

Andreas Malm and the Zetkin Collective, *White Skin, Black Fuel: On the Danger of Fossil Fascism*, London: Verso, 2021. ISBN: 9781839761744 (paper); ISBN: 9781839761768 (ebook)

Petronationalism as Fascism

In 2010, the far right Fidesz party won the Hungarian elections, foreshadowing far right electoral victories in India in 2014, Poland in 2015, the Philippines and the US in 2016, and Brazil in 2018. Along with coalition governments including far right parties (such as Italy), and governments with similar leanings in the UK and Australia, suddenly there were a crop of extremist right-wing governments on five of the six inhabited continents.

In addition to obvious parallels on questions of ethnonationalism and immigration, there was a striking parallel between many of these governments on energy and climate. The Trump regime had its doctrine of “American Energy Dominance”, and the reckless deregulation of the coal, oil, and gas industries that embodied this doctrine in action. The Bolsonaro government planned major offshore drilling expansion, and effectively declared war on the Amazon and its Indigenous peoples to serve corporate interests. The Modi government escalated the extractive resource wars against the Adivasi (Indigenous) people of India (Newslick 2019), and the ruling BJP’s crony capitalist relationship with the Adani fossil energy conglomerate was well-known (The Citizen 2015). Add to that the “coal republics” of Poland and Australia. There was a story here that needed further analysis.

The initial emergence of climate denial as a force in the 1990s and its subsequent adoption as the official ideology of the Republican Party in the US was evidently connected to this new phenomenon.

The role of the fossil fuel industry in creating and funding this apparatus of denial has been studied extensively (Cook et al. 2019). It wasn’t surprising that the industry would resort to

these measures – after all, it had an obvious material motivation to delay action on climate change as long as possible to extract the last drop of profit out of the current system, and capitalism is structured on incentivising short-term profit above all else.

What was less obvious was why a mainstream political party, the US Republican Party, would embrace such a transparent lie. Yes, the party in question was ideologically aligned with big business, but outright denial of scientific evidence seemed too extreme even for a business-at-all-costs party, especially because *climate mitigation could hypothetically be a business opportunity*.

One could easily have imagined a pro-business party responding to the growing threat of climate change with proposals for emissions trading markets and government subsidies for solar and wind energy entrepreneurs instead. Interestingly, the other major US party has adopted much of this “market-based” approach to climate mitigation, what Andreas Malm and the Zetkin Collective term “capitalist climate governance” in *White Skin, Black Fuel* (or WSBF, as I’ll refer to it henceforth). Clearly, there were other factors that motivated the bulk of the Republican Party to take a position that is at odds with what one might rationally expect a pro-business party to do.

Questions of climate *justice* aside, none of these “market-based mechanisms” would be even remotely sufficient to mitigate climate change, but that discussion belongs elsewhere.

There have been academic studies probing particular aspects of the far right’s attachment to fossil fuels, and popular articles (including some I’ve written [Sen 2021a, 2021b]) that point out this trend of “fossil-fueled fascism”. But until the publication of WSBF, there haven’t been any accessible, non-academic, explorations of this phenomenon in its entirety. While WSBF does draw on plenty of academic sources, it is (from my admittedly subjective perspective)

eminently comprehensible to non-academic readers who appreciate a sometimes challenging read.

In WSBF, Malm and the Zetkin Collective¹ have connected two of the greatest threats of our time – the power of the fossil fuel industry in an age of climate crisis, and the resurgence of fascism and white supremacy. For this reason alone, it is an essential political project.

Is there a Particular Fossil Fuels–Fascism Link?

European far right parties use anti-immigrant (often specifically anti-Muslim) politics as an explicit counterargument against the demand for climate mitigation. Importantly, Malm and the Zetkin Collective demonstrate how this is only partly intended as what they term a smokescreen, and that deeper motivations exist: “some form of investment was at stake” (p.54).

They go on to elaborate:

Some of the very same values that the far right found in the nation, it appears to have located also in the fossil economy, so that defence of the former and of the latter became one and the same thing. (ibid.)

WSBF is an exploration of what this “investment” is, and what “the very same values” are that the far right attaches to both the fossil economy and the “nation”.

Before examining the historical origins of the ideological ties of contemporary far right politics with fossil fuels, the authors lay out compelling case studies of how the far right views fossil fuel reserves as a *national* resource, that the “nation” (defined in ethnonationalist terms)

¹ The Zetkin Collective is “a group of scholars, activists and students working on the political ecology of the far right. It was formed around the human ecology division at Lund University in the summer of 2018”

(<https://thezetkincollective.org/whoarewe/>).

deserves to benefit materially from. This includes case studies of the relationships of the Polish far right with coal, the Norwegian and Brazilian far right with offshore oil, and the US far right with the entirety of the fossil fuel industrial complex.

From my vantage point in the US, I can't help observing that Malm and the Zetkin Collective's understanding of the Trump phenomenon is vastly superior to that of many US observers, in spite of (or maybe because of?) their being from outside the US. There was a prominent strain of liberal thinking in the US (even influencing sections of the left) that the Trump regime was above all characterised by the chaotic, confused flailing of an egomaniac, with no underlying method, ideology, or goals. WSBF quotes some examples of this misguided thinking.

The authors correctly term this an "astonishing misjudgment", stating:

Only the conviction that matters of energy are utterly immaterial to a capitalist economy could buffer it against basic data on the campaign and administration of Donald Trump. In the *longue durée* of global warming, none of it [Trump's ascendancy] was a fluke.
(p.204)

One area where WSBF is a little wanting in depth is the discussion of Trump's "Energy Dominance" doctrine. The underlying motivation of US strategic advantage through becoming the world's largest fossil fuel producer and exporter is mentioned, but could have been explored in greater depth through analysis of the National Security Strategy (NSS) in the Trump years. Even more insights could be gained by comparing the Trump NSS with the Obama NSS, which would reveal that the *fundamental substance had not changed that much*; what had changed was

the bluster of the language. This is not merely a stylistic difference, however; it goes to the core of the differences between the neoliberal and the fascist varieties of capitalism.

According to the Obama NSS, the US position as “the world leader in oil and gas production” is “good for growth” and, combined with decreases in consumption, reduces “our vulnerability to global supply disruption and price shocks” (Obama White House 2015: 16). To the extent that any explicit connection is made between fossil fuel power and raw military power, it is exclusively with reference to the power rivalry with Russia, in the context of energy exports to Europe. Needless to say, concerns about “growth” and “vulnerability to global supply disruption” are unlikely to be popular or to evoke an emotional response. The Obama NSS was evidently written for technocrats.

The Trump NSS re-frames the same policy outcomes (continued expansion of US oil and gas production and exports) in starkly different terms. Starting from the section title (“*Embrace Energy Dominance*” – emphasizes mine), the document uses emotive language about “*unleashing abundant energy resources*” to ensure “a prosperous, secure, and powerful America for decades to come” (Trump White House 2017: 4, 22). Admittedly, most MAGA-hat wearing Trump rally attendees do not read the NSS. However, government officials do – and the Trump NSS is a thinly disguised instruction manual to senior government officials about how to talk publicly about energy policy in a way that fits squarely within militaristic rhetoric about US global power. In other words, there is a fundamental ideological continuity between the fascist conception of energy policy and the patriotic celebration of imperial power.

Evidently, Trump officials took these instructions to heart when they referred to US gas exports as “molecules of US freedom” (p.192).

In addition, the sanitized Obama-era language of efficiency is dispensed with in the Trump NSS. Instead of celebrating growing production and decreased consumption (and

therefore, less import dependence), as the Obama NSS does, the Trump NSS celebrates “America’s central position in the global energy system as a leading producer, *consumer*, and innovator” (Trump White House 2017: 22, emphasis mine). There is a direct ideological connection between this policy document and the (race and class stratified) *license to consume*, exemplified by the proliferation of fuel-inefficient SUVs and what WSBF, following Henderson (2006), aptly terms “secessionist automobility” (p.363-386).

And of course, any analysis of US “dominance”, of the military, economic, or energy variety, becomes much more powerful if it is grounded in the history of US imperialism, starting first and foremost with “Manifest Destiny” and the armed robbery of Indigenous lands.

Scenarios for the Slide into Fascism

In Part II of WSBF, the authors synthesise the empirical observations from Part I into a unified theory of fossil fascism, to begin to answer the questions they pose about the far right’s “investment” in fossil fuels, and the “very same values” they attach to both the fossil economy and the “nation”.

They start with a rigorous process to arrive at a definition of fascism, which is of immense analytical use on its own (pp. 223-239). They expand upon it with scenarios of what might happen during mitigation and adaptation crises to bring about a transition to full-fledged fascism. Curiously, they follow that with fictional examples of how these crises could lead to fascism, instead of answering the hypothetical they pose with real life examples.

The hypothetical they pose is the crux of the problem. A “life-threatening” situation for parts of the capitalist class, which faces the prospect of annihilation, occurring at the same time that there is a “force on the far right picking up its own momentum” (p.240), is the fundamental reason we are seeing fossil fascism on the rise in the first place. The scenario of “fossil capital ...

stepping forth to strike a deal with the far right” (ibid.) is *already in motion at a fairly advanced stage in some countries*, particularly the US and India.

It takes the form of coal baron Murray handing Trump a policy agenda, as WSBF mentions. It also includes the fossil fuel industry-funded laws criminalising mainly Indigenous-led protests against fossil fuel infrastructure that one-third of US states have enacted (Sen 2021c) – a deeply disturbing and significant development that WSBF does not cover.

This brings up a startling blind spot in what is otherwise a really strong analysis. In the Postscript, the authors write of the contemporary US climate movement: “Its direct actions had always been of the civil and polite type, in which activists practically count on being arrested” (p.530). This may have been a fairly accurate observation ten years ago (and remains largely true of white-led sections of the movement), but seems misinformed after Standing Rock.

Even as I write, Indigenous water protectors are braving horrific state violence to try to shut down the Line 3 pipeline in Minnesota (Houska 2021). This is by far the most militant wing of the US climate movement.

It’s also phenomenally effective – a recent report shows that Indigenous resistance to fossil fuels in North America has stopped or delayed greenhouse gas emissions equivalent to a quarter of combined US and Canadian emissions (IEN and OCI 2021). This is a remarkable achievement. And it’s exactly why these movements are being surgically targeted for repression through “critical infrastructure” laws (Colchete and Sen 2020). These movements are being attacked precisely because they are *successful enough to be a real threat to the industry*.

Deep Ideological Roots

Fascist ideological projects rely on palingenesis (myths of the glorious past of the racially defined “nation”) and palindefence (myths of the existential threat of racial others who are

“historical enemies” of the racial nation) as tools of propaganda. WSBF has illuminating case studies of palingenesis and especially palindefence, from present-day Hungary, to the Bosnian war of the 1990s, to the origin stories of fascism in the interwar years. (Being of Indian descent, I can’t help observing that the authors have missed out on a particularly illustrative example of palingenesis and palindefence by not analysing the Indian fascist movement, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh [RSS].)

They go on to connect these myths in a straight line to the climate denial machine, and its palingenetic myths of the glorious (fairly recent) industrial past and palindefensive myths constructed around conspiracy theories such as “cultural Marxism”.

By delving into the ideological roots of fascism in the interwar years, Malm and the Zetkin Collective demonstrate the depth of connection between fascism and fossil fuels. They step back even further into history to show the centrality of fossil fuels to the rise of the British Empire – not only their obvious economic contribution as the fuel of the Industrial Revolution and Britain’s consequent ascent to the pinnacle of worldwide economic and industrial power, but also their very direct *military* contribution in the form of steam-powered ships as the engine for British naval domination. (I use “fuel” and “engine” both literally and as an apt metaphor here.)

The most startling revelation in WSBF for me was the influence of fascist writers Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and Ernst Jünger in creating an ideological framework incorporating technology, nation, and race.

It is relatively well known that the Nazis played a pivotal role in the establishment of the autobahn, and it is obvious that it created direct economic benefits in the form of a publicly funded captive market for the likes of Daimler-Benz and other corporate backers of Nazism. It is also relatively well known that the autobahn was the model for the sprawling monstrosity (and

captive market for oil) that is the US highway system. What is less well known is how fascist ideological and aesthetic symbolism underpinned the autobahn project.

What Malm and the Zetkin Collective have achieved with WSBF is a critically needed analysis for movement thinkers and organisers seeking to understand the resurgence of fascism in the midst of climate breakdown. This understanding is not an academic exercise, but a necessity to develop effective strategies to defeat fascism and end the climate crisis.

And one lesson from WSBF is that the two are intertwined: it is not possible to fight fascism in the 21st century without accounting for climate catastrophe, and it is not possible to mitigate climate change without confronting fascism.

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