

# THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF POLITICS: Climate Change Denial and Political Polarization

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“It’s anti-American and anti-freedom.” (Rand Paul)

Newly elected Republican Senator Paul states succinctly the conservative view of U.S. cooperation with international efforts to stem global warming. Liberals view Paul and friends to be endangering efforts to save the planet. The partisan split, analyzed incisively by McCright and Dunlap, will likely intensify in the wake of the conservative midterm election victories and possible mobilization of the Democratic Party’s progressive wing. As McCright and Dunlap note, the partisan split over global warming is entwined with a broader polarization that intensified since the late 1990s. We address facets of American political culture that feed this polarization and support McCright and Dunlap’s critique of “reflexive modernity” theories.

For more than a century, American political debates have ensued over two competing policy regimes, *market liberalism*, stressing unfettered capitalism, strong property rights, and a minimal social safety net, and *social liberalism*, favoring modest state intervention, redistribution, and welfare provision.<sup>1</sup> By contrast to social democracy and socialism, American social liberalism has not challenged capitalist ownership or management in fundamental ways. Moreover, market liberalism has been well represented in both political parties, even though the Republican Party has been its primary carrier. Both regimes embrace liberal democratic rights (e.g., freedom of speech, assembly, religion), albeit with distinct twists, reflecting different ideologies as well as divergent political alliances and compromises (e.g., the Republican–Christian conservative pact). Each regime has dominated at different historical moments (e.g., compare the culture and policies of the Gilded Age with the Progressive Era or the Roaring Twenties and the New Deal). Hegemonic rule by one of the two regimes has tended to move overall political discourse in its direction and shape accordingly public beliefs about what is politically possible and what is not. Governing in the wake of the Johnsonian Great Society, for example, Republican “conservative” Richard Nixon, supported a minimum annual income, employed price controls, and presided over creation of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). By contrast, in the aftermath of the Reagan Revolution, Democratic “liberal” Bill Clinton, supported welfare reform, cut the deficit,

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and presided over financial deregulation.<sup>2</sup> However, assertions of power and consequent policy changes by hegemonic regimes have produced mounting polarization and opposition.

The split over global warming is part of a wider polarization over today's version of market liberalism—*neoliberalism*.<sup>3</sup> Neoliberalism emerged, in the 1970s, addressed to economic and political crises of the Great Society regime, was consolidated via the elections of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, and became hegemonic during the 1990s bull market and Clinton presidency. Neoliberals attributed the 1970s economic slowdown and overall American malaise to New Deal and Great Society policies. In 1971, Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell wrote a memo (NCRP 2004) warning about threats to “free enterprise” and the need to respond (Powell 1971). Inspired by this memo, neoconservatives and the religious right joined big business to campaign against social liberalism and the welfare state, and to promote free-market ideology. They built a network of think tanks that called for deregulation, privatization, welfare cuts, and reduced taxation to revive high corporate profits and economic growth (Ferguson and Rogers 1986; Stefancic and Delgado 1996).

Drawing from Chicago School and Austrian Economics, neoliberals equate democracy with “economic freedom” or “free enterprise”—property rights, contracts, and consumer choice. They attack the idea of public goods and oppose regulation, taxation, and other state policies, which do not serve the short-term corporate bottom line and investor accumulations.<sup>4</sup> Allies from the neoconservative right and the Christian right, supporting more aggressive foreign policy and cultural conservatism, helped shore up neoliberal power. Conservative activism and public outreach (especially right-wing talk radio) bore fruit in the 1994 midterm election victories, or “Republican Revolution.” Polarization grew with help from conservative Fox News and in the wake of “Monicagate” and the year 2000 Gore–Bush election debacle. McCright and Dunlap engage shifts in public opinion that occurred in the backwash of these events, during a decade when conservative hegemony was shaken by multiple crises. But the huge Republican gains in the 2010 midterms, in the midst of severe economic distress, demonstrate the conservative regime's resilience. Its transnational version, the “Washington Consensus,” which has been enforced by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, G8, and other governance agencies, suffered major political setbacks in many nations, but its growth imperative and austerity measures are now being reasserted again in response to financial meltdowns, debt crises, and economic slowdowns.

Neoliberals sought to weaken the substantial network of environmental regulations and oversight agencies, created in the 1970s, and to blunt the environmental movement's effort to strengthen this system and make it more comprehensive. In the 1970s, new neoliberal organizations, centered in the mountain states, spearheaded the “Sagebrush Rebellion” to defend property rights and oppose environmental regulation (Cawley 1993). These forces gained political traction under President Reagan, who made James Watt, a leader in the Sagebrush Rebellion, Secretary of the Interior and Ann Gorsuch EPA head. Reagan empowered the anti-environmentalist countermovement, and forged the neoliberal Republican strategy of selecting opponents of regulation to

lead environmental and other regulatory agencies, deemed to be “intrusive” and “anti-business.” The momentum of the Sagebrush Rebellion faded after Reagan’s first term as Watt and Gorsuch were forced to resign due to allegations of illegal activities. However, the issues raised by the Sagebrush Rebellion gained new impetus, in the late 1980s, under a more comprehensive movement known as the “Wise Use Movement,” which argued that market mechanisms can best manage all natural resources and environmental problems (Cawley 1993:166). Taking office in 2000, George W. Bush staffed federal environmental protection agencies with leaders from this anti-environmental movement (e.g., protégé of James Watt, Gail Norton was appointed Secretary of the Interior).

Thus, anti-environmentalism has been, from the start, a keystone of neoliberal antiregulatory politics. But the perceived threats posed by climate change discourse intensified this opposition, mobilizing energy companies and other related industries and broader free-market forces. Discrediting global climate change claims began in earnest in 1989 when the Marshall Institute issued their first report disputing climate science (Oreskes and Conway 2010:186). Although climate change denial is a latecomer to neoliberal anti-environmentalism, it has now become the countermovement’s pivotal issue in battles against environmental regulations. Neoliberals hold that the issue provides license for wholesale intervention everywhere. Conservative columnist and climate change denier George Will (2008) has argued that the fanatical “green left’s” charges that CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and fossil fuel industries pose a “planetary menace” provide a rationale for the government to “intrude” everywhere, curtail consumer choice and property rights, and increase the state’s size and surveillance. Reeling from conservative attacks over liberal bias, “mainstream media,” seeking “editorial balance,” often grant parity to “climate skeptic” news releases and policy papers, from right-wing think tanks and their bought experts and pundits, with peer-reviewed science. Having increased leverage in recessions and periods of economic insecurity, many Americans are receptive to conservative views—e.g., that regulating fuel efficiency, and thereby vehicle size and weight, increases energy prices and taxes, “kills jobs,” violates freedom of choice, and threatens overall liberty.

Pew Research Center Surveys indicate that the partisan divide over warming accelerated between 2007 and 2009.<sup>5</sup> However, belief in “solid evidence” of it declined substantially across partisan lines. Belief in this evidence dropped substantially (8 percent to 31 percent) for all age, educational, regional, and political categories surveyed (Pew Research Center 2009, 2010c). In a 22-nation Pew survey, the two greatest emitters of CO<sub>2</sub>, China and the United States had among the lowest percentages of people surveyed who consider climate change to be a “very serious problem.” In sharp contrast to the Chinese, however, the majority of Americans surveyed (58 percent) said that they should not have to “pay higher prices to address climate change” (Pew Research Center 2010b). Only 32 percent of Americans surveyed considered warming to be a “very serious problem” and only 34 percent attribute it to “human activities” (Pew Research Center 2010c). The financial crisis and weak economy, and consequent flows of news and information, appear to have widened and hardened the opposition to engaging climate change and eroded support for its mitigation. Perceived competing interests in job

creation and provision of energy needs have been the top issues of public concern (Pew Research Center 2010a). In the wake of a recessionary slowdown and jobless growth, the main aim almost everywhere has been restoring growth as we have known it. Also stress on debt reduction as a top priority makes action on climate change unlikely.

Already impressive Republican political solidarity and party discipline likely will be strengthened by their decisive midterm electoral victories. Many more staunch conservatives join the already conservative congressional Republican ranks. In a recent Pew Research Center (2010c) survey, only 16 percent of Republicans agree that there is “solid evidence” of anthropogenic warming and only 14 percent see it as a “serious problem.” Hardened by widely publicized 2009 “climategate” charges about climate scientists’ misconduct and hoax have circulated so widely in conservative media and circles that the claims about them are now taken for granted by many conservatives.<sup>6</sup> Many new Republican members of Congress share the extreme views of their conservative base, who see climate change and regulation of energy consumption to be a left-wing anticapitalist conspiracy. All but one of the new GOP Senators (Mark Kirk, IL) either deny climate science findings or hold that they are split and inconclusive. New conservative Republican House members share similar views (Davenport 2010). Prominent Republican deniers and energy industry allies Senator James Inhofe (Oklahoma) and Representative Joe Barton (Texas) likely will enjoy increased support for their views. Immediately after the midterms, the new Republican House leadership threatened to use the House Select Committee on Energy Independence and Climate Change Committee to investigate climate change hoax. Later they announced that they have instead chosen to shut down the committee—a powerful symbolic act signifying that a more intense impasse on climate change is likely. New chair of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, Darrell Issa (R-CA) has also promised to investigate climate science fraud, replay the climategate scandal, and challenge the EPA’s rights to regulate greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Coming long before the new Congress was seated, these GOP moves indicate that climate change opposition initiatives will be a top priority.

McCright and Dunlap hold that their argument poses problems for theories of “reflexive modernity.”<sup>7</sup> These theories heralded a new phase of *progressive modernization* at the same moment (the 1980s and 1990s) that neoliberal restructuring was accelerating. They belong to a family of related neomodernization theories (NMTs), framed in response to globalization, economic and cultural change, the collapse of communism, and decline of labor-centered left politics. Suggesting taints of Deweyan-like democracy, NMTs implied that representative democracy and its political dynamics are being vitalized by much more citizen-based, civil society-centered, participatory, plural, critical networks, institutions, and communications.<sup>8</sup> Claiming to be an alternative to “failed” Marxian theories and to problematic postmodernist and neoliberal approaches, NMT theorists heralded the weakening of the postwar Fordist state’s corporatist planners and managers as a victory over top-down technocracy, opening way for more vibrant civil societies and increased “reflexivity” about science and risks. They held that “subpolitics” driven by new social movements, active citizenry, and post-traditional identities, challenge “formulaic knowledge” and treat science in a more critical manner and facilitate

public debate over risks and public policy to deal with them. NMTs held that the nascent regime informs and moderates actions by states, corporations, and unions and thereby limits their power and initiates more decentralized, voluntary cooperation, and management. But they acknowledged that the emerging regime still faces bureaucratic blockages, threats from neoliberal excesses, and many new global risks. (e.g., Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994).

NMT theorists drew attention to ecological problems, including warming, but as McCright and Dunlap stress, they did not take account of “antireflexive” countermovements. Ecological modernization theories held that democratizing forces are “ecologizing the economy” and developing voluntary mechanisms that deal effectively with environmental risks (e.g., Mol 1997). Although opposing neoliberal “market fundamentalism,” NMTs did not address the scale of neoliberal restructuring, or express concern about the corporate financed network of American think tanks and other groups that enforce neoliberal agendas from a singular bottom-line standpoint. They overestimated the resilience of postwar social programs, and overgeneralized European social democratic traits. Reminiscent of Cold War Era modernizationist claims about a fundamental transformation to “postindustrial society” and the “end of ideology,” NMT theorists mistook a conjunctural shift in capitalism as a semi-epochal transition to “Second Modernity.” They framed these ideas when financial bailouts, union busting, erosion of the middle class, and overall demolition of the postwar capital-labor accord were well under way in the United States. Recent American politics can hardly be seen as reflexive, given the partisan polarization and gridlock in Congress and civil society with regard to the last decade’s serial economic shocks and scandals—the year 2000 Dot.com bust, 2001 to 2004 wave of corporate scandals (e.g., Enron, World Com), 2008 to 2010 financial bust, bailout, and second wave of financial scandals (e.g., Madoff, Goldman Sachs), sharply increased economic inequality, and “jobless recovery.”

The current situation parallels the 1920s when the market liberal discourse ruled in a climate dominated by nationally consolidated markets, major technical innovations (e.g., radio, electrification), unchecked corporate power, and plutocratic inequality. John Dewey argued that the “rugged individualist” cultural vocabulary left the American public “lost” and “bemused” (Dewey [1929–1930] 1999). So it is today. Rather than a more democratic “Third Way,” NMT claims about the “end of left and right” manifests neoliberal hegemony and consequent decisive shutdown of social liberalism’s discourse about balancing liberty and equality. Today, even an African American Democratic president dares not address forcefully poverty and rampant economic inequality or even unabashedly embrace “liberalism” (also known as social liberalism). That Democrats fear being identified as “liberal” indicates a one-dimensional political culture. After decades of privatization, social benefit cuts, reduction of the safety net, and dominant financial markets, neoliberalism and its growth imperative are more than ideas and policies; they compose a complex of institutions, habits, and attitudes, or a “habitus” insouciant about social and ecological limits. Although many Americans believe in anthropogenic warming and

fear its consequences, it is uncertain if even they are ready to expend significant resources or alter their way of life to meet the challenge. Belief in the need for continuous economic growth, at almost any cost, is transparent in a time of high unemployment, insecurity, and jobless growth.

The antireflexive tendencies, discussed by McCright and Dunlap play out in the context of a larger one-dimensional political culture and a citizenry resistant to the idea of public goods and the need to share their costs. Margaret Thatcher famously asserted about neoliberalism—“There is no alternative!” Arguably, this is the taken-for-granted reality today (Judt 2010). Given the estimates of ecological risk posed in the IPCC’s AR4, surely to be heightened considerably in AR5, the lack of reflexivity and plain imprudence, among policy elites is considerable. How long can unplanned, unregulated, exponential growth hold sway in a globalized capitalist world, which has massively accelerated resource consumption and waste production, and where increased GHG emissions and the intensity of other ecological problems grow at such speed that irreversible ecological damages would outpace even a reflexive democracy? Formulating an alternative policy regime that could achieve widespread support, even among progressives is not now on the near horizon.

The most pressing danger with regard to climate change and other serious ecological issues is failing to get them on the national agenda and to entertain strategies to cope with them. Repression is more likely when unattended crises erupt into chaos and conflict. However, polarization exists with respect to other major issues that are perceived to impact on American life in more immediate ways than warming—financial problems, economic inequality, and unemployment.<sup>9</sup> The gridlock over these matters and unserious posturing about them diminish the sense of shared fate and community needed to face the sweeping changes that warming ultimately demands. It will be hard to mobilize people for climate change mitigation unless it is done in concert with efforts to engage these other pressing problems, which also have been generated or at least exacerbated by neoliberal globalization. The situation calls for collective action and mobilization of civil society to initiate state intervention, reconstruct social liberalism, or another yet to be imagined alternative policy regime, to redefine liberty, bring it more into balance with equality, and create more just, sustainable alternatives to the growth imperative and capitalism as we have known them. Coping with ecological crises requires a critical discourse that has been precluded by neoliberal governance and culture.

Recognizing that we are embedded in the biosphere compels envisioning a possible post-neoliberal community that cultivates awareness of our social interdependence and responsibility to fellow human beings, future generations, and other life on the planet. This sense of collective fate could be forged in efforts to illuminate what confronts us, form strategies to deal with it, and in the shared intensity of collective action aimed to alter our relations to others and to nature. All this may sound utopian, but globalization and its environmental wall has changed the scenario—in a “full world,” where global resource consumption is extended to hundreds of millions or billions more people, continuous, unplanned exponential growth simply cannot be sustained.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>These concepts parallel what McCright and Dunlap call “conservative” and “liberal.”

<sup>2</sup>Kevin Phillips (2002:293–316, 340–43) has stressed that Democrats have converged strongly with Republican market liberalism in “Capitalist Heyday” periods (i.e., the Gilded Age, Roaring Twenties, and the “Great Bull Market” of the 1980s and 1990s).

<sup>3</sup>Neoliberal globalization, financialization, deregulation, and privatization spurred unparalleled growth of the stock market, boosted corporate profits, and enriched big investors (Harvey 2005).

<sup>4</sup>Neoliberals’ jeremiads about “big government” threats to free enterprise are contradicted by their widespread, often-successful efforts to secure state support for shifts of public goods to private ownership or usage, “public–private partnerships” that subsidize big business, public bailouts for finance capital, and other policies that serve corporate and rich investor interests.

<sup>5</sup>Between April 2008 and October 2009, Republicans identifying as moderate or liberal showed the sharpest drop in belief in warming evidence (–28 percent), and Independents also shifted similarly (–22 percent) (Pew Center 2009). Moreover, 30 percent more American liberals than conservatives surveyed consider warming a “very serious problem,” a substantially sharper divide than the parallel left–right splits than in the European countries surveyed (Pew Center 2010a).

<sup>6</sup>Someone hacked into computers at the University of East Anglia’s Climatic Research Unit, and leaked thousands of e-mails and documents. Conservative activists charged that they revealed efforts to manipulate data and block contrary findings. Investigations, in the United Kingdom, cleared the scientists of misconduct charges, but have not stemmed conservative talk of malfeasance.

<sup>7</sup>In another recent essay, McCright and Dunlap (2010) focus in more detail on antireflexive countermovement strategies aimed to thwart climate science findings.

<sup>8</sup>Dewey’s conception of science as “inquiry” attacked technocratic ideas and stressed emphatically “uncertainty” and uncoerced, open conversation.

<sup>9</sup>Larry M. Bartels’s (2008) *Unequal Democracy* demonstrated partisan splits over sharply increased economic inequality and plutocratic tendencies, which he described as a “New Gilded Age.” In roll call votes, he found the split between parties was greater on class-related legislation than on cultural issues. He also showed that Republicans have been much more receptive to high-income voters, but neither party has been receptive to the lower third of the income scale. He found that well-informed conservatives were more likely to deny the increased inequality and to deny that it would be a bad thing. Bartels found that divergence in empirical and normative beliefs about inequality was sharpest among well-informed conservatives and well-informed liberals and that poorly informed members of both groups converged (Bartels 2008:155–61, 263–82). For related material, see Noah (2010).

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