

Politics at the End of the Anthropocene

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“For over thirty years the scientific knowledge of global climate change has been on the [political and public agenda](#), but today, we are further from dealing with the root causes than ever before. Emissions from burning fossil fuels and other sources of greenhouse gases are on the rise, while extractive industries and far-right wing political parties engage in climate change denial.”

The above introduction was supposed to be the opening of a text focusing on the overlap of the climate crisis, right-wing authoritarianism, and the origins of both in our fossil fueled global economy. I was supposed to bring together all of my interdisciplinary knowledge on these subjects from the research we are carrying out at the [Center for Studies of Climate Change Denial](#) in Sweden. Our findings have just been published in a book with the title [Heated – Democracy in the Period of Climate Crisis](#). I had for a few weeks written down my judgments of what to do if we are to find safe ground when lowering the greenhouse emissions. But nobody foresaw the outbreak of COVID-19.

The whole world today is in a state of flux, and will be for months, if not years, to come. At the same time, many of the measures taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19 (lockdowns, closed borders, etc.) are in line with the authoritarian shift taking place in some of the largest countries in the world. While it feels like a new reality, this is not a unique time in human history. If we are to handle this triple crisis of climate change, authoritarianism, and diseases in a way that actually shifts us on a path towards healing Earth and its Earthlings—creating a center of gravity attractive enough to shift the field of energy towards a sustainable future—we need to recognize the historical patterns that have led us to this point. When researchers just have named our current geological period as the Anthropocene, maybe our best thinking should be about how to end this idea of human exceptionalism at the core of such a term?

Ecocidal Logic of Late-Anthropocene

A bit more than a decade ago, four global societal processes came together. The first three trends—high awareness of the climate crisis, economic recession, and a pandemic (H1N1)—resulted in the fourth outcome, as less coal, oil, and gas was extracted and burned, leading to decreasing carbon emissions. At the time, the political response was to [“fossil fuel up” the economy](#) (e.g; shale gas in the US, tar sands in Canada). Today, another reaction is needed.

The fossil fuel industry cannot “save us” this time since it has for decades been a merchant of doubts spreading contrarian climate science while it has pumped and mined [oil, gas, and coal](#). They have successfully created an “ideological” climate change denial among right-wing authoritarian nationalist political parties around the globe (led by Trump, Bolsonaro, and Morrison, to name a few). When the youth climate justice movement brought climate into politics, the “climate denial machine” (as termed by professor Riley Dunlap) again went into a higher gear. This engine is well funded, well established, and connected to right-wing nationalist political agendas. Its [power is widespread](#). The maintainers of an audience for the messages sent out by the climate denial machine is quite a homogenous group of older men with [conservative values](#). Challenged by the straightforwardness of young people in the climate movement in 2018 and 2019, men with conservative values who were part of right-wing nationalist parties enacting “industrial/breadwinner masculinities” have reacted with anger, [fear, and confrontation](#). This reaction is connected to the structures of industrial modernization and our fossil fuel based global economy which has demanded these types of values and practices by especially Western men [since the 17th century](#).

We are now in the middle of a perfect storm which was (as in 2009) preceded by widely shared knowledge [regarding the climate crisis](#). Added to this is a pandemic (as in 2009). In this recession, less coal, oil, and gas is extracted and burned, leading to decreasing carbon emissions; however, the global economy might be “fossil fueled up” again if transformative policies are not put in place.

Where to Now?

If we are to leave anthropocentric extractive logic behind, laws and norms need to be changed—as norms and laws were changed when we entered the Anthropocene. Just as the industrial revolution was made possible not only by technological innovations, but also very much by shifts in values and laws making extractivism the new normal, our global climate emergency needs similar shifts towards [glocal care for our planet](#). Two suggestions to that end are outlined below.

First is the need to try out laws that protect the planet. For many years, scholars from a diverse set of fields such as law, sociology, Indigenous studies, and gender studies have laid out the vision and practice of [Rights of Nature](#), arguing that “nature” in and of itself should be part of political decision making. These ideas are more acute and important today than ever, not least because it seems that only including “nature” as a resource in policy making or as a limit not to be crossed is [failing us as a species](#). Rights of Nature are today inscribed in the constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia; additionally, rivers in New Zealand and Lake Erie in the United States have been granted rights. This approach could also be implemented globally through the Rome Statute. The Rome Statute underpins international law and, combined with a fifth statute in the form of an End Ecocide Law—similar to the law against Genocide—could bring court cases to the International Criminal Court in the Hague. For example, a case against those responsible for the [Great Barrier Reef bleaching](#) may be possible.

Second is the need to change the gender norms that shape men into “[industrial/breadwinner masculinities](#).” This way of framing maleness is today present mostly in the same aforementioned cohort of climate change deniers and is failing both men themselves and the broader societies they live in; just look how Scott Morrison handled the fires in Australia, or how Jair Bolsonaro acts now with COVID-19. A shift is needed toward masculinities with greater care for men themselves, as well as for women, youths, [societies, and the Earth](#). In scholarship and education, younger and more aware men are turning toward what has been termed “ecological masculinities” as a way to be just and careful with all humans and non-humans alike. Inspired by academic rigor from the traditions of ecological feminism and feminist care theory, “[ecological masculinities](#)” enacting caring encounters with self and others, recognises our material interconnectedness with humans and other-than-humans alike, identifying the costs of male domination as well in pro-feminist solidarity creating a just society for all bringing us back to Earth.

There is a need in this moment to be innovative and work with solutions that can make a big difference. Rather than “fossil fuel up” the climate change denial machine once again, new forms of laws and transformations of gender norms are two solutions that will create a new path for humanity

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Associate Professor Martin Hultman, Chalmers University of Technology, Sweden, is widely published in energy, climate and environmental issues – especially notable are the articles ‘The Making of an Environmental Hero: A History of Ecomodern Masculinity, Fuel Cells and Arnold Schwarzenegger’ and ‘A green fatwā? Climate change as a threat to the masculinity of industrial modernity’ then the books Discourses of Global Climate Change and Ecological Masculinities. Hultman leads three research groups analyzing ‘gender and energy’, ‘ecopreneurship in circular economies’, ‘climate change denial’ and as part of his academic work he publishes chronicles in a wide range of newspapers and gives public lectures commenting on contemporary politics.