Ecology and the politics of climate: notes concerning the idea that the reaction against environmentalism is authoritarian, rather than conservative.

We have some explaining to do. The sources of fierce and successful resistance against recognising and acting on the climate problem have been investigated, debated and wondered at for years, without a decent consensus ever emerging – either about what can be done to neutralise them, or what, exactly, they really are. That's not to say nothing has been learned. On the contrary, a lot of work has taught us a great deal. But … we're no closer to actually fixing this diabolical perplexity than we were 25 years ago when it began to be a serious issue, paralysing decision makers and confusing the public, where otherwise, political will might have arisen.

It occurred to me reading Karen Stenner's landmark study of the nature of authoritarianism, that her insight might be useful in pinning down just what it is that powers the climate denial movement. What we seem to lack is an adequate account of the passion; the apparently righteous force, behind the movement. One suspects a moral agency as indefatigable and assured as this must have its origins somewhere in our common, inherited dispositions – our human nature. But where?

This is just the kind of enquiry Karen undertook in pursuit of a persisting puzzle in political psychology – what drives authoritarians? Lust for power? Conservative fears & apprehensions? Disordered childhoods? Her answer is admirably clear and convincing as a result of incisive conceptual analyses, and relentless accumulation of evidence.[1]

Authoritarianism, she found, is an enduring disposition, to be found in varying quantity in most, if not all people, but expressed according to the presence or absence of certain latency factors – overwhelmingly, perceived threats in society to the normative order – what we often call 'values'.

Authoritarians are people for whom tolerance of diversity in their society is a sensitive issue. If they sense that the coherence and unity of collective life is at stake, they want a countervailing force to restore it. They value authority, in other words, as a means to guarantee a paramount order – something essential for a tolerable sense of identity and permanence.

Conservatives, on the other hand, are people with a different disposition, and possibly a different kind of one – a strong preference for stability *vs* change (*Status quo conservatism*)

or individual freedom of action *vs* regulation (*Laissez faire conservatism*). These predilections too, are subject to provocation by varying social circumstances, and may exist independently or in tandem with authoritarianism.

Karen's revelation would therefore seem to pose an interesting question for anyone concerned about motives for climate denial – the more so because of the prevalence of instances where denial is professed by well qualified advocates (senior academics in other scientific disciplines, as well as a few climate researchers) who one would expect to know better. These people frequently mangle evidential and methodological arguments in an inexplicable way, so one is left wondering whether to account for their waywardness as psychosis. In other words, if sane, these deniers must be moved by powerful prejudices.

What follows is a sketch for an argument that ecology, the great 20th century discovery of the deep unity of the living world, is actually a profound normative threat which only some training and familiarity with its concepts can relieve. This 'coming to terms' with ecology is all too rare among us, even in the well educated rich societies, so the radical, disquieting character of its news about the human condition is a like a great sword hanging over everyone who highly values coherence and continuity, and fears the arrival of a shaky, indeterminate world scene shorn of certitude. For it has to be admitted, although ecology makes a substantial claim to truth, it has so far given us no very useful guidance on how to sustain our world of comfort and security. It is not hard to see it as all bad news.

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"Man inhabits two worlds. One is the world of plants and animals, of soils and airs and waters which preceded him by billions of years and of which he is a part. The other is the world of social institutions and artefacts he builds for himself, using his tools and engines, his science and his dreams to fashion an environment obedient to human purpose and direction."[2]

This idea, that humans are so constituted that they must live in a created 'world' populated and governed by the works and uses of imagination, language and culture, appears to be indispensable to understanding the predicament we now find ourselves in. Putting it like this, René Dubos implies that we inhabit simultaneously two worlds, but with the risk that we can become so absorbed by life in the human one that we effectively desert the other. This has consequences.

Peter L Berger sees this necessity of the human condition as a sort of unavoidable paradox.
"Like the other animals, man is *in* a world that antedates his appearance. But unlike the other mammals, this world is not simply given, prefabricated for him. Man must *make* a world for himself."
"The condition of the human organism in the world is thus characterised by a built-in instability. Man does not have a given relationship to the world. He must ongoingly establish a relationship with it."[3]

All traditional societies, and all agrarian ones until recent times, revealed this truth in their ordering of affairs. Religious stories that revolve around human prerogatives, purposes & causes. Economic practices that privilege human sustenance. And systems of meaning in which human actions are conceived on a background of non-participating natural agents with no competing rights - just the obligation of subservience. An anthropocentric world.

We know that, over millennia, locally and regionally, this arrangement often enough ended in ecological destruction and collapse. And we know that today, this very threat has been magnified to global scale. What has occurred in the meantime is something unique. Some perceptive biologists during the last half of the 20th century figured out a new way of understanding the living world - as an integrated, interdependent whole. The concept had a startling corollary: it abolished every kind of human privilege. Everything. Ecology is utterly unforgiving. It claims that, despite our special capacity (necessity) to create a 'human world' our membership of the 'first world' is no less binding than it is for dolphins or bees or bamboo. It's a hard lesson to swallow. And we resist it as if it were bitter medicine.

Ecological thinking is apparently seriously anti-intuitive. It's hard to learn - even for dedicated students - and in the society as a whole, it is almost ignored, and deeply unfamiliar. And yet, it is one of the most significant and useful insights of the scientific era. We cannot possibly solve the huge ecological problems that have accumulated all around us without the help of ecological understanding, yet in our public discourse it might as well never have been discovered.

Why is this? Well, for one thing, it appears we have more confidence in our collective wisdom than is warranted, either by scientific discovery or the hard lessons of history. We

don't seem to want to hear the news about human demotion. A thoughtful ecological pioneer put it this way:
"… a land ethic [ecological conception of life] changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such."[4]

Before ecology, the self-conscious story of human existence and fatefulness was a reassuring, unitary and comprehensive one. Nature's role in it was that of a yielding substrate or a bountiful stage upon which human actions and enterprises unfolded. The story was all about us; and it seemed to come naturally. When it bit the dust it wasn't due to any discovery, but a series of them, each removing a bit more of old certainties, like the tide against a dune, until ecological prophets rewrote the entire text. It's not about us, they said. Never was. It's about matching human pride with a suitable humility. In this new story, the paragon of animals is no conqueror, but a saviour – a beholder and sustainer of the beauty of the world.

I guess we can blame our confusion on an old bias, a cognitive disability – a kind of pre-scientific Ockham's razor that makes us choose simple explanations for complicated things. Aldo Leopold, thinking about this, saw it in terms that are familiar to every classical conservative: we just can never know enough about complex phenomena of life to be efficient designers or organisers.

"In human history," he wrote, "we have learned (I hope) that the conqueror role is eventually self-defeating. Why? Because it is implicit in such a role that the conqueror knows, *ex cathedra*, just what makes the community clock tick, and just what and who is valuable, and what and who is worthless in community life. It always turns out that he knows neither, and this is why his conquests eventually defeat themselves."

Ecology is radical because it asks us to abandon something so familiar we don't know it is there – a big chunk of our solidarity; a universally recognised self-image; a signal of unity – and replace it with a teeming diversity that for most folks fits nothing in their imaginations or memories. This imaginative failure is surely why, to people disturbed by its proposals, ecology can look like romanticism gone mad, an irresponsible repudiation of hard-won human achievements, a retrograde faith with an odour of nihilism, a reckless social idealism.

There certainly exists something one can call an 'anti-environment movement'. If any proof were needed, it should be sufficient to look at the visceral response to Rachel Carson in 1962, and then at the campaign to discredit her, which has continued ever since. The indignant quality of this old prejudice is exactly reproduced in the solid core of the climate denial movement today. 'How dare suggest that beneficial economic activity could induce something that further ingenuity could not cure?' they cry – an assertion of human primacy if ever there was one.

In an interview in 1992, after she had attended the Earth Summit, Dixie-Lee Ray encapsulated this outrage in a sentence. "Mankind is considered (by the radical environmentalists) the lowest and meanest of all species and blamed for everything."[5] A demotion like this appeared to her as a blend of blasphemy with treason. Her training in biology was no use against such an offence, as she went on to claim that the natural world was in better shape as a result of exploitation by humans than it had been before. Environmentalism was not just subversive of our righteous self-portrait, but it attacked moral foundations with a fake religion. 'Nature-worship' she called it.

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The question for consideration then is whether, instead of blaming 'conservative' prejudice for the force and persistence of climate denial (as we do all the time), we ought to be blaming offended and fearful authoritarians – for at least some of it. What difference would it make? Well, it might help explain a few puzzling things. Here, for example, is one of them.

Economy vs environment

Many people, anxious to engage 'right wing' opponents of climate action have proposed that advocates should push for 'market-based' solutions – that is, carbon pricing schemes that, once enacted, would operate within a free-market system without further intervention or regulation. Such a regime would shift the underlying rules of the market, but in a way that preserved all the entrepreneurial dynamics and incentives, ultimately moving market outcomes in the direction we need. Jim Hansen has been a steady advocate for this; so has Citizens Climate Lobby, a very effective volunteer group; so have some prominent Republicans, economists and businessmen. So far so good.

But, here's the catch – the goal of the policy is to extinguish entirely the biggest commercial enterprise on Earth, in just three or four decades. The fossil fuel businesses

all over the world are reckoned to be worth something like 4 or 5 trillion dollars, not counting their fixed assets, installations and infrastructure. Tens of millions of people depend on them for employment and sustenance. All of us depend on their products for much of our comfort and prosperity. We are nowhere near ready to do without them; their proprietors are certainly not interested in just letting them go. So the idea that *laissez faire* conservatives can be placated by a win-win carbon price is only feasible under the condition that it is compatible with indefinite survival of these immense business enterprises.

This ambivalence was captured in a remark by Rex Tillerson, then CEO of Exxon, when he said, a couple of years ago,
"What good is it to save the planet, if humanity suffers?"
Tony Abbott, when he was Australia's prime minister was more explicit, making the same point:
"This Government cares passionately about the environment. We only have one planet. We must leave it in better shape for our children and our grandchildren but the last thing we should ever do is clobber the economy to protect the environment because if we clobber the economy, the environment will surely suffer."[6]
And Australia's foreign minister, Julie Bishop must have been thinking along the same lines when she remarked on her return from Paris in December 2015:
"… all nations are committed to taking action … that's what we wanted … we know what our major trading partners and competitors are doing … all countries are committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions while balancing economic growth."

I hope you find these words, spoken with full sincerity by people in very senior executive roles, as perplexing as I do. Somehow, they seem to be saying, the world made by humans must come first – it even trumps "saving the planet". Surely we can say, these speakers are having trouble with the simple concept that humans inhabit the planet, right along with all the other living things. If their words mean anything, they seem to say that all the arrangements we have made for ourselves somehow float on top of the planet's dynamic systems, as if we were visitors here, autonomous, with the privilege of separating at will and leaving any problems behind. Nothing troubling beneath should be allowed to disturb our pursuit of 'progress'. This is a repudiation of the claims of ecology – nothing more nor less. But how can competent people do this?

You might want to say that free market orthodoxy is welded into conservative thinking – and that is true enough. But "free markets" is an economic abstraction; it's not a value

concept that can carry the kind of commitment we're seeing here. Nor are any markets in the real world truly free. They never have been, and every conservative who knows a thing or two understands this. You'd expect *laissez faire* conservatives to oppose intervention in the market; but if the need for an intervention had been established beyond doubt (which it has been) then you'd expect them to welcome a hands-off solution, one that merely applies a rule. letting market dynamics do the real work. But they don't.

Think a moment about the weirdness in those speeches. "We have no obligation to make the human world fit inside the planetary surface", they seem to be saying, exactly as if they were pioneers newly arrived in a bountiful land. That is what human populations have always done when they encountered a new ecological opportunity – exploit and multiply as if there were no tomorrow. Every other species does the same. The only thing that has ever come along to apply a brake to this inherent disposition is the discovery of ecology. Rex Tillerson's question is coherent (to him) because he has no idea what he is ignoring. And if it were explained to him, he would reject it precisely because ecology tells pioneers to pull up before they hit the wall. "What wall? We can jump over that", he would say.

There appears to be no reason why a transition from a fossil fuel economy to a renewable energy one could not be planned and managed. The costs of a transition are all going in the right direction; it's beyond question the only morally responsible thing to do; and we know how to do it. There is plenty of resistance from vested commercial interests, but there's lots of opposition from non-commercial actors too, like Tony Abbott. What seems to offend these folks is that accepting the necessity means swallowing a bitter pill – acknowledgment of human culpability, the existence of limits to growth, and the end of that comforting picture of the world as a benign theatre for all our endeavours – in Abbott's case, sanctioned by his religion.

My suggestion is that there is an 'economic prejudice', a prevailing, virtually unchallenged conviction that 'the economy' possesses a kind of systemic autonomy; that it runs on human industry and ingenuity, together with inputs from the environment, in much the way a factory does, taking in raw energy and materials and putting out goods and services. I suggest this amounts to a value claim of great force, and that it is flatly contradicted by ecology, which tells us the economy is nothing more nor less than a sub-system of the dynamic planetary surface, wholly contained therein, with no shred of the independence imputed to it. I suggest that this challenge to a precious orthodoxy could

produce exactly the response Karen Stenner described, and that it appears in the enigmatic words of Rex Tillerson, Tony Abbott and Julie Bishop.

There seems to be a lesson here – and it is this: if ecological thinking triggers an authoritarian disposition, at least in some people, then the node of tension in the dispute about the climate problem is not where we thought it was, and a lot of our advocacy has been in vain. And this would not be specially good news, because the insights of ecology are not easy to turn into public understanding – specially now, when science is so poorly appreciated, and a confected 'debate' has raged for years. Yet if this diagnosis was correct, then we would have no choice but to figure out ways to make it familiar. Whether that would entail an intractable collision with deep intuitions remains to be seen.

Notes

[1] Karen Stenner. *The Authoritarian Dynamic*. 2005. Cambridge University Press.

[2] Barbara Ward & Rene Dubos: *Only One Earth*. 1972. Norton, New York. p1

[3] Peter L Berger: The Sacred Canopy. 1967. Anchor Books, New York. p5

[4] Aldo Leopold: A Sand Country Almanac. 1949. Oxford University Press. p204

[5] Dixie-Lee Ray: *Science and the Environment,* Fall, 1992. The Acton Institute.

[6] Tony Abbott, speaking in South Australia, 12/8/2015