

On facing the crucial psychosocial and political-economic dimensions of anthropogenic global warming

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Abstract Anthropogenic global warming is one of the most significant existential threats facing the human species. Nonetheless, most individuals largely conduct their lives in a manner that does not fully acknowledge, let alone effectively deal with this threat. This field note argues that both a psychosocial and political-economic approach could offer more in-depth perspectives to understand anthropogenic global warming and potential avenues to investigate it moving forward. In so doing, it is argued that climate change policy recommendations, and associated political action, could benefit from taking into account the dimension of our psyches on an individual and collective level, as well as the political-economic context of anthropogenic global warming. *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* (2020) 25, 271–282. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41282-020-00165-6>; published online 24 January 2020

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As Susan Kassouf (2017) argues, climate change scientists and well-versed policy-makers agree that climate change is the greatest existential threat facing the human species (although the threat of global annihilation posed by nuclear weapons is a close second). The manner in which we largely proceed with our daily lives as if climate change was nothing more than a small, subsidiary concern, or as highly exaggerated, or even a myth (Levy and Spicer, 2013), is therefore somewhat astounding. A psychoanalytic perspective would argue that individuals are largely in denial, or enacting disavowal (see also Weintrobe, 2013) – concepts that will be explored in more depth in this piece. Further, the political-economic dimensions of anthropogenic global warming also need to be explicitly considered,

whether in policy documents and/or associated political action – something that thus far has largely, if not entirely, been avoided, for reasons that this field note will also discuss.

In the Freudian framework, and as further specifically interpreted by the Lacanian theorist Slavoj Žižek (2012), denial and disavowal are defense mechanisms that reduce anxiety. These mechanisms are distinct in the following manner: denial operates by entirely eliminating the awareness of a distressing reality consequent to becoming aware of it, or entirely eliminating or denying its truth (such as by arguing that anthropogenic global warming is not actually happening); whereas disavowal entails knowing and not knowing all at once, and involves a splitting of the ego (Freud, 1927/1961). As Hall and Pick (2017) argue, disavowal can therefore be associated with the notion of turning a blind eye – the reality, perception, or circumstances in question are not denied or negated, but rather pushed away from conscious thought. As Slavoj Žižek (2012) puts it, in denial, the content is admitted into consciousness, but is characterized by a repudiation; with disavowal, the content is admitted into consciousness, but “[...] its symbolic impact is suspended, it is not really integrated into the subject’s symbolic universe” (p. 859). This is to say that the content is not denied, but is not properly given a life or acknowledged in its full power – it lives within us, but its meaning and impact are suspended.

These defense mechanisms occurring at the individual level then begin to operate on a larger social level, beginning with lower-level interactions between individuals, without any one person having to consciously create the phenomenon (Dodds, 2011). At its most extreme, climate change denial manifests in outright skepticism towards the scientific consensus that global warming is real and human-caused – a position famously espoused by, for example, a number of conservative Republicans in the United States (Leiserowitz *et al.*, 2018). On a more mundane, everyday level, disavowal manifests, for example, in the consumption of products without acknowledging the manner in which they were produced, their true cost, or their impact on the environment. A notorious example of this is packaged meat: there is a great amount of disavowal at work when pre-packaged meat is purchased in a supermarket as if in a vacuum, without the full confrontation with and acknowledgement of the fact that a sentient animal had to die in order to enable the packaging, purchasing, and consumption of that meat. Slavoj Žižek (2009) has addressed this kind of disavowal in the following way: “I know, but I don’t want to know that I know, so I don’t know. I know it, but I refuse to fully assume the consequences of this knowledge, so that I can continue acting as if I don’t know” (pp. 45–46; see also Adams, 2015). Beyond this, many of us continue to consume meat, even though many of us are also very well aware of the detrimental impact of livestock production on the environment and the fact that it is one of the biggest sources of greenhouse gas emissions (see, amongst many



others, Garnett, 2009; Moran and Wall, 2011). Globally, consumption of livestock products is actually on the rise (Garnett, 2009; Godfray *et al.*, 2018).

Disavowal on this scale is nothing new. Slavoj Žižek's work in relation to the "obscene underside" of democracy (see amongst others, Žižek, 2005, p. 57, 2006, p. 370; see also Danil, 2017) can be transposed to the issues at hand here. Succinctly, the obscene is that which cannot be encapsulated or contained within the symbolic order, but also paradoxically that which is retroactively generated through the creation of the symbolic order. It is the *beyond* of the symbolic order – the abject and the unspeakable. Maria Aristodemou (2014) describes it thus: In Freud's (1913/1955) *Totem and Taboo*, the mythical primordial crime that establishes a community of legal subjects is the murder of the father by his sons. As Aristodemou (2014) continues, the death of the real father establishes the symbolic father, or the Name-of-the-Father – which presides over the symbolic order, constituted by laws, the social, customs, and language. A surplus remains in this transition, however, and haunts the symbolic order – the obscene (p. 65).

As Žižek (2006) argues, the laws or rules that constitute the social require that subjects relinquish their own personal *jouissance* (or enjoyment) in the interest of the higher good of the community (Sheehan, 2012). Here, *jouissance* needs to be distinguished from Freud's (1920/1955) pleasure principle. *Jouissance*, strictly speaking, entails going beyond, or transgressively trespassing the pleasure principle to reach that which is obscene (Lacan, 2018). To continue, *jouissance* does not simply disappear – rather, it is disavowed, or members of the community turn a blind eye to it. It can then take on the form of an "open secret," as that which everyone knows very well is going on, but refuses to openly acknowledge. In *The Parallax View*, Žižek (2006) gives the example of the torture and abuse perpetrated at Abu Ghraib in 2003 and 2004, and argues that, far from the incidents being perpetrated by a few "bad apples" as the Bush administration insisted (Hajjar, 2013, p. 7), they were actually indicative of the obscene underside of US liberal democracy.

Further, the threats posed by anthropogenic global warming also provoke our fears of not fully possessing self-mastery and mastery over the environment. The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (2006; see also Vanheule, 2011 and Danil, 2016) argued that the illusions of total self-mastery and mastery over our surroundings are crucial to our misrecognition of ourselves and our condition. Such illusions develop as a defense mechanism of sorts during our infancy, during what Lacan called the mirror-stage, which involves the process of ego formation (Lacan, 2006). In our altricial condition that entails nursling dependence and a fragmented experience of the body while we are still undergoing development, we misrecognize ourselves as coherent, whole, and in control through internalizing and assuming specular images. These images can correspond to our reflection in a literal mirror or through the gaze of others. Such images provide an ideal of an integrated, coherent, and whole self – what Lacan termed

the Ideal-I (Lacan, 2006) – that the infant will strive to assume as corresponding to itself. This assumption reduces the incredible anxiety that is provoked by what are in fact accurate feelings of vulnerability. Further, Lacan argued that this experience is not limited to infancy – rather, the experience establishes a generalized search for stability and coherency in the world and in the self that the individual will continue to seek for the rest of their life.

A consideration of the psychosocial – that is to say, individual behaviours, beliefs, actions, and motivations, both conscious and unconscious, and how those individual factors interlink, mutually shape, depend on, are informed by and are contextualized in the social in a mutually constitutive relationship – would be a substantial and helpful contribution to tackling anthropogenic global warming. There is no individual without the social and vice-versa, and there has been both an individual and collective failure to truly acknowledge and act upon the significant and immediate risks that anthropogenic global warming poses. As the UCL Communicating Science Policy Commission to the Science and Technology Committee of the UK House of Commons (2014) states:

Evidence from climate science shows that the modern world is founded on a false assumption—that it can be powered by fossil fuels with impunity [...] While a majority of the general public broadly accept that climate change is occurring, and that human activity plays at least some role in this, the severity of the threat and the urgency of individual and collective action, as well as exactly what we need to do, is not widely appreciated. Neither is the extent to which individual and collective action is needed to prevent serious climate disruption. (paragraph 1)

If we disavow, that is to say, turn a blind eye to the effect that we have on the environment, we do not have to face, amongst other things, our self-absorption to the exclusion of the natural world, other species, and future generations; our ability for destructiveness; or the changes that we need to implement in order to effectively tackle pertinent issues and threats. We also do not have to face the fact that not everything will be within our control or resolvable by human ingenuity, so that we can continue “business as usual” without any consequences. For example, many of us maintain a blind faith in the ability of technology to remedy any potential problems by climate change – here, technology is fetishized (and one can interpret this in a Freudian and/or a Marxist sense) and given mystical properties as the “cure-all” that will unequivocally save us. This is actually far from certain, however; for example, the development of negative emissions technology to reduce carbon dioxide already in the atmosphere could buy us some time – but as it stands, such technology is still in its infancy (Martin, 2016).



Moreover, many of us have a vested interest in things remaining the way they are now, enthralled as we may be by the spell of (over-)consumption generally. In the continuous attempt to generate profit, this consumption is not just encouraged by the system of capitalism, the engines of which are powered by fossil fuels, and in fact which provide the primary energy source of global growth (Di Muzio, 2011), but also by and large by governments, given that consumer spending is crucial in relation to a good GDP. As Daniel J. Fiorino (2018) argues, “[a]side from national security, economic growth is probably the number one priority of modern governments. Political careers rise and fall on the ability to deliver rising GDP and incomes. Growth rates are a measure of success” (p. 2). In addition, the global market economy’s addiction to fossil fuels is compounded by their high energy return on investment, or EROI, in comparison to alternative energy sources (Hall *et al.*, 2014). The incongruence between sustainable lifestyles, and government and capitalist objectives, must therefore be unequivocally acknowledged and dealt with.

More broadly, modern industrial societies are, without question, highly dependent on fossil fuels – through our modes of transportation, including aircraft and petrol and diesel engine cars, and some of our modes of generating power, amongst other things. But changes must occur if we are to counter the risks posed by anthropogenic global warming – and perhaps drastic changes, as Lesley Head (2016) argues. At the level of our individual psyches, we must prepare ourselves for those changes and learn to accept them – successful mourning must therefore occur in the process of transitioning from current lifestyles to more sustainable ways of living. As Head argues, these changes entail “[...] terrifying thoughts, given that humans are not good at voluntary restraint, and given the way that all our lives and well-being in the more affluent parts of the world are tied into and dependent on a fossil-fuel economy” (p. 3). Head argues that grief will be a necessary component to a transition to a low-carbon society – grief as we compromise, and perhaps lose some of the things, or find them harder to achieve, in a low-carbon society *vis-à-vis* a fossil fuel-powered one.

I further wish to discuss a recent scientific report to emphasize my points. In October 2018, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released a special report, “Global warming of 1.5°C” (IPCC, 2018). The Summary for Policymakers reiterates what is now largely common knowledge, including that human activities are estimated to have caused approximately 1°C of global warming above industrial levels, which is likely to reach 1.5°C between 2030 and 2052 if it continues to increase at the current rate. Of course, with high confidence, the Summary continues with the argument (which corresponds to 90% to 100% likely) that reaching and sustaining net-zero global anthropogenic CO₂ and declining net non-CO₂ radiative force would halt anthropogenic global warming on multi-decadal time-scales. The Summary highlights the benefits of limiting global warming to 1.5°C compared to 2°C – such as the

potential reduction of risks of drought and precipitation deficits in some regions and, conversely, reduction of risks from heavy precipitation events in other regions; risks associated with sea level rises being reduced; and on land, the reduction of impacts on biodiversity and ecosystems, including species loss and extinction, being lower at 1.5°C compared to 2°C. With high confidence, the Summary argues that limiting global warming to 1.5°C compared to 2°C is projected to lower the impacts on terrestrial, freshwater, and coastal ecosystems, and is conducive to their retaining more of their services to humans. With high confidence, the same limit is argued to reduce increases in ocean temperature as well as associated increases in ocean acidity, and reduce decreases in ocean oxygen levels – and therefore lessen risks to marine biodiversity, fisheries, and ecosystems, and their functions and services to humans.

The above excerpts from the Summary are indicative of the larger general approach of the Summary itself, which is couched in purely scientific terms, simply presenting projections derived from data. The Summary is therefore an example of objective science, removed from a political, social, and economic context. This is not particularly surprising or even necessarily wrong, given that science largely functions under the principle that it should be evidence-based and removed from ideological or political concerns. Recent proclamations from US President Donald Trump that climate change scientists have a “a very big political agenda” (BBC News, 2018) probably do not help the situation either, as scientists strive to present data in as objectively a manner as possible in an effort to avoid being seen as implicitly partisan or biased.

However, beyond arguments as to whether scientific research, or any other research, can ever truly be fully “objective” – a supposition that has already been persuasively debunked given that research is always value-laden, whether through the choices that are made about what to research and how to undertake that research (see, for example, Botterill, 2017) – how is this objective scientific data that is presented in a political, social, and economic vacuum to be interpreted effectively by policy-makers? There is no question that policy recommendations should be evidence-based – but, in relation to climate change at the very least, it would be a mistake to remove those evidence-based arguments from larger psychosocial and political-economic circumstances that not only created the conditions for that evidence to emerge, but moreover, are also the prism through which they can be better understood.

Therefore, additional climate change policies are needed that translate scientific data into concrete policy recommendations that shy away neither from the political-economic nor psychosocial dimensions of climate change, as discussed earlier. Political action must also be translated and mobilized from these policy recommendations. In relation to the political-economic, it is in fact not “biased” to argue that the ethos of unlimited economic growth – as espoused by neoliberal capitalism and as presently powered by fossil fuels – is simply not



tenable on a planet with finite resources. That the planet does not possess infinite resources or biodiversity is a self-evident fact, and not a mythical construction by those on the political left with vested interests in, amongst other things, diverging from neoliberal capitalism (for an interesting discussion of ecological limits, see, amongst others, Fiorino, 2018).

A concerted, global and united effort to move away from the present global economic system, which continues to rely heavily on fossil fuels to drive economic growth in the short- to medium-term, therefore needs to be theorized and implemented as soon as possible. As Raymond Cléménçon (2016) argues, “[...] there is no attempt to address the inconsistencies between international climate and international trade liberalization objectives which countries continue to pursue side-by-side with no co-ordination” (p. 11). Elsewhere, as Eric Biber *et al.* (2017) argue in relation to the fact that the global energy economy is locked into fossil fuel production and consumption to the detriment of effectively tackling catastrophic climate change, “[...] for almost every country on the planet there are large gaps between what scientists and politicians agree society must undertake to be successful in managing an energy transition away from fossil fuels and what current laws and policies provide for” (p. 606).

Part and parcel of this will involve people, individually and, perhaps more importantly, collectively and continuously, confronting those in power, as well as those with a vested interest in the current neoliberal capitalist paradigm, as presently powered by fossil fuels, remaining in place. For example, George Monbiot (2018) has explicitly referred to Donald Trump and “[...] his cabinet of multi-millionaires; the influence of the Koch brothers in funding right-wing organisations; the Murdoch empire and its massive contribution to climate science denial; or the oil and motor companies whose lobbying prevents a faster shift to new technologies.” Neoliberal power must be countered, and this must be done on a global level in order to be truly effective. One crucial aspect of this will be the nationalization or renationalization of key sectors of the economy, such as energy and transport, and with climate change a key focus in relation to how these sectors are run. Crucially, however, such policy recommendations need to acknowledge that the primary burden rests on politicians and corporations – and insofar as politicians go, we as a populace have a major role to play by forming collectives, lobbying and pressuring governments, and voting the right politicians into power in the first place. Further, any transition to a low-carbon society needs to protect, first and foremost, the poor, so that a Yellow Vests revolt does not predictably take place. Emmanuel Macron’s misguided fuel tax failed because it penalized those already struggling with living costs, who simply could not afford to shoulder the burden of replacing their vehicles, and who had no viable alternative modes of transportation available to them. One should, instead, take the example of a different policy in Australia, where carbon taxes placed on industries were diverted to help those

on lower incomes by lowering income taxes and increasing welfare payments (Harrabin, 2018).

In the transition to a non-fossil fuel-powered world, policy recommendations, in their unequivocal and non-negotiable discussion of, amongst other things, specific restrictions and putting a price on carbon – whether through a tax, an emissions trading program, or a combination of the two as the transition is achieved – would explicitly discuss the considerable restructuring of our lives that would follow. As argued earlier, we must mourn our old ways of life and learn to adapt to new ones. To begin with, those changes will include, for example, a ban on petrol and diesel vehicles, which a number of countries, such as Norway and India, have pledged to do by 2025 and 2030 respectively – the UK (excluding Scotland, with the Scottish government having already pledged to phase out petrol and diesel cars by 2032, for example), should also follow suit by phasing out such vehicles within a similar time-frame (Gabbattis, 2018); significantly reduced consumption of animal products, which may be partially achieved through a tax on the consumption rather than production of meat for reasons of efficiency and feasibility (Wirsenius *et al.*, 2011; Nordgren, 2012); and the allocation of air mile allowances that can further be traded, depending on need (Sodha, 2018).

This will undoubtedly mean some curtailment of our present freedom of choices – and the reticence, particularly from liberal Western governments, to steer people's lives and choices in particular directions is perhaps one of the reasons why progress in this area has been so slow. For example, in the case of a tax on meat consumption, Anders Nordgren (2012) has highlighted that diet and lifestyle are perceived as something with which politicians should largely not interfere, as doing so could be perceived as an infringement on individual autonomy and privacy. However, the fact is that we already live by codes as to what we can or cannot do on a daily basis – or, in Foucauldian terms, we are disciplined (Foucault, 1991) – and we largely comply with those codes. We do so particularly when we recognize that doing so is in the interests of the greater good and the harmonious functioning of the social order, which we have all implicitly made a pact to respect and uphold (or face the consequences) – such things are called customs, norms and laws, and constitute, in a Lacanian psychoanalytic sense, the socio-symbolic. This is not to say that those codes are always justified or cannot be contested and even overturned. However, to argue that the consumption of meat, for example, is entirely a matter of individual choice exercised in a vacuum is misguided, since that choice has significant collective consequences, particularly in the face of anthropogenic global warming.

To conclude, climate change policy recommendations, and associated political action, that unequivocally and explicitly assess and deal with the following two things could have a valuable impact: the dimension of our psyches, on both an individual and collective level, to identify the anxieties,



defense mechanisms, and the fetishizing of technology, for example, that stand in the way of effective collective action; and the political-economic dimension, specifically the acknowledgement that neoliberal capitalism, particularly as powered by fossil fuels, is simply incompatible with sustainability and averting calamitous climate change. This piece has further suggested a number of policy recommendations, whilst holding in mind that tackling climate change will need a range of approaches and a globally co-ordinated effort, and is not restricted to the issues discussed here.

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Linda Roland Danil obtained her PhD from the School of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Leeds in 2016. Since then, she has published a number of sole-authored articles and book reviews in several journals, such as *Law and Critique*, *Law, Culture and the Humanities*, *Critical Studies on Security*, *Legal Studies*, the *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, and the *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*. She has also guest edited a special issue for the journal *Critical Studies on Security*, and co-guest edited a special issue for the *Australian Feminist Law Journal*.

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