

[Jason W. Moore](#), May 15, 2024

# The Fear & the Fix

*Environmentalism serves the powerful*



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AS THE AUTOMOBILE-CLOGGED CITY of Los Angeles saw its smog problem worsen through the 1960s, Californians had ample reason to worry about environmental pollution. Then, in January of 1969, the pristine beaches of affluent Santa Barbara turned black, and the tar-slathered corpses of dolphins washed in with the tide after a blowout at an oil rig just off the coast dumped millions of gallons of crude into the water. At the time the largest such spill in U.S. history, it drew national headlines—and eventually the attention of President Richard Nixon, who paid a visit in March to assure Americans that, moving forward, economic growth and prosperity would not come “at the cost of the destruction of all those things of beauty without which all the material progress is meaningless.” Clearly, something had to be done about ‘the’ environment.

Gaylord Nelson, the junior senator from Wisconsin, had an idea. Barnstorming California that summer for conservationism, a cause he'd espoused since the 1940s, he came across an article from the New Left magazine *Ramparts* about teach-ins. "It suddenly occurred to me," he later told an interviewer, "why not have a massive nationwide grassroots teach-in on the environment?" The idea for the first Earth Day was born—and a movement to "save" the environment along with it. Nothing less than the survival of civilization appeared to hang in the balance. Or so the story goes.

In reality, the new movement was neither as new, confrontational, or left-wing as many now imagine. Often portrayed as a popular uprising, this mainstream environmentalist movement could more accurately be described as part of a wider web of think tanks, research institutes, transnational networks, academic institutions, well-endowed foundations, and government ministries: an eco-industrial complex that sought to "solve" the problem of the environment through a combination of "good science" and "good government."

This love affair with science, technology, and law has failed to put the brakes on the biospheric crisis. In fact, it has only contributed to the fundamental problem, failing to confront the unprecedented centralization of economic and political power that has brought us to the brink of ecological collapse. Environmentalism has become a cause for reform-minded tinkerers who imagine eco-alternatives and fixes of every kind—save those that would wrest power from the few and democratize the web of life.

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Since the end of the Civil War, environmentalism has very much been a blue-blood affair. As American capitalism came under the sway of giant corporations and the demand for resources exploded, the scientific and technocratic requirements for administering public and private power grew immeasurably. In order to house a growing population, softwood lumber output alone tripled between 1865 and the turn of the century. For the first time, beyond a few royal forests in western Europe, systematic resource management became central to capitalism. In this "first wave" of environmentalism, nature would have to be preserved, conserved, and managed if economic growth was to proceed with at least a semblance of order and efficiency.

These two paths of environmentalism, preservationist and conservationist, were personified by John Muir, who cofounded the Sierra Club in 1892, and Gifford Pinchot, who led the Department of Agriculture's Division of Forestry (later the U.S. Forest Service), beginning in 1898. The Sierra Club, indelibly associated with Muir's preservationism, was hardly a populist affair. Its board and original signatories included present and future presidents of Stanford University, a United States senator, and the Chief Justice of California's Supreme Court. This group led the charge to create a national park system, often by wresting lands from Indigenous control. Yellowstone was the first,

followed by Sequoia and Yosemite; in 1897 President Cleveland, with Muir's advice, significantly extended federal forest reserves. A binge of National Park formation followed, culminating in the National Park Service in 1916. The new parks "preserved" lands that were, on a good day, marginal to the monied interests. They were places like Oregon's Crater Lake— beautiful, remote, and hardly suitable for farming, ranching, or mining. Still, it abetted the march of capitalist progress.

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In contrast to Muir, the Scottish naturalist from a middle-class background, Pinchot was a scion of the New England bourgeoisie. Pinchot was among the country's first professional foresters, pursuing it with missionary zeal. Pinchot, a skilled propagandist and political operator, was also the consummate technocratic visionary. He founded the Society of American Foresters in 1900, and his family later that year endowed the Yale School of Forestry. Not only was "forestry . . . essential to national prosperity," he wrote in 1914, that essence owed everything to its shaping of "conservation policy" in general, managing environments so that waste was minimized, and "efficiency"—a watchword of the times—was maximized. From the beginning, environmentalism was a pillar of business and politics as usual in times of rapid social and environmental change.

But in the 1960s, it appeared, briefly, as though mainstream environmentalism might chart a more radical course. A major catalyst was the 1962 publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, which revealed that the widely used insecticide DDT was a nonbiodegradable toxin that persists in fish, wildlife, and even human breast milk. Carson is often given credit for the "second wave" of environmentalism that followed, but she was simply too combative. She challenged not only DDT's environmental consequences but its underlying logic "of quick and easy profit." Nature-loving conservationism was well-tolerated by the one percent; joining the critique of corporate power to the war machine, however, is an entirely different matter.

*Silent Spring* let the genie out of the bottle. By making the crucial connection between corporate power and the "relentless war on life," Carson pointed the antiwar movement that emerged following the full-scale invasion of Vietnam in 1965 toward a new synthesis. Its outlines crystallized quickly: American imperialism had reached a monstrous stage, joining genocidal strategy with ecocide. By 1967, dissident scientists, antiwar activists, and public intellectuals put the ecocide question on the political map. That October, the Madison chapter of Students for a Democratic Society led a mass action—with some five

thousand students and two hundred faculty—demanding a “permanent” ban on Dow Chemical’s recruiters at the University of Wisconsin. Dow Chemical, alongside Monsanto (the corporate *bête noire* of twenty-first-century agroecology activists), produced not only napalm but Agent Orange, a deadly toxic defoliant whose health impacts on the Vietnamese persist to this day. Dow recruiters fled. When they returned the following spring, as Kirkpatrick Sale writes in his history of SDS, recruiting was carried out from a “remote point on the campus, heavily guarded by policemen.”

Not long after, Howard Zinn—of *People’s History* fame—published a widely reproduced essay, *Dow Shalt Not Kill*, in an obscure magazine of antiwar students in the South. Zinn denounced Dow and called for continued mass civil disobedience to bar corporate recruiters from campuses. On December 13, William J. Fulbright—a one-time president of the University of Arkansas—took to the floor of the Senate, where he decried the increasingly tight relation between the “military-industrial complex” and the universities, which “are adapting themselves to the requirements of continuing war.” A “military-industrial-academic complex” was taking shape.

We tend to think of mainstream environmentalism’s second wave as similarly confrontational, an ideologically aligned offshoot of these kinds of militant antiwar efforts. But while activists were in the streets, white-collar environmentalists took to the courts, where “Sue the bastards” became the new war cry. The phrase originated with a lawyer, Victor J. Yannacone, who sued Suffolk County, New York, in 1966 to stop its longstanding practice of spraying DDT to suppress the local mosquito population. The next year Victor and Carol Yannacone, the biologist Charles Wurster, and a handful of lawyers and scientists founded the Environmental Defense Fund with the ambition of using the courts to halt pollution.

What happened next tells us a lot about how the movement fell under the sway of benign reformism. First, the EDF’s incorporation documents were signed at Long Island’s Brookhaven National Laboratory, an important postwar nuclear research facility subsequently managed by SUNY-Stony Brook. Perhaps it’s easy to make too much of this, but the symbolic unity of science, the military, and environmentalism is striking—and not exceptional. Second, the EDF was immediately made solvent by a generous grant from the Ford Foundation. Ford would also finance the Natural Resources Defense Council and, on the West Coast, the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund. When, in 1969, *Science* reported on Yannacone’s “proposal to bring a \$30-billion damage suit against DDT manufacturers as a ‘class action’ on behalf of all citizens of the United States,” the EDF board fired him. While EDF’s trustees denied that the decision had anything to do with Yannacone’s anti-corporate litigation, internal documents say otherwise.

The Foundation moved swiftly to ensure the Yannacone problem didn’t repeat itself. It subjected Foundation-funded law firms to a bipartisan oversight panel

tasked with ensuring that environmental litigation stayed in its lane. To wit: no \$30 billion class-action suits. Big Chemical was not Big Tobacco; it was central to the military-industrial complex. As journalist Mark Dowie underlines in *Losing Ground*, his history of American environmentalism, figures like Yannacone “were simply too adversarial . . . too confrontational in court, and too successful against companies with close associations to” Ford trustees.

*Life* magazine seemed pleased by Ford’s efforts to tamp down the radical element of the movement. “The strongest argument for optimism,” as John Pekkkanen wrote in the magazine in January 1970, “is that the leadership of the [environmentalist] movement are the educated citizens of the middle and upper middle class, people who know where the levers of power are and who are willing to use them short of violent revolution.” The timing of this is significant. In 1970, American environmentalism was on the brink of an important transition: Earth Day.

The first Earth Day, held on April 22, 1970, was designed to chart a decidedly liberal course under the bipartisan leadership of Senator Nelson and California Republican Congressman Pete McCloskey. Its contrast with the New Left could not have been greater. By 1970, American radicals were engaging in very different tactics: building occupations, firebombing ROTC centers, mass civil disobedience, wildcat strikes, organizing GI’s against the war. Earth Day, on the other hand, “proposed that students should return to their campuses and engage in orderly, rational dialogue with industry,” as Barry Weisberg writes in *Beyond Repair: The Ecology of Capitalism*.

The Day’s events were an innocuous tapestry of alternatively scientific and pious speeches replete with neo-Malthusian catastrophism and political theater: “trash-ins” in New York, bicycle rides in Scranton, a “die-in” to protest supersonic air travel at Boston’s Logan Airport. For the *New York Times* it was something of a national unity holiday: “Earth’s Day, Like Mother’s, Pulls Capital Together.” Both houses of Congress adjourned. The defining slogan came from the Pogo, the eponymous character in a long-running cartoon strip, who appeared in a forest packed with so much trash one could barely walk. “We have met the enemy,” he told his sidekick Porkypine, “and he is us.” Here indeed was environmentalism as a “cause beyond party and beyond factions,” as President Nixon—who would establish the Environmental Protection Agency later that year—put it.

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## science, and better regulation, to carried out by technocrats.

A week after Earth Day, South Vietnamese and American forces, under Nixon's orders, rolled into Cambodia, sparking the greatest antiwar mobilization in American history. Over four million students—half the American university student population—poured onto the streets. The University of California and California State University systems were shut down. Governors mobilized National Guard units twenty-four times at twenty-one universities in sixteen states. In Ohio and Mississippi they opened fire on students, killing four at Kent State and two at Jackson State University. These students had met the enemy. So had the inhabitants of Indochina. They looked remarkably similar.

Meanwhile, Earth Day's modest but influential infrastructure, led by Denis Hayes and what would become the nonprofit Environmental Action, sat on its hands. Mainline environmentalists like David Brower and Paul Ehrlich penned a tepid letter to Nixon decrying the invasion; eventually, the Sierra Club denounced America's chemical war in Vietnam—but not the war. The die was cast for environmentalism's virtually nonexistent opposition to American misadventures abroad; it declined to name the enemy.

The unprecedented and widespread social and political challenge to capitalism presented by antiwar activists had made the political establishment nervous. Intellectuals, professionals, and technocrats had always been defenders of the status quo. But starting in the late sixties, Samuel Huntington and his colleagues wrote, an "adversary culture" had sunk deep roots within culturally influential layers of the professional and technical intelligentsia, especially, they underlined, "students, scholars and the media."

One source of that adversarial culture was the rapid growth of the professional managerial class. So fast that, by the end of the sixties, the sons and daughters of steelworkers, truck drivers, and secretaries were entering the professions on a massive scale—and organizing radical caucuses in professions that included not only teachers and social workers but chemists and engineers. They had blue collar ideas about white collar work. They asked difficult questions about war, science, and environmental change. The reestablishment of social order called for a "*moderation in democracy*."

Mainstream environmentalists, however, were not of concern. From the first Earth Day, the new environmentalism cohered around a politics strikingly at odds with labor, the New Left, and national liberation movements. It bore no resemblance to the great union drives of the 1930s or the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s. Those movements put bodies on the line to leverage democratic power for egalitarian goals. In contrast, the new environmentalists

were institutionalists, and shared with elites a fear of the dangerous classes and a vision of incremental reform. Their politics were shaped by a distinctively postwar philosophy, what Jurgen Habermas called the “scientization of politics.” It answered political questions of democracy, governance, and inequality through scientific formulas. Whatever we call it, the new environmentalism approached the crisis of the natural world with two great remedies: better science and better regulation, to be carried out by technocrats. They would “listen to the science”—not follow the people.

Here, environmentalism as a practical, technocratic, and scientific infrastructure for managing (some) capitalist environmental problems fused with its role as a cultural infrastructure for virtuous, reform-minded social change. The once-disaffected professional classes embraced the individualized, localized, and market-oriented lifestyle environmentalisms. Radical solutions lost out to technocratic reforms and “small is beautiful” sentiment. There was a general disavowal of democratic politics that might redistribute wealth and power in favor of a vaguely countercultural anti-politics captured in its iconic slogans: Think Globally, Act Locally; Live Simply So That Others May Live; even the syndicalist No Compromise in Defense of Mother Earth.

A few months after Earth Day, the great muckraker James Ridgeway finished a book on the new environmentalism called *The Politics of Ecology*. He cut to the heart of the matter: “Ecology offered liberal-minded people what they had longed for, a safe, rational, and above all peaceful way to re-make society” in ways that would remove capitalism’s worst excesses. This was not good news for those who sympathized with the core argument of Old and New Lefts: solutions to social problems required a radical extension of democratic norms and civil liberties. For Ridgeway, the new environmentalism pointed in the opposite direction. It was an ideology cooked up by scientists—and the foundations who financed them—and a politics developed in the boardroom.

This was a minoritarian, and ultimately antidemocratic, politics. For the scientists, observed Ridgeway, “beneath the revolutionary rhetoric are arguments for . . . a more efficiently managed central state, a benign form of capitalism, and . . . technology as the great problem solver.” The lawyers, meanwhile, in shifting the fight from the streets to the courts had a clear political logic: “The court becomes the legislature . . . [and thereby contributes to] a governmental system in which lawyers are a commanding elite.”

There were successes, of a sort. The greatest was 1972’s DDT ban. The litigation launched by Yannacone in 1965 culminated in a D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals 1970 ruling, prompting the newly formed Environmental Protection Agency to propose a total ban. The victory was hardly unqualified, however. The EDF’s litigation strategy allied with Chavez’s United Farm Workers, who demanded protection from toxic agrichemicals and improved wages. Uninterested in unionizing the fields, the EDF abandoned the farmworkers as soon as the DDT ban was realized.

Ignoring the underlying relations of labor, democracy, and health, environmentalism's strategy produced more tragedy than triumph. DDT was already on the way out by the mid-1960s, as insect species evolved to withstand the toxic onslaught, replaced by a family of agrichemicals based on organophosphates, which were even more harmful than DDT. The outcome was consistent with the new environmentalism's single-issue focus. Banning DDT did benefit the whole population, but the ban was relatively easy to secure because it didn't threaten the capitalist bottom line. DDT could be substituted—and the toxic burden shifted, as ever, elsewhere.

There *was* legislation, to be sure. But it was premised on extending the regulatory state without popular mobilization. This distinguished seventies eco-legislation from the New Deal reforms of the 1930s. In the decade after the first Earth Day, Congress passed nearly two dozen new laws aimed at the environment, bookended by the National Environmental Policy Act, which established the Environmental Protection Agency, and 1980's Superfund Act, funding the cleanup of toxic waste sites—largely financed by a tax on the petrochemical sector. Embodying the “polluter pays” principle, Superfund was unquestionably the high tide of postwar liberalism before the neoliberal reversal.

Like the DDT ban, this “golden age” of eco-legislation was done on the cheap. Most postwar environmental legislation, beginning in earnest with 1963's Clean Air Act, was passed before the new environmentalists cohered as a political force; subsequent legislation around clean air, water, and endangered species was hardly the outcome of an environmentalist sit-down strike; beyond lobbying, earnest letter-writing, and scientific testimony, there were no public showdowns. In basic industry, the retooling mandated by the Clean Air and Water Acts came in the same decade that postwar investments had amortized; the most polluting capital goods needed to be replaced anyway. No doubt the legislation helped. But if regulations grew too costly, they could be quickly defanged. Finally, as if to add insult to injury, when the floodgates of free trade globalization opened, the major environmentalist groups were there to bless it: in 1993, the EDF went to bat for the North American Free Trade Agreement.

We are living with the results of these insufficient efforts, a tepid environmentalism captured by elite interests and premised on a Janus-faced worldview. Let's call those faces the fear and the fix. On the one hand, there's a long thread of doomist thinking, fixated on the metaphor of survival. When Biden told the nation in 2023 that the “climate crisis . . . is an existential threat,” he was recycling an old trope. Since the 1970s, it's amounted to a kind of emotional blackmail on a world scale couched in the rhetoric of techno-scientific realism. Notwithstanding its ubiquity, existential threat rhetoric has little to do with confronting the forces behind the planetary inferno—indeed it may enable those forces. Put simply, climate doomism is not about climate; it's about cultivating a climate of fear, and the imperative of a techno-scientific fix to the tipping points remaking the biosphere. Geoengineering, carbon capture and storage,



electrical vehicles, renewable energy, “climate smart” agriculture; you know the list. And it’s not that we won’t need new technologies to address the climate crisis. But without the necessary connection to a democratization of today’s structures of power and profit, such fixes will never be anything but authoritarian.

The radical trend within climate justice tells us that “system change” is imperative. That’s correct. But we need to name the system, and make sense of it historically, the better to see how capitalism isn’t confined to mere economics, although that’s a big part of it. The tight connection between corporate power and carbonization is well-established. Richard Heede at the Climate Accountability Institute found that just 103 corporations—“climate majors”—emitted 70 percent of “human society’s” carbon dioxide between 1751 and 2017. The American share of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions clocks in at 20 percent since 1850. Even that’s a radical undercount, disregarding American world power in rebuilding and leading global capitalism since World War II. Capitalism’s enclosure of the atmospheric commons didn’t just happen; it was politically enabled. It can be politically disabled.

No reasonably informed person doubts that the climate is changing or that these changes signal irreversible shifts in conditions of planetary life. There’s no question that the biosphere is moving out of a long period of unusual climatic stability. Earth system scientists reckon this as the Holocene, a distinctive interglacial epoch that began nearly twelve thousand ago. Does the post-Holocene transition portend humanity’s demise? Or is it perhaps the “end” of the world as we have known it?

It’s not that the science isn’t real; it’s that the powerful have frequently used arguments for “listening to the science” to justify and explain social inequality.

One thing is certain. The dominant answers to these questions rely on the ways of conceptualizing, visualizing, and investigating that helped to create the climate crisis. But the reigning consensus—now shared by outfits ranging from the IPCC to the World Economic Forum to the White House—is narrow and self-serving. Its narrative thread goes something like this: humans cause climate change; climate change is an “existential threat” to the human species; “we are out of time” and emergency measures are necessary; the “climate

emergency” therefore mandates an unprecedented centralization of political power if “we” are to “save the planet.”

This narrative promiscuously mixes state-of-emergency rhetoric with scientism, a pillar of modern thought that pretends science is independent of power profit, then uses “good science” to make “good policy.” It’s not that the science isn’t real; it’s that the powerful have frequently used arguments for “listening to the science” to justify and explain social inequality. Taken as a whole, the dominant answers to these questions form a double yes: *yes*, the present trajectory of “human society” points towards extinction; and *yes*, the existential threat can be averted, but only through an emergency politics of scientific experts and enlightened technocrats. Democratization, never mind social revolution, is off the table.

This is ideological Valium. On the one hand, climate doomism is explicitly hostile to the kinds of mass democratic politics that threatened to upend the capitalist applecart in the twentieth century. Its evangelical and moralizing character is, however, deeply appealing to the world’s professional managerial class, let us say perhaps 15 percent of the world population. For the past century, they have carried a candle for the fantasy of an international technocracy, even as big capital has kept its hands firmly on the tiller. On the other hand, doomism functions because it is not purely doomist; the new climate consensus advances eco-catastrophism so it can justify a new techno-scientific program that mitigates and adapts to manifold biospheric tipping points—but at the expense of the world’s poorest 80 percent. One rightly worries about climate fixes as climate austerity.

A 2020 Yale and George Mason University study found that 41 percent of Americans felt “helpless” in the face of climate change. About the same number felt “hopeful.” But of this latter group, how many are mobilized in any meaningful political sense? Maybe we should give democracy a try. I’m reminded of the old radical joke that if elections could change anything, they’d be illegal. A democratic experiment would necessarily go beyond the narrowly political sphere—and the massive concentration of economic power it protects. Naomi Klein’s insistence that climate politics must entwine the democratization of planetary life with the struggle for climate justice—and climate solutions—is a powerful one. It’s also more unsettling to climate justice thinking than we usually suppose.

To call for planetary democratization, then, is not simply about more people participating more actively and more meaningfully; it’s also about a reimagining of how science works, what technologies should be developed, and, thorniest of all, how investment should be socialized in the maximum interest of humans and the rest of life. Geoengineering, for instance, may well be necessary. But on whose terms and for whose interests?

We may have the best science that money can buy, but, as *Nature* reported in January 2023, its capacity to yield “disruptive” insights has withered. Over a decade of economic analysis has pointed to systemwide stagnation of labor productivity growth, notwithstanding all the hoopla around automation and artificial intelligence. Capitalism’s vaunted techno-scientific prowess is showing definite signs of wear. From this perspective, the causes and possible solutions to the climate crisis turn on capitalism’s dramatic narrowing of democracy, the potential for democratizing all of planetary life, and how to imagine justice, technology, and science within it.