

THE LANGUAGE OF CLIMATE POLITICS

FOSSIL-FUEL PROPAGANDA
AND HOW TO FIGHT IT

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Preface: *We*

It feels perfectly natural to use the word “we” when you talk about climate change. “*We* are causing climate change.” “*We* are emitting more carbon dioxide than ever.” “*We* need to draw emissions down to net zero in order to halt global heating at the Paris Agreement target of well below 2° Celsius.”

Given that human beings are in fact causing climate change, the impulse to use the word “we” makes sense. But there’s a real problem with it: the guilty collective it invokes simply doesn’t exist. The “we” responsible for climate change is a fictional construct, one that’s distorting and dangerous. By hiding who’s really responsible for the crisis, the word “we” provides political cover for the people who are happy to destroy a livable climate to gain more profit and power.

Let’s think about it. Who is this “we”? Does it include the nearly 700 million people who live on less than \$2.15 a day? Does it include the approximately 4.2 billion people, half the global population, who live on less than \$6.85 a day? Does it include the millions of people all over the world—like the six million who participated in the global climate strikes of September 2019—doing whatever they can to lower their own emissions and push for systemic change? Does it include Bill McKibben, the elder statesman of the climate movement who wrote his first book about climate change in 1989? How about Greta Thunberg, the young woman who inspired worldwide climate protests by sitting in front of the Swedish Parliament every Friday to demand her government take action at the scale of the crisis? Does it include the indigenous peoples who have been living in harmony with their ecosystems for generations? Does it include our children?

Of course the universal “we” seems real. The fossil-fuel system, for the moment, feels all-encompassing. It provides the means for what people do on this planet. In its inclusions and exclusions, its laying out the conditions for human action, it seems totalizing, especially from an affluent American vantage point. But it’s not totalizing. And it’s certainly not eternal. It requires active reproduction at every moment in time: through subsidies, through construction and repair of its infrastructure, through court cases that uphold its laws, through protection of its “assets” by the military, through Instagram photos that pretend its benefits will bring you joy, and on and on.

Instead of thinking of climate change as something “we” are doing, always remember that there are millions, possibly billions, of people on this planet who would rather preserve civilization than destroy it with climate breakdown, who would rather have the fossil-fuel economy end than continue. Those people are not all mobilized, by any means, but they are there.

But remember too that there are millions of other people, some of them running the world, who seem willing to destroy civilization and allow untold numbers of people to die in the decades ahead so that the fossil-fuel system can continue now.

Remember as well that there are degrees of complicity. Without structural changes paid for collectively, most of us have no alternative but to use fossil fuels to some extent. Each of us can only do our best. And lots of people—including, as you shall see, some climate researchers, policymakers, and even advocates—believe, mistakenly, that the world can keep using coal, oil, and methane gas and still halt global heating anyway. But neither constrained choices nor mistaken beliefs are akin to the deep and shameful complicity of, for example, those in public relations who create advertising campaigns for oil and gas companies or those in the news media who refuse to mention climate change or the dangers of fossil fuels in their reporting. Such people are making money destroying the world.

Complicit people and institutions must be called out and encouraged to change. And the fossil-fuel industry must be fought, and the

governments that support that industry must be replaced. But none of us will be effective in this if we think of climate change as something “we” are doing. To think of climate change as something that “we” are doing, instead of something we are being prevented from undoing, perpetuates the very ideology of the fossil-fuel economy we’re trying to transform.

Fossil-fuel ideology can be reproduced even by a tiny, innocuous pronoun like “we.” This capacity to transmit ideologies—to shape the way people see the world, without their even being aware—makes words politically powerful. To undo climate change, a new collective “we”—me, you, everyone who reads this book, everyone with whom we share its ideas—will need to use the power of words to fight climate propaganda and transform the deep ideologies of the fossil-fuel economy. Contributing to that transformation is the goal of this book.