FROM MY BOOKSHELF 24.11.2021 | Claudia Detsch

To win the new climate war, we need a new strategy

Today's fossil-fuel lobbyists don't deny climate change. Instead, they distract from meaningful action. Activists must avoid falling into their traps

The well-known US climatologist Michael E. Mann is no pussyfooter. He likes to provoke, which makes his new book downright entertaining. In *The New Climate War*, Mann defies expectations. While it is unsurprising that he takes to task the decades-long machinations of large energy companies and their backers, other actors also attract his attention here.

Although climate denial no longer convinces the wider population, the 'climate war' is not over. There simply is a new form. Having lost the war against science, fossil-fuel lobbyists are now doing their best to thwart decisive action. Denial has given way to distraction. Today, the crisis is downplayed, deflected, and delayed – and doom mongering abounds.

Manipulative tactics

Michael Mann describes the earlier tactics the fossil-fuel lobby of industrial and oil-producing countries used – which has always taken their cues from the arms lobby, and the tobacco and beverage industries – and how they operate today. Sometimes, Mann seems to be personally feuding with the scientists who once helped the fossil fuel industry lie and now are guiding their deflection campaign. But we should indulge that from an author who has been subjected to personal attacks and defamation for decades.

Mann not only examines the interests of the fossil fuel industry, but also those of petrostates and governments. The meagre results of the latest COP show that Saudi Arabia, Australia, and Russia are keen to prevent implementation of climate change measures. As Mann sees it, fossil fuel's self-interest explains Russia's support for both Brexit and Trump's presidential campaign. For him, '*Russia Gate*' is synonymous with fossil fuels.

Mann's illuminating survey of lobbying practices includes the story of how the climate debate in Europe has taken the wrong turn in recent years. That Germany, too, is headed the wrong way became clear from an election campaign dominated by a debate around personal travel and meat consumption instead of structural issues. The distractors prevailed.

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The diversion campaign shifts responsibility from companies and industry to individuals, whose behaviour and personal decisions are critically scrutinized. The battle is no longer about international financial markets and the commodity exchange – but rather diets and flights.

We easily get more worked up about our neighbour's personal failings than over systemic change. An attack on lifestyles serves well to divide society, as it is bound to identity. Making someone else look bad has become a kind of reward – proof of our own moral superiority. According to Michael Mann, that's dangerous. It creates and sustains a false dilemma that helps get the fossil fuel industry lobby off the hook. Mann is clear that individual behavioural changes are not an *alternative* to systemic change. We definitely need both. But only changing the system will ensure our future.

Not only does criticising individual behaviour make us lose sight of the real goal, but it also weakens the community of climate advocates. Nagging about dietary and travel choices and about purity and virtue divides the movement. Natural allies attack each other, and the potential recruits from the political centre who are urgently needed to democratically restructure our economic system get scared off.

Climate doom porn

Mann shows that some activists don't want to just slow down climate change. He distrusts those who turn the fight against global warming into a fight for veganism or anti-capitalism and rejects the view that embracing technical and economic solutions equals being hoodwinked by neoliberalism. Advocating asceticism empowers those who preach that we should do *nothing:* The 'inactivists' – as Mann calls them – portray climate advocates as freedom-hating totalitarians.

While Mann is not against technology, he warns against pseudo-solutions like geo-engineering. Carbon capture and storage only makes sense for sectors that are hard to decarbonise, such as cement production. A bridge of natural gas with methane leaks leads us nowhere: The problem caused

by fossil fuels cannot be solved using *any* fossil fuel. Nuclear energy's inherent dangers and high cost exclude that, too. Such non-solutions only delay the necessary investments in renewable energies.

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Although Mann's views jibe with the young climate protectors of *Fridays for Future,* they will not like everything he writes. Mann acknowledges that they have managed to push the issue high on the political agenda and maintain public pressure. But he warns against overdoing it. Aggressive blaming and shaming hinders progress. Cautioning about the end of humanity, disparaging *all* negotiation results and demanding drastic measures can boomerang and make it harder to protect the climate. To get as many people as possible onboard, rather than tongue-lashing and foretelling doomsday, we've got to stress the benefits of what's necessary.

It would be a sad irony if the engaged, progressive camp were to get in its own way by refusing to accept compromise and consensus, or to recognise them as progress. Unfortunately, many climate protectors view *any* compromise as a hypocritical pretext for doing nothing – or even as cowardice – rather than recognising that it's crucial for peaceful coexistence in a democratic and pluralistic society.

Some activists obviously believe that people have to be shocked and scared into taking climate change seriously. With the fossil fuel lobby strategically using doom mongering, Mann warns that climate protectors' excessive demands and exaggerations – what he calls 'climate doom porn' – play into inactivists' hands. Such apocalyptic reading material sells well. But it doesn't help us fight climate change. Fear does not motivate: Instead, it causes people to turn away from the movement.

The glass is half full

According to Mann, we are *not* facing a dystopia. Obviously, we have got to act – but the global community is capable of acting. Although he credits Greta Thunberg and her movement with stimulating public discussion, Mann has little time for her scolding. Thunberg's accusation that next to nothing is being done is false and condescending towards the efforts being made worldwide. Mann's book helps us to evaluate the results of the most recent climate conference in Glasgow. The glass is half *full*.

Nevertheless, we must remain vigilant. Mann sees climate protection threatened by the same witches' brew that brought Donald Trump to power in 2016: the meddling of malicious state actors mixed with cynical disgust, even amongst leftists, who declared that there was no difference between Trump and Clinton – so voting was pointless.

Mann's *New Climate War* shows that we have indulged climate change deniers and opponents of climate policy for too long. Often they were just clever in mass communication. We should no longer give them a bully pulpit. In this respect, too, Mann's book is enlightening. Despite the seriousness of the subject, his book entertains, raises awareness, and inspires optimism. *That* is how we fight for the climate.



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