline in liberal democracy, we see a worldwide escalation of planetary warming. In 2021, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued its Working Group I sub-report that provided irrefutable scientific evidence that greenhouse-gas emissions primarily from burning fossil fuels are putting billions of people at immediate risk (IPCC 2021). UN Secretary-General António Guterres called the report 'A Code Red for Humanity' (Guterres 2021). It seems that the planet is burning – literally. Throughout 2022, temperatures soared and reached unprecedented levels as catastrophic bushfires, heatwaves and megadroughts descended upon large regions of the world. Hit by heat domes were wealthy industrialised countries that – until recently – typically thought climate change was a problem for poorer countries in the Global South. But under the searing heat of the sun, it is impossible to deny that we are all facing a climate emergency. Against the backdrop of huge wildfires across much of Europe in 2022, António Guterres again warned the international community, ominously stating, 'Collective action or collective suicide. It is in our hands' (Guterres 2022).

In what follows, I explore in 'Structural conditions of neoliberalism' the neoliberal logics that underscore a global political economy and a largely deregulated market system of

natural resource extraction. I examine how these structural conditions have helped create today's gross inequalities within and between countries and are destabilising liberal democracies and the broader appeal of democratic values and principles. In 'Regulatory capture by the fossil fuel industry', I discuss the role of the fossil fuel industry in consolidating conservative political power in the United States since the 1990s. What happened in the US, one of the biggest producers and consumers of fossil fuels in the world, encapsulates similar patterns of regulatory capture by the energy sector in countries such as Brazil and Australia. In 'Why do extreme-right leaders politicise anti-environmentalism?', I discuss the main reasons why antidemocratic regimes politicise and weaponise anti-environmentalism. In 'Deregulating environmental protections', I turn to the United States as a leading example of climate change being weaponised in political struggles over democratic principles and institutions. I conclude by highlighting the deadly alliance between anti-environmentalism and antidemocracy in the context of the global reliance on non-renewable fossil fuels. This dependency was underscored by Russia's invasion of Ukraine that created a global energy shortage and a corresponding worldwide surge in oil and gas drilling and production in 2022.

In arguing broadly about the alliance of antidemocracy and anti-environmentalism across diverse governments, and focusing primarily on the United States to illustrate this, there is a risk of oversimplification in my argument. It is impossible in this essay to do justice to the extraordinary complexity of increasingly antidemocratic regimes and their respective anti-climate policies and decision-making. I want to be clear at the outset that my argument is exploratory in nature and might be relevant beyond the US context by offering insights and inviting further scholarship on this alliance in other countries and regions of the world. For instance, details about what is happening in the Pacific and Africa would add important comparative context to understanding any association between declining democratic governance and anti-climate politics.

That being said, across Europe and Latin America, anti-environmentalism is emerging as a hallmark of far-right parties and extremist politicians. For instance, in Europe alone September 2022 proved to be a politically significant month. Britain's far-right Prime Minister Liz Truss (a previous Shell executive) was voted to lead the Tory party. She quickly overturned a ban on fracking, opened North Sea oil and gas leasing, and appointed a new energy minister, Jacob Rees-Mogg, who has a long history of opposing pro-climate action. Also in September, the far-right Sweden Democrats were elected to lead Sweden. The party has a deep association with white supremacy and has pushed a climate-sceptic position that included opposing the ratification of the Paris Agreement in 2016 (Klinkenberg 2022). Finally in Italy, the far-right coalition led by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni came into power, exactly 100 years after the first appearance of fascism in Europe under Benito Mussolini. Meloni's Brothers of Italy party has deep authoritarian roots and in recent years had argued against European Union plans to reduce gas emissions. Complementing this political reality, growing numbers of commentators at the front lines of the global environmental movement are pointing to an alliance between authoritarian leaders and the fossil fuel industry. For instance, according to Basav Sen, a leading climate analyst at the *Institute for Policy Studies*, big oil and gas companies are turning to funding far-right leaders to further their drilling and mining projects. Wrote Sen, 'As climate change intensifies and global opinion turns more and more against fossil fuels, the industry will resort to increasingly desperate measures to survive, including backing outright fascists who support their agenda' (Sen 2021).

Together the rising number of antidemocratic regimes and the growing embrace by extreme far-right leaders of the powerful fossil fuel industry point to a new episode in extractive capitalism that is engrained with neoliberal logics, yet unique to the twenty-first century. It also suggests a new wave of eco-fascist ideology may be developing that historically echoes the early decades of the twentieth century but differs today in that it is globally promoted on internet and social media platforms (Darian-Smith 2022, 91–92; Hancock 2022). In the context of this emerging political landscape, this essay offers an exploratory political analysis as well as an invitation for scholars to explore the antidemocracy/anti-environment alliance and help build a global research agenda that furthers much-needed – and ecologically urgent – comparative analysis.

Structural conditions of neoliberalism

Today's global antidemocratic drift is structurally linked to neoliberalism, which over the past 50 years has become the dominant way of organising most economies and societies around the world. A large body of scholarship exists on neoliberalism and how it has ideologically shaped today's global political economy. Scholars such as Jamie Peck note that neoliberalism is not a fixed concept and in its implementation by governments over decades has morphed and changed, 'made and remade, as a *constructed* project' (Peck 2010, xii–xiii). Still, while neoliberalism has changed over time there is consensus that it embraces financial profit and market efficiencies as its signature core goals (Chomsky 1999; Harvey 2007; Mirowski and Plehwe 2009; Slobodian 2018).

As a radical ideology, neoliberalism emerged in the interwar years through the writings of Austrian economists such as Friedrich Hayek. It gained gradual influence among economists in Europe and the US and informed the thinking of scholars at the University of Chicago who established what came to be known as the Chicago School. Neoliberalism was put into practice under Pinochet's Chilean dictatorship, ushered in by a political coup in 1973 that was promoted and supported by the United States. Pinochet's policies had enormous impact on the thinking of Ronald Reagan in the US and Margaret Thatcher in Britain, both known for moving domestic policies away from a Keynesian welfarism to a new economic system that prioritised corporate interests and institutionalised free-market logics. Importantly, as scholars have argued, this radically conservative system was inherently antidemocratic (Giroux 2004; Juego 2018). In the United States, it has been shown that economists, academics, financiers and industrialists worked together to reshape the Republican Party and alter the political system away from the needs of citizens and in favour of corporations (Maclean 2018; Mayer 2017).

National policies that are typically associated with neoliberalism are deregulation, privatisation, defunding public health, dismantling public education, and breaking up of unions and organised labour. Thatcher's busting of the coal miners' strike in 1984–1985 encapsulates the brutality deployed by the state against working classes in the promotion of privatised industry. Often overlooked in analyses of neoliberalism is that alongside deregulation it also enabled the re-regulation of international trade facilitated through a new economic system and transnational legal network organised to serve the best interests of global capitalism and finance. This transnational trading system involved a vast array of regulatory institutions and bureaucracy that operated informally for years until becoming solidified with the establishment of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995 (Slobodian 2016; Halliday and Shaffer 2016; Hickel 2018; Dowdle 2022).

Alongside the WTO, big actors in this global financial system are the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. These institutions have been heavily involved in managing loans and development strategies to predominantly poorer countries around the world to open markets and attract international investors to take advantage of natural resources and cheap labour. These largely predatory loans include structural adjustment programmes in the Global South and austerity programmes in the Global North (Stiglitz 2017). Over decades, both loan structures have resulted in the defunding of domestic social services such as education, health and transport, and creating massive socioeconomic inequalities within societies (Tansel 2017). At the same time, in both developed and developing nations, corporations have benefitted from deregulated government oversight, massive tax cuts, and policies that favour their best interests such as de-unionised labour and setting a very low minimum wage.

Global inequality and destabilising liberal democracy

The long-term consequences of neoliberalism have resulted in the hollowing out of middle classes as wages stagnate and opportunities for upward socioeconomic mobility decline in many countries. Today there are unprecedented levels of inequality between the masses of working poor populations and a very few extremely wealthy (often white male) individuals. Millions of people around the world are concerned with rising costs of living, precariat labour markets, economic shocks such as the 2008 recession, fear of inflation, perceived governmental corruption, and a sense of being abandoned by political and economic elites that are typically connected to established political parties.

Socioeconomic insecurity and a feeling of being forsaken by those in government has in turn created a 'global democratic recession', according to the University of Cambridge Centre for the Future of Democracy. In a 2020 report it states that the decline in democratic satisfaction has been especially sharp since 2005, with some of the world's most populous democracies leading the downward trend. The report goes on:

many large democracies are at their highest-ever recorded level for democratic dissatisfaction. These include the United States, Brazil, Mexico, the United Kingdom, South Africa, Colombia, and Australia While in the 1990s, around two-thirds of the citizens of Europe, North America, Northeast Asia and Australasia felt satisfied with democracy in their countries, today a majority feel dissatisfied. (*Report: Global Satisfaction with Democracy 2020*, 2)

Scepticism about the value of liberal democracy is also evident in democracies in Africa that no longer regard the United States as a role model. According to the non-profit pan-African research network Afrobarometer, many African people are disappointed with democracy even if they continue to support it over other political systems.² Be it in the Global North or Global South, the evidence is clear that what is being experienced by many millions of people dissatisfied with their plight is a decisive questioning, if not rejection, of core democratic principles.

It is in this context of peoples' anxiety about the future that opportunistic political figures have emerged over the past two decades, ostensibly rejecting elitism and speaking for the poor and forgotten masses (Duggan 2003; Bello 2020). These populist strongmen and their successors – Trump, Putin, Salvini, Erdoğan, Johnson, Duterte, Orbán and many others – reflect a global cohort of antidemocratic leadership. They often learn tactics from each other, such as Bolsonaro taking a cue from Trump and talking about witch hunts and fraudulent

elections (The Groundtruth Project 2019). Also common to many of these regimes is the promotion of anti-globalisation rhetoric, ultranationalist ideology, anti-immigrant legislation, strict border controls and religious fundamentalism. Together these political figures have been responsible for a dramatic turn in many so-called liberal democracies towards voter suppression, censoring of media, installing biased judges, defunding education and delegitimising climate science (Naím 2022).

So, while each leader operates in specific national political and social contexts, their similar strategies to attack the institutions of democracy are helping to create a global antidemocratic wave that is unique to the current moment. Most of these leaders were voted into power through open and fair elections, but once in office dismantle constitutional checks and balances on their power such as term limits (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). This behind-the-scenes undermining of democracy means that most people are not aware how much of their civil and political rights have been taken away until it is too late.

The stealthy transitioning from formal democratic governance to a system with a thin democratic veneer has been happening within many countries. However, perhaps nowhere has it been as dramatic a transition as in the United States (Mettler and Lieberman 2020). Trump's attempt to deny the presidential election results and lead a coup against Congress on 6 January 2020 brought home to the world just how far the Republican Party had veered towards antidemocratic governance. Even when no longer in office, the continuing hold of Trump on the Republican Party led to aggressive assaults on voting rights in Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Montana and Texas. Republicans also sought to increase their capacity to serve as election officials in these states to ensure discretionary oversight over the legitimacy of the voting process. According to Kurt Bardella, a political commentator:

It has become painfully transparent that the Republican Party platform is 100% anti-democratic and it is their ambition to impose minority rule on the majority going forward, because they know that when the playing field is level, they can't win and so they have instead decided to double down on supporting a wannabe autocrat, and are doing everything they can to destabilize the democratic safeguards that we've had in place since the founding of our country. (quoted in Smith 2021)

In addition to the Republican Party's open assault on voting rights and a transparent electoral process, numerous Republican legislatures introduced 'anti-riot' bills in a backlash against the Black Lives Matter movement (Bayles 2021). These bills seek to redefine more broadly what constitutes a 'riot' and increase penalties for people involved. Some of the laws make it illegal to protest near 'critical infrastructure' such as gas and oil pipelines. Other legislation in Florida, Oklahoma and Iowa grants legal protection to drivers who hit protestors with their car. Together these legal strategies represent well-organised attacks on voting rights and the right to peacefully protest those attacks, and build upon longer-term efforts to limit political demonstrations (see Dauvergne and LeBaron 2014; Passavant 2021). In effect, Republican legislation is narrowing the ability of ordinary Americans to vote for political representatives who, among other things, seek to curb the power of the fossil fuel industry, reduce planetary warming, and fight for environmental justice.

Regulatory capture by the fossil fuel industry

Neoliberal economic policies have in effect enabled a corporate takeover of regulatory agencies at domestic and international levels to best serve the profitability of sectors such as

agribusiness, pharmaceuticals and energy. This is clearly evident with the fossil fuel industry which has aggressively attempted to debunk climate science linking fossil fuels to greenhouse-gas emissions, as well as created industry-friendly economic policy through deploying 'neutral' economic consultants (Oreskes and Conway 2010; Freese 2020; Franta 2022). Scholars highlight that the interference by corporations in democratic processes has led to increasing levels of corruption in liberal democracies (Nyberg 2021). However, when it comes to the interference of the fossil fuels industry, only a few scholars highlight that the corollary to this process has been a delay in implementing effective environmental legislation, resulting in a rapidly escalating climate emergency (Brulle 2022).

The extraction of fossil fuels has for centuries been a driver of modernity, capitalism, nationalism, racism, inequality and planetary environmental destruction (Mitchell 2011; Malm 2016; Angus 2016; Pirani 2018). But it was not until The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) climatologist James Hansen testified before a US Senate committee about the greenhouse effect in 1988 that the industry intentionally mobilised as a global political network. The fossil fuel sector responded by forming the Global Climate Coalition a year later in 1989. The coalition was an international fossil-fuel lobby organisation designed to lead media campaigns intended to stop the regulation of greenhouse-gas pollution. Conservative politicians and industry networks heavily promoted non-academic testimony as expert evidence, arguing there was no scientific basis in climate-change claims (Darian-Smith 2022). This coalition-led disinformation campaign to create confusion around climate-science took hold around the world, and was aggressively active in international climate negotiations opposing the Kyoto Protocol in 1997 and encouraging the United States not to ratify it.

Within the US, the fossil fuels industry adopted a complementary domestic strategy to influence the political process. There is much evidence to show the orchestrated efforts by energy corporations to finance Republican candidates, and some Democratic candidates, in a bid to influence domestic policy around greenhouse-gas emissions. Beginning in 1990, financial contributions to conservative candidates strongly outweighed those to democratic candidates and helped push the energy sector's best interests for over 30 years (Kusnetz 2020). These contributions took the form of endorsements, as well as monetary contributions to electoral campaigns, political action committees, and a wide range of conservative causes. In the last decade, donations to Republicans coming from sources linked to the oil and gas industry more than doubled. This was in large part due to the controversial Supreme Court ruling *Citizens United* (2010) which 'instituted a remarkable system of legalized payoffs to politicians...and opened a flood of unregulated private funding for private political campaigns' (Naim 2022, 63; McCarthy 2019).

Corporate campaign funds have been essential in maintaining many politician's careers. As scholars have shown, 'The more a given member of Congress votes against environmental policies, the more contributions they receive from oil and gas companies supporting their reelection' (Goldberg et al. 2020, 5111). Those benefitting from payoffs have mostly been Republicans, but there have also been a few Democrats such as Senator Joe Manchin from West Virginia who owns a coal plant and used his political influence over many years to benefit his private company (Flavell and Tate 2022). Manchin's public endorsement of the environmentally destructive coal industry was echoed in the Supreme Court's 6–3 conservative majority decision *West Virginia v Environmental Protection Agency* (EPA) (2022). In this case the court overturned longstanding precedent to decide that the EPA did not have broad

regulatory authority to curb dangerous greenhouse gas emissions by power plants. Not surprisingly, this challenge to the EPA was brought by coal companies and a coalition of 19 Republican state attorneys general.

Building on this anti-environment momentum, the state of West Virginia took a further step by imposing punitive action on banks that had decided to reduce investments in the coal industry. Republican Treasurer Riley Moore declared state ties would be severed with five major banks (including Goldman Sachs and JP Morgan). This retaliatory action by a state leader was modelled on similar fossil fuel boycott legislation already in place in Texas, Kentucky, Tennessee and Oklahoma. Apparently, a coalition of Republican state treasurers had aggressively been acting behind the scenes since Biden took office to try and stop the Democratic climate agenda. As one commentator states:

Nearly two dozen Republican state treasurers around the country are working to thwart climate action on state and federal levels, fighting regulations that would make clear the economic risks posed by a warming world, lobbying against climate-minded nominees to key federal posts and using the tax dollars they control to punish companies that want to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Over the past year, treasurers in nearly half the United States have been coordinating tactics and talking points, meeting in private and cheering one another in public as part of a well-funded campaign to protect the fossil fuel companies that bolster their local economies. (Gelles 2022)

It is now clear that many Republicans – and at least a few Democrats – are very handsomely paid to act in the best interests of oil, gas and coal industries. In the process, these same politicians have largely ignored their commitments to the wider public where decisive majorities want the government to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions (Rabe and Borick 2022). Many of these politicians have openly embraced the politicising and weaponising of anti-environmentalism and in the process disregarded its disastrous consequences for citizens' rights to public health and public safety. This strategy follows the approach pushed by the former Trump administration and its countless instances of collusion with the fossil fuel sector. For instance, Trump appointed Andrew Wheeler, a coal lobbyist, to head the EPA in 2019, ensuring the deregulation and profitability of the energy sector. Together what these instances underscore is the complicity of the extreme-right Republican Party's entangled antidemocratic and anti-environmental agendas.

Why do extreme-right leaders politicise anti-environmentalism?

As is very evident in the United States, politicians supporting the powerful fossil fuel industry are rewarded through the financing of their electoral campaigns, maintaining of their political power, and in some cases receiving significant personal profits. Given the extraordinary scale of financial contributions by the oil, gas and coal sector to the Republican Party, these kickbacks point to why it pushes an aggressive anti-environmental political agenda that includes giving mining companies drilling leases, granting government permissions to lay pipelines over public lands, and deregulating oversight of toxic pollution, water contamination and biodiversity loss.

In addition to the obvious *quid pro quo* relationship between politicians and fossil fuel corporations, how does anti-environmentalism fit within the broader agenda of extreme-right politics both in the US and around the world? I argue that there are common reasons why antidemocratic regimes politicise and weaponise the environment, despite each country having unique histories, cultural values and political ideologies.

At a basic level, anti-environmentalism sits comfortably within the logic of conservative thinking that espouses small government and national independence. Since climate action needs international cooperation through treaties such as the Paris Agreement, leaders avoid talking about climate change as a problem because they reject the multinational solution required to effectively confront the climate emergency. The current promotion of national independence by extreme-right leaders reflects a very different mindset to that which dominated national governments and the international community in the second half of the twentieth century.

There is another, related reason why anti-environmentalism is embraced and weaponised by numerous antidemocratic regimes. This is the rising dominance of ultranationalist sentiment which promotes national sovereignty and cultural essentialism. This sentiment is expressed in extreme-right leaders' political slogans such as 'Make India Great Again' and 'Make America Great Again'. And it is often used as a rationale for discrimination against minorities, severe immigration policies, and increased funding of police and military programmes. Over the last decade, ultranationalism and the promotion of 'authentic' and 'patriotic' citizens have emerged as a signature feature of antidemocratic regimes. In the United States ultranationalism is linked to a rhetoric of white supremacy and is bound up with the country's long history of slavery and enduring systemic racism (Yacovone 2022).

Recent scholarship underscores a general correlation between ultranationalist ideologies, conservative values, anti-elitist rhetoric and climate science scepticism (Lockwood 2018; Huber 2020; Tosun and Debus 2021). Across Europe, for instance, researchers have found this correlation among the rising numbers of right-wing populist movements and the extreme-right political parties they support. According to Martin Hultman:

The increase of climate change denial has also contributed to the growth of right-wing nationalists, because there are some overlapping features. For example, not wanting to deal with global issues and only thinking in nationalist terms. Another overlap is that both right-wing nationalists and climate change deniers are portraying the elites as the people who are lying. They describe the researchers and UN delegates as the elite that is against the people. And then, I think very importantly, there is also an overlap in funding and financing which might not be as visible. But it is there. Funding from extractive industries also goes into right-wing think tanks, which are creating this type of distrust of climate science, which then also fuels this type of right-wing nationalist climate change denial. (DW 2018)

Another study shows that for the majority of right-wing parties in the European Parliament, climate change is not considered an important issue since party members do not believe it exists or is related to human activities. According to the study, 'Two out of three lawmakers from the right-wing populist spectrum in the European Parliament regularly vote against climate and energy policy measures' (DW 2019).

Deregulating environmental protections

Climate science scepticism is an effective political strategy. It provides a narrative that justifies the lack of environmental regulatory action (and in some cases dismantling of existing regulation) by political leaders. So, it is not surprising that as an explicit political strategy climate scepticism has been around since the 1970s. Today, however, it has taken on increasing importance precisely because scientific evidence about the harm of burning non-renewable energy has become widely accepted by majority populations in most societies. There is

mounting political pressure from ordinary citizens for governments to do something about mitigating the climate emergency. In the face of this political pressure, climate scepticism has shifted from a narrative of outright denial that for decades was fostered by the fossil fuel industry to that of disinformation about who is to blame and confusion about its short and long-term consequences. Further disinformation is circulated about the advantages of renewable energy, and the false narratives picked up by far-right leaders keen to oppose more sustainable energy strategies.

At the same time as political pressure has mounted to act on the climate crisis, fossil fuel reserves have become scarcer. This has forced mining corporations to seek new drilling leases, often on public lands, and to use highly polluting fracking and strip-mining processes that poison groundwater and pollute surface water and landscapes. And as older drilling reserves become depleted, there is a greater need to transport crude oil and gas through new pipelines over longer distances. The laying of such pipelines requires massive deforestation and other ecologically destructive practices, and risks toxic seepage. It is important to note that these harmful activities disproportionately impact the health and livelihoods of Indigenous communities, small farmers, and rural populations who are often forced to have pipelines run across and under their lands (Estes 2019; Gilio-Whitaker 2019).

The US is the world's largest producer and consumer of oil and gas in the world, followed by China, Japan and India.³ The extraordinary power and influence of the fossil fuel industry over the Republican Party gives context to Trump's four-year term as president which saw the rise of disinformation about climate science, the removal of career scientists and scientific language from government reports, the overturning of over 100 environmental laws, the dismantling of 50 years of environmental protection policy, the opening up of national parks to drilling and mining, and the removal of the United States from the Paris Agreement (Darian-Smith 2022; Southerland 2020). These cumulative events effectively undermined the government's ability to act on the climate emergency while providing maximum opportunities for the fossil fuel industry to broaden its destructive and polluting practices with little regulatory oversight. Under Trump, the United States became the leading anti-environmental nation in the world.

The election of Democratic president Joe Biden in 2020 offered hope with his administration's explicit commitment to fight global warming. However, the continuing dependence on fossil fuels as the country's primary energy source created extreme obstacles to implementing green initiatives and transitioning to renewable energy. For instance, in May 2021, the Biden administration was forced to defend in federal court the Willow project, a Trump initiative allowing for massive drilling on Alaska's North Slope that is projected to produce over 100,000 barrels of oil a day for the next 30 years. Not surprisingly, this project was bitterly opposed by climate activists. The Biden administration also backed Trump's earlier decision to grant oil and gas drilling leases on federal land in Wyoming. Perhaps most controversially, Biden allowed crude oil to continue to flow through the Dakota Access Pipeline despite the fact the final section of the pipeline does not have a federal permit and runs through the treaty-protected Standing Rock Sioux Tribe reservation. Then in July 2022 the Supreme Court, stacked with majority Republican appointed judges, issued a ruling in *West Virginia v Environmental Protection Agency* that reduced the EPA's authority to put state-level limits on carbon emissions. The ruling went against previous Supreme Court decisions and non-coincidentally benefitted the fossil fuel industry.

However, despite widespread challenges, the Biden administration achieved a major victory when it passed the Inflation Reduction Act in August 2022. This was done even with the might of fossil fuel lobbyists working with Republican members of Congress against any climate legislation. Predictably, senate Republicans unanimously opposed the bill resulting in a 50–50 tie that was broken by the deciding vote of Vice President Kamala Harris. It was then taken to the House where it passed again along strict party lines with 220 to 207 in favour. The legislation was criticised by some community and environmental groups for compromises made to oil and gas companies. But overall, it represented a very significant milestone, overcoming decades of Republican resistance to any climate legislation and injecting \$370 billion into the economy to help transition the country away from fossil fuels towards solar, wind and other renewable energy.

With the passing of domestic climate legislation, the United States may be able to take a global leadership role in de-politicising the climate emergency and help develop practices to mitigate planetary warning. This will require relying upon the advice of climate science experts from around the world, as well as reducing the influence of fossil fuel corporations on domestic and international political processes. However, just how significant this leadership may be is in question given the urgency of the looming climate catastrophe and the real threat that the Republican Party will take majority control of Congress in the mid-term 2022 election and return Trump – or one of his trusted party loyalists – to presidency in 2024. Arguably, in the United States the biggest obstacle to a pro-environment agenda is the tight control Trump maintains over Republican Party members who are in lockstep in weaponising the environment and blocking any form of pro-climate action (Friedman and Weisman 2022).⁴

Concluding comments

The structural dependence of the global political economy on fossil fuels was underscored with Russia's invasion of Ukraine in early 2022, leading to escalating gas prices and energy shortages around the world. While for many millions of people this invasion was understood as an aggressive act of war that resulted in death and violence and a denial of democratic values, for oil companies the war was a financial money-maker. As argued by Irène Wabiwa Betoko, International Project Leader for Greenpeace Africa, 'After oil demand and prices briefly fell during the lockdowns of 2020, we're seeing Big Oil enjoying unprecedented war-time profits'. She went on, 'Instead of steering us into a climate catastrophe, the international community must stop serving as the handmaiden of Big Oil' (Wabiwa Betoko 2022).

With the structural realities of ongoing fossil fuel dependency, particularly for major industrialised countries in the Global North, we are seeing a growing alliance between anti-environmentalism and antidemocratic political leadership. No longer able to completely deny climate science, many leaders are being forced to take a more hardline stand against growing grassroots political pressures to confront the negative impacts of planetary warming. Amidst the global drift towards antidemocratic governance, climate change is being weaponised by extreme-right leaders to further their political agendas. We see this in the United States with the Republican Party dismantling laws intended to protect people, animals and places from the negative impacts of extractive capitalism. We also see this in the Republicans' punitive reaction against political opponents and companies who speak out against investing in fossil fuel industries. And we see this in Republican legislation against democratic

principles that includes preventing open and free elections as well as peaceful protest of the laying of gas pipelines on public lands.

Given the enormous power and profits at stake, it should be anticipated that over the coming decade we will see – in tandem with the global antidemocratic trend – a deepening conflict around environment politics. And we should also expect to see the increasing weaponising of the environment by extreme-right leaders whose political office in part depends on the financing and influence of the fossil fuel industry. This weaponising may include an explicit silencing of climate scientists and environmental activists and may include strategies such as defunding research, increasing surveillance and censorship, social media smear campaigns, as well as more severe measures of false criminal charges, imprisonment and violent confrontations. It is important not to forget that Trump endorsed the sending in of police in riot gear to clear ‘water protectors’ peacefully demonstrating against the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock in 2017. Nor should we forget the escalation of deadly attacks on Indigenous peoples and local farmers protesting the burning of rainforests and clearing of lands in places such as Brazil, Colombia and the Philippines (Global Witness Report 2020).⁵ The killing of British journalist Dom Phillips and Brazilian Indigenous expert Bruno Pereira in June 2022 brought international attention to the deadly conflicts that have been going on for years between Amazonian locals and mining and logging companies.

Linking the fossil fuel industry as a significant driver of the global political economy to the global lean towards antidemocracy makes explicit why many leaders work on behalf of gas and oil companies that help finance their political campaigns and keep them in office. The story is very bleak – few countries have put into place new environmental laws since the Paris Agreement of 2015, and many of the biggest polluting countries have actively dismantled the environmental protection laws existing at the time of signing. Moreover, billions of dollars in climate crisis funds pledged by the wealthiest countries have not been delivered to the poorest of the countries ravaged by the cumulative impacts of the climate crisis. Many of these countries, such as Somalia and other nations in sub-Saharan Africa, are now facing catastrophic poverty and famine (Busby 2022).

So, despite moments of optimism with the election of pro-climate leaders (ie President Joe Biden in the United States, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese in Australia, Vice President Francia Márquez in Colombia, President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil), and the passing of domestic legislation in the US aimed to transition towards renewable energy, what we are witnessing over the long term is a widespread international correlation between dying democracies and dying ecological systems. Fossil fuel industries have been warmly embraced by most antidemocratic leaders, contributing to the escalating production of greenhouse gas emissions and loss of biodiversity and looming multi-species extinction (Kolbert 2015; McGuire 2022). This alliance of antidemocracy and anti-environmentalism underpins today’s global political landscape and reflects a new phase of largely unregulated fossil fuel capitalism – what some scholars are calling fossil fascism (Malm and The Zetkin Collective 2021). Promoted by economic elites, this global system of resource extractivism is responsible for warming the planet and, in the coming decades, is on target for killing much of the human and non-human life that inhabits it.

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Notes on contributor

Eve Darian-Smith is Professor and Chair of the Department of Global Studies & International Studies at the University of California, Irvine. She is an interdisciplinary scholar trained in law, history and anthropology and is interested in issues of postcolonialism, human rights, legal pluralism, authoritarianism and democracy. She is an award-winning author and teacher and has published widely, including 13 books and edited volumes. Her latest book is *Global Burning: Rising Antidemocracy and the Climate Crisis* (2022), which won the Association for Humanist Sociology 2022 book prize. Her research has been supported by the National Science Foundation, Wenner-Gren Foundation and American Philosophical Society. She co-edits the book series 'Global and Insurgent Legalities' with Duke University Press and is on the editorial boards of six leading interdisciplinary journals.

Notes

1. I use the term 'antidemocracy' rather than other terms such as autocracy, authoritarianism or populism to avoid endless definitional discussion. As a term, antidemocracy covers a wide spectrum of governmental policies and decision-making ranging from mild to extreme forms of oppression that undermine core democratic principles including aspirations of social equality, political accountability and representative government.
2. This finding is based on interviews with over 48,000 people in 34 African countries between 2019 and 2021. Afrobarometer, <https://www.afrobarometer.org/about/>
3. This includes crude oil, all other petroleum liquids and biofuels. US Energy Information Administration, <https://www.eia.gov/tools/faqs/faq.php?id=709&t=6>
4. Fueling anti-environmentalism among the public are widespread disinformation campaigns as well as elaborate conspiracy theories such as those pushed by QAnon that circulate through global social media. Over the years Trump has been a vocal supporter of QAnon as have some of his political allies. Stuart Thompson, journalist for *The New York Times*, has noted that the spread of disinformation no longer involves family members sharing fake news on social media platforms. On the contrary, he goes on, there is a lot of money involved and 'It's a very organized machine at this point It's not just a fleeting interest spurred by a few partisan voices. It's an entire community and social network and pastime for millions of people' (Hounshell et al. 2022).
5. For a revealing – and horrifying – interactive map about the 1540 land and environment defenders who have been killed around the world since 2012, and the extractive industries linked to their deaths, see Global Witness Report, 'In Numbers: Legal Attacks against Defenders Since 2012', <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/numbers-lethal-attacks-against-defenders-2012/>

ORCID

Eve Darian-Smith  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1971-0323>

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