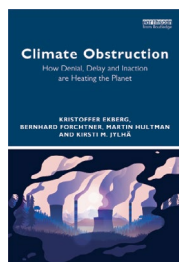


Understanding and overcoming climate obstruction

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Climate Obstruction: How Denial, Delay and Inaction are Heating the Planet

By Kristoffer Ekberg, Bernhard Forchtner, Martin Hultman and Kirsti M. Jylhä
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 156 pp. £16.99

Climate change denialism hinders climate action. Researchers have repeatedly attempted to understand and thus influence the phenomenon, but despite these efforts, progress has been slow. *Climate Obstruction: How Denial, Delay and Inaction are Heating the Planet* seeks to bring together the basic information on climate denialism so far and to answer the question, “why have we [...] not taken appropriate measures to avert the unfolding climate crisis which is itself part of a much broader ecological crisis?” (p. 2) The authors point out that the main actors behind climate change and the obstruction of climate action, the fossil fuel companies, have largely continued to do business as usual. However, in addition to vested economic interests, climate denialism more broadly is about complicated political and cultural interests, ideologies, social structures and the sentiments of ordinary citizens.

Most climate denialism is not denial at all, but organized and casual questioning of the causal relationship between human activity and climate change. Therefore, this book introduces the concept of ‘climate obstruction’ to replace or at least to add to the existing debates on climate denialism and climate scepticism. Since denialism is too simplistic and scepticism enjoys a scientific aura, the authors suggest that climate obstruction could serve as an umbrella term integrating a wide range of obstructionist strategies on the one hand and research by different scholars and fields on the other. The concept also poses “the question of who obstructs”, thus emphasizing “agency” (p.5). Against this backdrop, this concise book explores the topic in

an introduction, four substantive chapters and conclusions.

The introduction begins by first presenting the conditions under which societies can and could have acted decisively on climate change, using the COVID-19 pandemic as an example, followed by the argument that the public do generally understand climate science. To address their question and to unite scholars, the authors present a typology of three distinct but overlapping types of obstruction as a theoretical tool to identify and describe the phenomena in question, based on the existing research. The primary type of obstruction refers to the denial of scientific evidence of anthropogenic climate change, and deliberate and overt actions to undermine climate policy. The secondary type of obstruction is that the science is tacitly accepted, but vested interests lead to inaction and delay of climate action. The tertiary type refers to unintentional obstructionism that takes place for certain cultures, hierarchies and values that encourages citizens to continue to live their life as they have been. All contribute to the same outcome, which is a “lack of taking urgently needed steps” (p.13).

In chapter 2, the authors proceed to dissect the long social history of fossil fuels and the foundations of climate obstruction. The introduction and the control of fossil fuels has led to the accumulation of “wealth and geopolitical power [to] a small portion of the world’s population” (p. 22). This has led to the rise of economic and political interests, but beyond this, cultural signifiers of the industrial, modern era, such as cars sold to the public as vehicles of liberation and “private car ownership”, are seen as a “human right” (ibid). And in the wake of reports such as *Limits to Growth* (D. H. Meadows et al., 1972), conflict emerged between industrial society and the global environmental movement, giving impetus to climate obstructionism. An essential public-opinion-formation strategy has been to create doubt about scientific findings concerning climate change.

Fossil fuel companies have for many years funded their own scientific projects that they have used to manipulate the causal link

between global warming and human activity. The anti-communist and anti-government sentiments of some prominent patriotic scientists have been harnessed to bring credibility to their case. At the same time, the lobbying sector, think-tanks and public relations (PR) agencies have been used to spread the manufactured doubt about climate change and science, to create desirability for (green) growth and consumerism, and to resist climate action. These are the strategies of the organized climate obstruction “machinery” (p.53), the subject of chapter 3. Current strategies include, for example, constant advertising, the production of pseudo-scientific reports and the creation of fake grassroots movements with the aim “to create and enhance existing conflicts in society” (p. 54). These strategies have contributed to the distrust of science and even conspiracy theories. The ongoing contentious debate over fuel price could be seen as an example and a consequence.

The climate obstruction machinery has been instrumental in fomenting social conflict and creating mistrust of science, and chapters 4 and 5 describe how the far right is exploiting this situation and how, for example, the sentiments of ordinary citizens are affected by these measures. A key unifying factor between the far right and the basic psychology of denialism is the authoritarian attitude. According to the authors, the conventional wisdom of essential hierarchies between ethnic, national and/or racial groups resonates well with such eco-fascist explanations of environmental problems such as overpopulation. These ideas also extend to resistance to globalism and cosmopolitanism, as these phenomena threaten the borders of the national homeland. Moreover, the culture of traditional masculinity and the idea of “the little guy” (p. 85) whose job is at risk are effective parts of the appealing imagery that is used by the national populists to resist environmentalism. Finally, the most mundane, tertiary obstruction, which manifests as inaction due to “attitude-behaviour gaps” (p. 96), leads the authors to conclude that “voluntary behavioural changes alone do not provide sufficient means to address the climate crisis, and [how] individual action is

enabled and constrained by various structural and institutional conditions” (p. 95). The conclusion chapter presents the truly outstanding feature of the book: it says something concrete about how to proceed from here. Its prescription for “overcoming obstruction” (p. 123) can be considered as a rare feature in the academic literature and is a good place to end.

The two minor shortcomings of the book are its emphasis on certain ideas and identities behind climate obstruction and its inability

to bridge the structural and psychological explanations. This is evident when people’s ideas about the good life and their masculine and/or nationalist identities are seen as the primary explanation for their attitudes. As a result, people’s concerns about the structural changes brought about by the green transition – for example, concerns about low-skilled industrial jobs – are downplayed as irrelevant and merely populist rhetoric. Despite these shortcomings, *Climate Obstruction: How*

Denial, Delay and Inaction are Heating the Planet achieves its goal of explaining the reasons for climate obstruction and delivers its message in a concise but very comprehensive manner.

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