

VOLUME XVI, NUMBER 1, WINTER 2015/16

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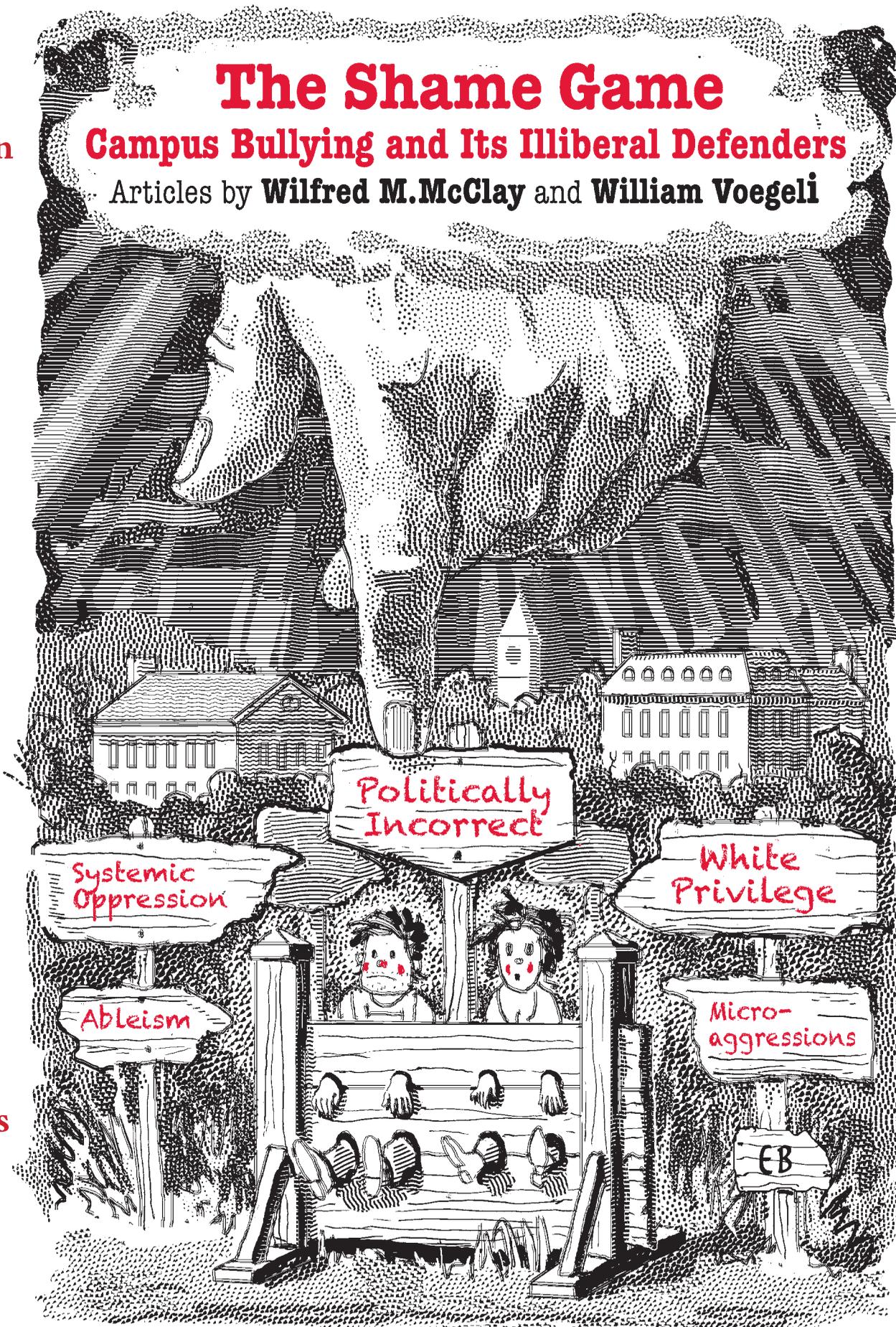
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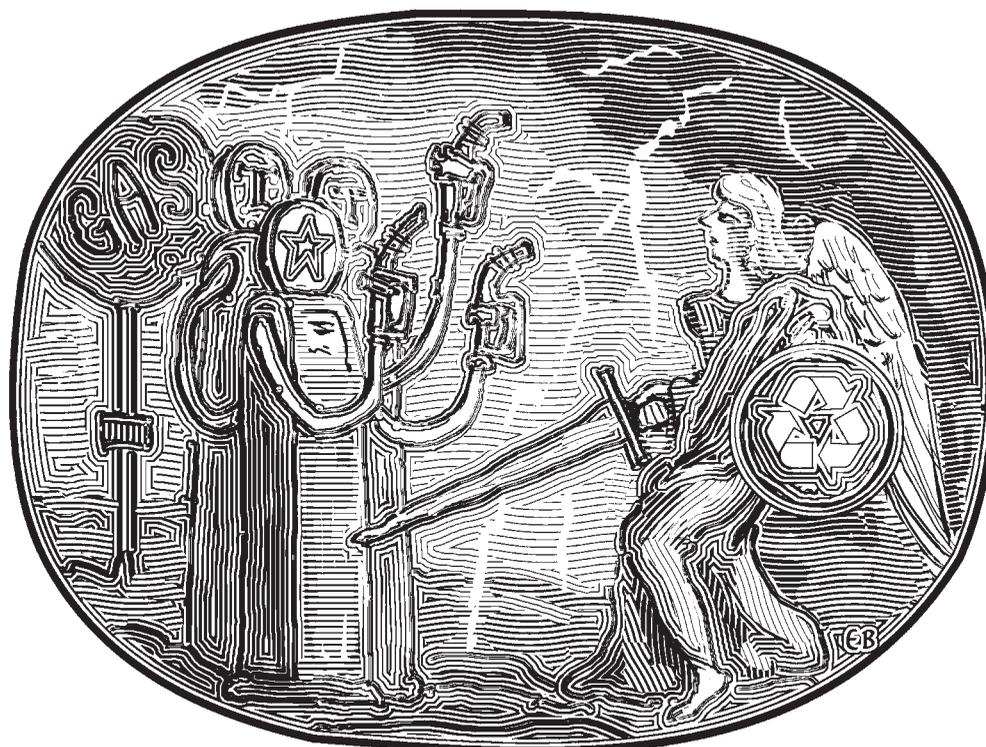
## THE CHURCH OF ENVIRONMENTALISM

*The New Holy Wars: Economic Religion vs. Environmental Religion in Contemporary America*, by Robert H. Nelson.  
Pennsylvania State University Press, 416 pages, \$25.95 (paper)

*This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*, by Naomi Klein.  
Simon & Schuster, 576 pages, \$30 (cloth), \$16.99 (paper)

*The Moral Case for Fossil Fuels*, by Alex Epstein.  
Portfolio, 256 pages, \$27.95

*The Age of Global Warming: A History*, by Rupert Darwall.  
Quartet Books, 448 pages, \$45 (cloth), \$35 (paper)



JULIAN SIMON, THE ECONOMIST WHO WAS legendarily skeptical about environmental doom, once posed a question at an environmental forum: “How many people here believe that the earth is increasingly polluted and that our natural resources are being exhausted?” Almost every hand shot up. He then said, “Is there any evidence that could dissuade you?” There was no response, so he asked again, “Is there any evidence I could give you—anything at all—that would lead you to reconsider these assumptions?” Again, no response. Simon concluded, “Well, excuse me. I’m not dressed for church.”

This story gets at the crux of today’s environmental disputes. Karl Popper argued that a scientific assertion’s defining feature is that it can be falsified empirically. Thus, the

religious fervor animating the environmental movement—and especially its most sacred cause, to halt and reverse global warming—must be considered apart from the research of environmental scientists, especially since many scientists also worship at the temple.

Four recent books elucidate this phenomenon. *The New Holy Wars: Economic Religion vs. Environmental Religion in Contemporary America*, by Robert Nelson, frames the debate in terms of environmentalism and “economism” as competing theologies. Two other offerings—Naomi Klein’s *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* and Alex Epstein’s *The Moral Case for Fossil Fuels*—consider the climate debate in moral terms, though from opposed ideological perspectives. A rigorous yet more detached assess-

ment comes from Rupert Darwall in *The Age of Global Warming*.

IN CONTRAST TO KLEIN, WHOSE BOOK exemplifies the environmentalist creed, the other authors critically examine environmentalism’s first principles. Philosophers and policy scholars, in works like Alston Chase’s *In a Dark Wood* (1995) and Wallace Kaufman’s *No Turning Back: Dismantling the Fantasies of Environmental Thinking* (1995), have criticized environmental romanticism. Both Chase and Kaufman were environmentalists who ultimately rejected that movement’s anti-humanism and romantic, unscientific view of nature.

We can, with some justice, treat *This Changes Everything* as a fervent but representative profession of the faith. In this moral-

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istic book, Naomi Klein treats her political opponents as enemies of humanity. One villain is Francis Bacon, widely recognized as the founder of the scientific method. Klein presents Bacon as a repressed pervert whose scientific writings on exploring nature were merely sexually frustrated metaphors for raping it. She draws a straight line from Bacon to the Industrial Revolution, and then to the global environment's destruction.

Since bursting into public consciousness in 1992 with the Rio Earth Summit, the climate change movement has never been strictly about science as such, but morality. Radicals of all kinds, from Communists to Islamists, have disdained democratic capitalism for providing mere affluence not the transcendent meaning they demand. To compensate, radical movements offer recruits the chance to vent their discontents by using words and deeds, including violent ones. Klein's work and surprising alliances show that environmentalism and the activist climate movement are powerful adversaries against democratic capitalism.

**T**HIS CHANGES EVERYTHING RECEIVED glowing reviews in all the Left places, and spent several weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Yet Klein's glib surer-ties should be shocking to anyone seriously familiar with climate science or policy. That she has found such a broad and sympathetic audience in elite media shows how irresponsible they have become in covering this complex issue. Klein, the author of two previous bestselling critiques of capitalism, *No Logo* (2000) and *The Shock Doctrine* (2007), has a sizable following. She acknowledges that climate change is an attractive issue because it of its potential to be exploited for the sake of fundamental social reorganization.

"Clearly, what gets declared a crisis is an expression of power and priorities as much as hard facts," Klein states early in the book; good advice, but also applicable to her own work. Even if one takes a sympathetic view of claims about the climate's role in various natural disasters, it's hard to support the assertion that climate change is a major cause of recent catastrophes, especially in comparison to other afflictions (war, famine, terrorism, Kardashians, etc.) that we face today. So the fact that it has been declared a crisis does represent power and priorities. But whose?

In fact, climate change has been designated a crisis by the very elites whom Klein loathes. A poll of the attendees of this year's World Economic Forum at Davos identified climate change as the greatest challenge facing the world, even as 1,700 arrived there on private jets. It also plays an outsized role in the agendas of President Obama and California Gov-

ernor Jerry Brown, despite climate change's very low rank among voter concerns, even in crunchy California.

**K**LEIN REPEATEDLY MAKES LOGICALLY and empirically dubious claims with strident self-assurance. She dismisses those who suggest that getting wealthier is an important aspect of a climate mitigation strategy, "as if having a few more dollars will make much difference when your city is underwater." More than one fourth of Holland is below sea level; yet the nation thrives because economic development has allowed it to hold back the North Sea. Klein also features senior government officials from developing countries who demand that developed countries pay "climate debts" to them, and who describe climate change as an "opportunity," thereby confirming the fears of many that international climate negotiations are a shakedown racket.

In many cases, her tactics seem baldly dishonest. She peddles assertions that are at best contested and at worst debunked, loading them up with several pages of overheated rhetoric, only to drop in a small footnote suggesting some disagreement or doubt among the experts. For example, her attack on hydraulic fracturing—"fracking"—relies substantially on discredited research, and is so full of apologies and hedges that one almost could believe the argument embarrasses her. Almost. Similarly, *This Changes Everything* does not discuss the inconvenient truth that global temperatures have risen more slowly over the past 18 years than all but the most sanguine climate models had predicted.

For Klein, "indigenous communities" are always heroic, corporations always rapacious. She seems blissfully unaware of the destruction of resources by many indigenous peoples, from prehistoric times to timber sales in modern Alaska, or even the mass extinction of most of the North American megafauna caused by ancestors of the indigenous communities that she celebrates.

Likewise, she highlights so-called "sacrifice zones," allegedly nefarious schemes of "extractivism" inflicted on places that "don't count and therefore can be poisoned, drained, or otherwise destroyed." The reality is that there must be trade-offs for *all* resources we use: the creation of any physical object, from a house to an iPhone to Ms. Klein's book, requires some alteration of the environment. Rather than insist on economic growth that leaves nothing disturbed, grown-ups ask how much alteration of our natural environment is desirable, at what prices, in which places, and for what purposes.

Klein's diagnosis is no more radical than her prescriptions, which include a guaranteed annual income for everyone and government-

mandated rationing of energy-intensive, long-haul transport. When discussing complex issues such as public transit she claims, "we need to be lowering prices and expanding services—regardless of the costs." She appears unaware of the politicized decision-making, featherbedded union salaries, and other problems that make public transit so spectacularly inefficient that it has made little dent in overall transport preferences globally, despite soaring public subsidies.

In a way, her candor is refreshing. She admits that "when climate change deniers claim that global warming is a plot to redistribute wealth it's not (only) because they are paranoid. It's because they are paying attention." She quotes Heartland Institute president Joseph Bast saying, correctly, "For the left, 'Climate change is the perfect thing.... It's the reason why we should do everything [the left] wanted to do anyway.'"

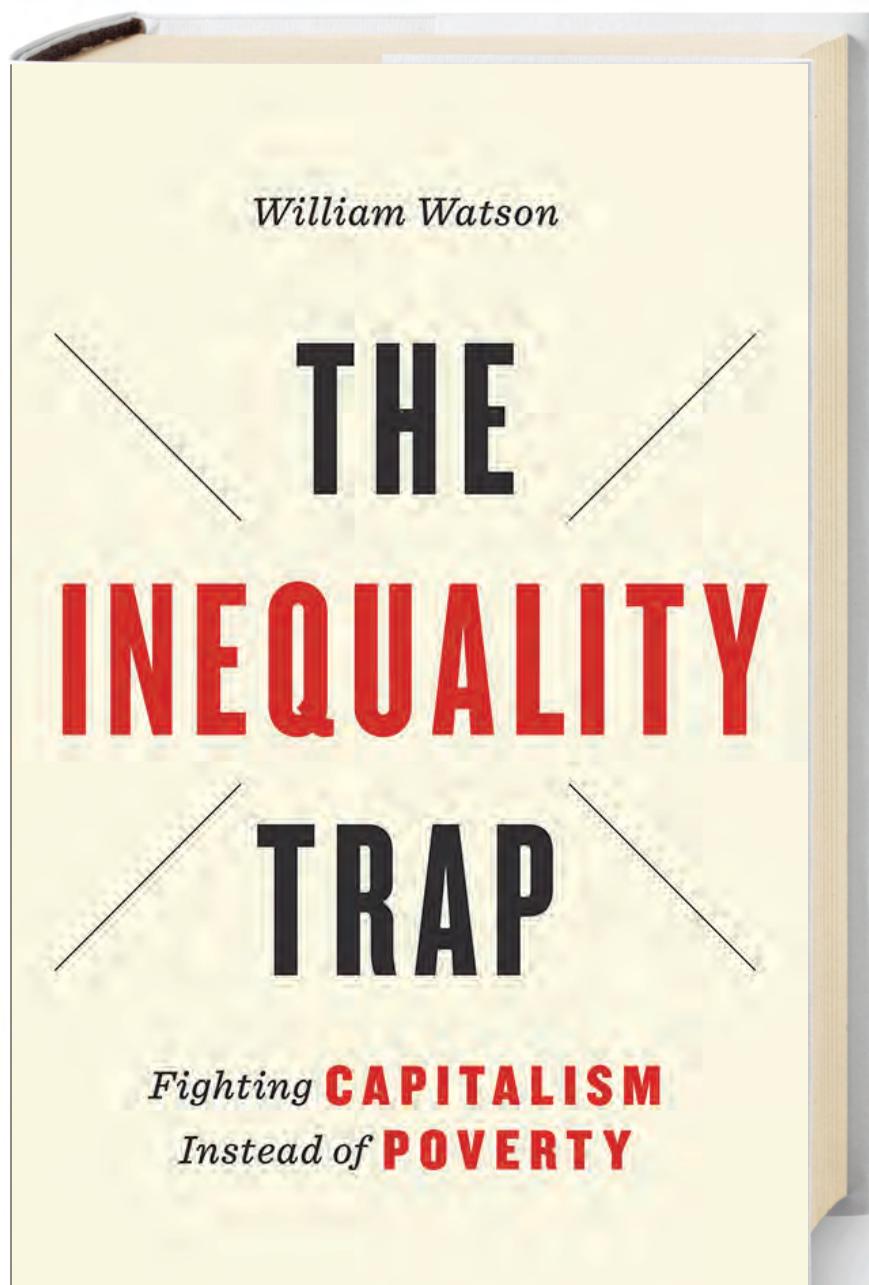
**I**N CONTRAST TO KLEIN'S DOGMATISM, Robert Nelson's *The New Holy Wars* takes a measured, philosophical approach to the environment and the economy. A professor of public policy at the University of Maryland, Nelson devotes a significant portion of his book to "religious" aspects of economic thought. Religious thought masquerading as empirical inquiry, he notes, is far from the exclusive province of environmentalists.

Yet his discussion of environmentalism offers the deepest insights. In Nelson's view, today's environmentalist religion is rooted in "Calvinism minus God." He discusses the founding environmentalists, from John Muir to Rachel Carson, who were brought up in the Calvinist tradition, and skewers today's climate fundamentalists for rejecting technical solutions in favor of Manichean moral arguments. "In environmental religion, global warming is a sin against God, not an issue to be resolved by economic calculations of possible future benefits and costs to human beings."

*The New Holy Wars* offers a broad, non-polemical critique of the environmental movement, uncovering the shaky intellectual foundations of its ideology and science. Nelson explores fundamental weaknesses in key concepts, e.g., what he calls "environmental creationism," documenting the conflicts between unsentimental Darwinism and conservation biologists' desire to save species at almost any cost. Such confusions are not simply tangential but have colored the entire history of protecting national parks, forests, and wilderness areas in the U.S.

In left-leaning communities and companies, Nelson argues, "environmental indulgences" to emit carbon resemble the papal indulgences that once absolved sinners. He calmly dissects

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James Ryerson, *The New York Times*



the views of mainstream environmental activists who denounce farming as “original sin” against the land, refer to humanity as a “cancer” or “the AIDS of the Earth,” and demand massive deindustrialization. Most fundamentally, he points out the many problems with treating humans simultaneously as natural and as opposed to nature. “To suggest that humans should renounce their power over nature is virtually a self-contradiction,” Nelson writes. “[I]t would be merely a different way of exerting power.” It is *human* nature to act from rules and impulses different from those of other natural beings. It is, therefore, contradictory to talk about “restoring” nature while advocating less human manipulation of nature.

If terms like “nature,” “wild,” and “ecosystem” are all too often subjective expressions of romanticism, then many of the anguished

calls for action on climate change are little more than personal preferences on stilts. Nelson offers a devastating critique of environmental colonialism, such as excluding Africans from portions of their continent that they once inhabited but that activists from Europe and America are now determined to keep “wild” and “natural.”

**L**ESS EVENHANDED THAN *THE NEW HOLY Wars, The Age of Global Warming* by Rupert Darwall, a CRB contributor, is undoubtedly a work of advocacy, but it delivers its message with skill and restraint. It struggles at times with being two books in one: a deconstruction of the religious ideology around climate change; and a highly detailed examination of global climate policy and policymaking. *The Age of Global Warming* begins with an eru-

dite account of environmental panic’s history, explaining how we got from Stanley Jevons—a great economist who nonetheless incorrectly predicted the collapse of British coal reserves in the 19th century—to Paul Ehrlich, the Club of Rome, and the first United Nations environment conference in Stockholm. Along the way, Darwall skewers the doomsayers’ many failed predictions of environmental catastrophe.

The second, more forbidding part of the book explains how the climate-industrial complex has sacrificed truth at the altar of orthodoxy. At times *The Age of Global Warming* feels prosecutorial, often but not always persuasively. For example, Darwall stresses that wind turbines kill many birds, which is true but not dispositive, since the number of birds killed by modern wind farms is tiny relative to bird deaths from other causes and would be even if we relied far more heavily on wind energy.

Unlike Klein, Darwall treats both Francis Bacon and Karl Popper as heroes, noting that Popper credited Bacon with being “the spiritual father of modern science and the creator of the industrial and scientific revolutions.” He traces the science around carbon dioxide and climate to its antecedents in the 19th century, while also tracing environmentalism to German romanticism of the same era. The Nazis, inspired by romantic German nationalism, were among the earliest modern environmentalists, pursuing laws and policies on organic farming, sustainable forestry, and air pollution that were far ahead of their time. The point is not that today’s environmentalists are neo-Nazis, but that today’s environmental movement is based in a romanticism firmly and sometimes fanatically opposed to reason.

Darwall provides a welcome history lesson, discussing, for example, economist E.F. Schumacher’s effect on President Jimmy Carter’s famous “malaise speech,” a prototype for today’s prophecies of environmental decline. It was also, in almost all of its points, spectacularly wrong, as future events would demonstrate. By reprinting some of that speech, with its overwrought language and alarmist tone, Darwall reminds us that true believers have always preached that catastrophe is imminent.

**A**LX EPSTEIN’S *THE MORAL CASE FOR Fossil Fuels* is in many ways the ideological counterpart to Naomi Klein’s book, though told with far more analytical rigor and far more moral and intellectual empathy for those not kindly disposed to its thesis. While Klein attacks fossil fuels as lethal to humanity, Epstein forthrightly embraces the morality of their use. *The Moral Case for Fossil Fuels* is a bold, paradigm-challenging work that would benefit many clueless college

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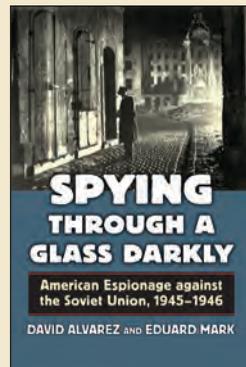
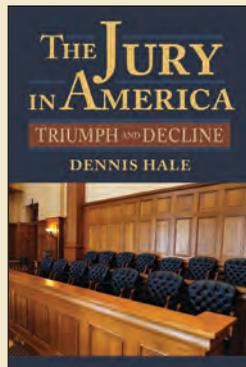
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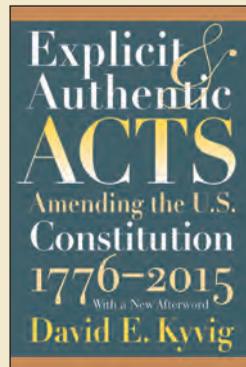
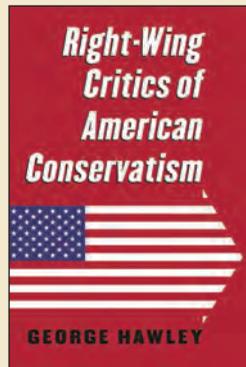
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sophomores and professors, even though Epstein's analysis succeeds only to a point, and reveals some of his own religious thinking.

The book owes a great deal to Bjørn Lomborg's *The Skeptical Environmentalist* (2001), though in many ways Epstein's argument is stronger by virtue of being narrower. *The Skeptical Environmentalist* exposed the hypocrisy and failed predictions of environmental activists over many decades, and for the most part told a far more optimistic and far more accurate story about the current state of the environment. (The hatchet job against it in *Scientific American* was an early indication of the extent to which environmental radicalism had captured American science.) Lomborg did leave himself open to critics by ranging over a wide variety of fields, leaning heavily on secondary literature and, invariably, leaving lines of attack open to his critics. By narrowing his focus to fossil fuels, Epstein produces a book with fewer vulnerabilities than Lomborg's.

Some readers will be wary of Epstein's roots in Objectivism, given the quasi-religious view of politics and philosophy taken by many followers of Ayn Rand. To his credit, Epstein states his assumptions up front—most importantly, that human welfare and flourishing should be the standard by which fuels are judged. Like Darwall, he mercilessly details the environmental catastrophists' and climate modelers' terrible predictive track record.

EPSTEIN DISCUSSES AT LENGTH Fossil fuels' enormous benefits for modern societies: longer human lifespans, higher incomes, more leisure time, to name a few. *The Moral Case for Fossil Fuels* stresses that humans actually can improve their environment by resisting the temptation to fetishize nature. (In any case, almost all "natural" sites are simply gardens of one kind or another, reflecting vast human influence.) He documents the dramatic decrease of climate-related deaths over the past century at a time of record carbon emissions, pointing out that our greater wealth and knowledge allow us to avoid disaster. He makes a persuasive case that fossil fuels have built a durable civiliza-

tion, highly resistant to extreme heat and cold, floods, storms, and other natural phenomena. These successes affirm Julian Simon's maxim that the human mind is "the ultimate resource." Abundant resources such as crude oil and aluminum, for example, were useless until human ingenuity unlocked their potential.

While Epstein is candid about according human flourishing highest priority, he fails to grasp the existence and legitimacy of other viewpoints. There are serious people, many of them politically conservative and religiously devout, who argue that nature and the creatures within it have certain fundamental rights to existence, independent of any human utility they may have. Although he parenthetically acknowledges this, Epstein never engages this perspective seriously. For him, man is the measure of all things.

Furthermore, while *The Moral Case for Fossil Fuels* argues that technical and economic barriers work against heavy reliance on today's renewable energy, it underestimates the ability of these sources to decline in cost and increase in utility over time. Having amply covered the tremendous innovation in fossil fuel extraction and utilization technologies over recent decades, Epstein should appreciate the possibilities for higher production and lower costs from alternative energy. He provocatively calls wind and solar energy "parasites that require a host," rather than acknowledging that these sources require fossil or other backup sources of power, which must be factored into their overall costs. Beginning with his book's title, Epstein often conflates oil, coal, and natural gas when discussing the benefits of fossil fuels. But each of these fuels has distinct merits and demerits, which can be fully understood only when they're considered individually.

WHAT EPSTEIN IS REALLY DOING IS making the moral case for affordable energy, not for fossil fuels. That is, countries should be able to lift their citizens out of poverty by using the most affordable forms of energy. It does not automatically follow, however, that middle-class Americans would suffer irreparable harm

from modestly higher electricity bills that result from increased use of renewables, given that total energy costs are less than 10% of the average household's budget. Any fair accounting must also consider that renewables not only impose costs that exceed fossil fuels', but generally provide distinct benefits: lower pollution and in many cases more predictable costs, as there is no variable cost for fuel. In this way, renewables in America's energy portfolio function like bonds in an investment portfolio—lower long-run financial return in exchange for short-run price stability. Though such arguments are not necessarily correct—currently we are almost certainly subsidizing too much renewable power at uncompetitive prices—they are at least plausible and need to be treated more seriously if Epstein wants to prove his case.

Overall, however, *The Moral Case for Fossil Fuels* performs a great service in challenging the unearned intellectual and moral superiority claimed by the opponents of fossil fuels. These energy sources have provided enormous services to humanity—have indeed been fundamental building blocks of civilization—and Epstein puts the burden of proof on critics who want to abandon them wholesale in favor of far less versatile and more expensive substitutes. His persuasive book will make their work very difficult.

The conservative blogger Ace of Spades has written, "God, save us from those who have no god but who are bursting at the seams with religion." It is long past time for conservatives to develop a serious, public critique of environmental theology, which perverts the science it claims to serve. If environmentalists wish to play a serious role in future policy debates, they will have to focus more on empirical findings and less on a holy war against real or imagined adversaries. As the continued popularity of Klein and her kindred shows, environmentalism's crisis of faith is not yet at hand.

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