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THE MONTHLY REVIEW

Our biggest fight is against denialism

● *Apartheid, AIDS, now climate change – we need to use the lessons from the past to spark collective action*

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Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out?, Bill McKibben (Henry Holt & Co)

Losing Earth: The Decade We Could Have Stopped Climate Change, Nathaniel Rich (Picador)

SA's Survival Guide to Climate Change, Siphos Kings and Sarah Wild (Macmillan)

"What if we Stopped Pretending?", Jonathan Franzen, *The New Yorker*, September 8, 2019.

In 2014, the psychologist Daniel Kahneman – Nobel-winning author of *Thinking, Fast and Slow* – said he was “deeply pessimistic”

about our ability to act on climate change, because of “loss aversion”: a distant problem requiring immediate sacrifice is exceptionally hard to accept. Six years later, the problem is not nearly as distant – Australia burns, Antarctica melts – but the sacrifices seem so daunting that the very topic seems to have instilled a fight or flight instinct: the Greta Thunbergs on the one hand, dedicated to putting out our “house on fire”, the Donald Trumps on the other, throwing fuel on the flames, and a seemingly paralysed majority in the middle.

As an avowed humanist, I am haunted by the idea that we are unable to act in our species’ best interests, which means acting in the planet’s too. The authors of the books I have been reading offer many reasons for our seeming denial: from our fear of death and inability to think beyond the here and now, to our “optimism bias” and hubris (“we can fix it”).

But it has been about politics and money too, in a big way. In *Falter* and *Losing Earth*, Bill McKibben and Nathaniel Rich track what the former terms a “three-decade campaign of deception and obfuscation” by an unholy alliance of greedy energy companies and right-wing politicians. If the industry was driven by the profit motive, the politicians were by ideology: an archaic “anticommunist” rejection of the kind of government regulation needed to reduce carbon emissions.

If there were to be a climate Nuremberg, accused number one (among the politicians, at least) would be John Sununu, George HW Bush’s combative chief of staff. Rich describes Sununu’s singular role, in the early 1990s, in turning back the consensus on the effect of greenhouse gases: he believed that those who wanted the state to regulate carbon emissions belonged to a “nefarious cabal” – Rich’s words – “portending vast, authoritarian remedies to halt economic progress”.

Blinded by ideology and his own vanity, Sununu reminds



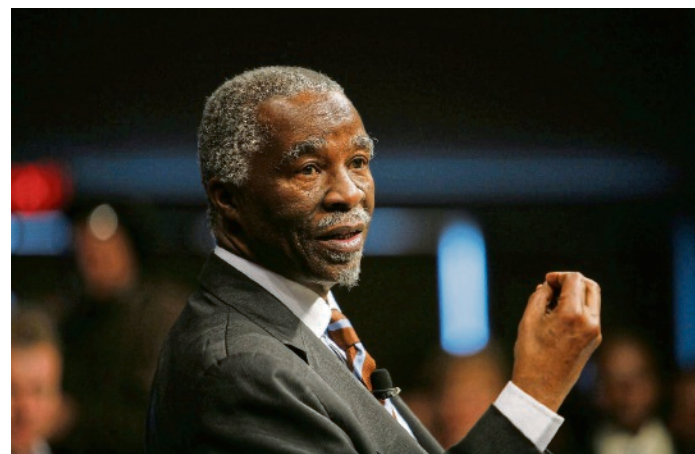
Smoking hot: The Secunda plant of Sasol, one of 100 companies that have contributed 71% of global carbon emissions since 1988. /Waldo Swiegers/Getty Images

me of a denier closer to home. When Rich describes how Sununu dismissed the climate scientist Jim Hansen’s drawings as “technical poppycock”, I hear Thabo Mbeki telling immunologists that HIV does not cause AIDS. And I find myself wondering what we can learn about climate change denial and the possibilities of conquering it from the two forms of public denial of which I have had the most personal experience: that about AIDS and its causes, and that of white South Africans under apartheid.

Beyond their hubris, Sununu and Mbeki had this in common: in the fight to reduce emissions or stop an epidemic, they saw an assault on their values and thus their political programmes – laissez-faire capitalism in the former and the African renaissance in the latter. Capping carbon emissions meant curbing capitalism. And fighting AIDS meant (at least Mbeki thought) pathologising African sexuality. Neither was tolerable: brimstone and plague were banished, their prophets slurred as revanchists.

But as we know, SA’s AIDS denialism goes deeper, and further back in time, than Mbeki. Nelson Mandela himself expressed contrition for his inability to acknowledge the epidemic, and dedicated his last active years to remedying this. It was just too difficult, in the time of renewal that was the transition to democracy, to acknowledge that huge numbers of people were going to die. There was also so much else to do – and besides, writes Rich of the climate issue, no politician wants to gear near a seemingly insoluble problem.

Last week, in part one of this



African hubris: Thabo Mbeki saw AIDS as an assault on African renaissance values. /Pieter Bauermeister/Getty Images

of the effect of greenhouse gases, and that I barely noticed the issue, even though it made the cover of *Time*. I was too busy fighting for my survival and those of my friends: I was in the epicentre of an epidemic.

I draw two keys lesson from this experience. The first is how difficult it is to think about something as big as the future of our planet if we are faced with a threat to our immediate survival, or even our wellbeing. And the second is how destructive panic can be – but also how effectively one can divert it into constructive action.

At the height of the plague, a doctor in a hospital saw a gay man with a high fever and a low white blood cell count and was convinced he had HIV, even though the test results said otherwise. That she was panicked into unreason by the epidemic, I have no doubt; that she could barely bring herself to touch me clouded my own reason, and made me panic too.

But there was a movement growing in my community, and I was able to channel my panic into HIV/AIDS activism: the kind that, in the US and later here through the Treatment Action Campaign, played such a significant role in countering the denialism of the likes of Mbeki. Now, three decades later, I am

trying to figure out what to do with the climate panic rising in my gorge, and what I can learn from that earlier time.

Rich plots the way that “confusion” about the facts injured the US public to the issue of climate change in the past. And in *South Africa’s Survival Guide to Climate Change*, Siphos Kings and Sarah Wild cite an influential 2016 study that found “that uncertainty is more stressful than the certainty of bad news” – and thus could provoke a kind of head-in-the-sand denialism.

Is there value, then, in pessimism? In *Extinction Rebellion’s This is Not a Drill*, the British climate adaptation specialist Jem Bendell writes that “letting go of a better future can allow us to drop false hopes and live in the present with more integrity”. Understanding this has made him happier: “My life is not doom and gloom. Instead, both doom and bloom

IT IS CLEAR THAT CAPITAL MARKETS ARE MORE CONSEQUENTIAL TO THE FUTURE OF THIS PLANET THAN HOW WE LIVE



Anticommunist fervour: John Sununu turned back the consensus on climate change in the 1990s. /David Hume Kennerly/Getty Images

are part of my everyday experience.”

In a startling recent essay, the novelist Jonathan Franzen puts flesh on this notion, noting that there is denial about the climate crisis not only on the right but on the left too, where it has been taboo to even suggest the problem cannot be solved. But, he insists, “a false hope of salvation can be actively harmful: if you persist in believing that catastrophe can be averted, you commit yourself to tackling a problem so immense that it needs to be everyone’s overriding priority forever.”

One result could be “a kind of complacency: by voting for green candidates, riding a bicycle to work, avoiding air travel, you might feel that you’ve done everything you can ... whereas, if you accept the reality that the planet will soon overheat to the point of threatening civilisation, there’s a whole lot more you should be doing.”

Kings and Wild see it differently: changing your personal behaviour “can make you feel more connected to the natural world and the food you eat. This disconnection between us and the natural environment is a large part of the reason we have ended up in this climate

quagmire in the first place. Being aware of the consequences of our actions is vital if we are going to survive climate change.”

I know from personal experience how much one’s consciousness can shift alongside such minuscule decisions as, for example, becoming a one-car family or eating red meat only once a week. “Doing my bit” makes me happier, rather than more despairing – but perhaps that’s because I’m not doing enough, yet, to feel the loss.

Franzen urges us to be realistic: “Once you accept that we’ve lost” the war against climate change, “other kinds of action take on greater meaning.” This might mean “preparing for fires and floods and refugees”, but it also “heightens the urgency of almost any world-improving action”. Given that “people seek protection in tribalism and armed force, rather than in the rule of law” in times of chaos, “our best defence against this kind of dystopia is to maintain functioning democracies, functioning legal systems, functioning communities.” And so “any movement towards a more just and civil society can now be considered a meaningful climate action”.



Jonathan Franzen

McKibben is more interested in focused action. He urges us to embrace the two “new technologies of repair” that emerged, unprecedentedly, in the 20th century: solar power and nonviolent resistance. He describes the latter as “a bulldozer for shaping the zeitgeist”. Though McKibben does not mention it specifically, a game plan for how to use popular mobilisation to prevent the further exploitation of fossil fuels was test-driven in the US and SA three decades ago, in the anti-apartheid struggle.

“Privilege,” writes McKibben, “lies in obliviousness”, and “one of the great privileges of living in the affluent parts of the modern world is that we’ve been able to forget that the natural world even exists.” He notes, parenthetically, that “white privilege” similarly “involves being able to reliably forget that race matters”.

Last week I wrote that our inability to act on climate change reminded me of the denialism of white South Africans under apartheid. I quoted Naomi Klein, on how we are addicted to the consumerist carbon-fuelled lifestyle, just as governments are addicted to carbon-fuelled growth, to the point of not being able to see its costs. So it was with apartheid. Even though many of us knew it was wrong and unsustainable, we white people were the beneficiaries of it: little wonder we experienced “loss aversion” at the thought of having to give it all up (and of course it could be argued that we never did).

But then the cost of apartheid simply became too high: because of the instability arising out of increasingly successful black resistance and, equally, because of the success of the international campaign to isolate SA. In a pincer action, both threatened to collapse the economy. The game-changer was Citibank’s withdrawal from SA in 1987 and the passage of the US’s Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act (CAAAA) the following year.

Robert K Massie, the activist cleric who wrote the book on the US divestment movement, is now trying to apply its lessons to climate activism.

“Divestment triggered first a moral struggle within the hearts of individuals and institutions, and then a massive national debate that fundamentally altered American policy,” he wrote in *The Harvard Crimson* in 2014. “That – and not a tiny fluctuation in stock price – is the goal of the fossil fuel divestment campaign.”

At the moment, fossil fuel divestment is snowballing

globally, at the rate of about \$1-trillion a month, according to the website gofossilfree.org. But though some SA companies have taken positions (Nedbank will no longer finance carbon-generated power), SA is not yet part of this momentum, for two reasons: we do not have a significant enough grassroots movement, and no appropriate funds exist for those who wish to divest.

One company is trying to launch such a fund, David Le Page of Fossil Free SA (FFSA) tells me, and it has the backing of a major asset manager promising near-to-benchmark returns. But it needs at least R300m in seed funding, and no one, besides the Desmond & Leah Tutu Legacy Foundation and the Anglican Church, has signalled interest.

FFSA is asking bigger fish, such as the University of Cape Town, to divert a small portion of their existing portfolios into funds like this, which would then be able to exclude companies such as Sasol, BHP Billiton, Exxaro and Anglo American, all of whom are named in the Carbon Majors List – of the 100 companies that have contributed 71% of the world’s carbon emissions since 1988.

For McKibben, “the key to disrupting the flow of carbon into the atmosphere may lie in disrupting the flow of money to coal and oil and gas”: this disruption will surely wreak havoc with the global economy and many people’s lives, and the transfer to renewables has to be carefully managed, but we have no choice.

“Because we can destroy, we can also decide not to destroy,” writes McKibben. “We’re the only creature who can decide not to do something we’re capable of doing. That’s our superpower, even if we exercise it too rarely.”

But generations of psychologists, from Sigmund Freud to Kahneman, have explored the way our histories and contexts limit our ability to exercise this “superpower” rationally. Kahneman’s great insights, with Amos Tversky, are about how much our decision-making is influenced by the way a problem is “framed” – and how our instincts override our rational brains when the problem seems insoluble.

In their different ways, the writers I have been reading have reframed the problem for me, and helped me see a path out of the range of humanity’s instinctive reactions to the climate crisis: denial, panic, sorrow, anxiety, nihilism too. My spiritual life might be richer and my conscience clearer by eating differently or travelling more mindfully, but it is clear that capital markets are more consequential to the future of this planet than how we live.

The anti-apartheid divestment movement offers a lesson in how we, as individuals, can influence these markets, and history. If we want to make a meaningful contribution to our species’ and planet’s survival, we have to follow the money. Or, more precisely: to use our power to redirect it.