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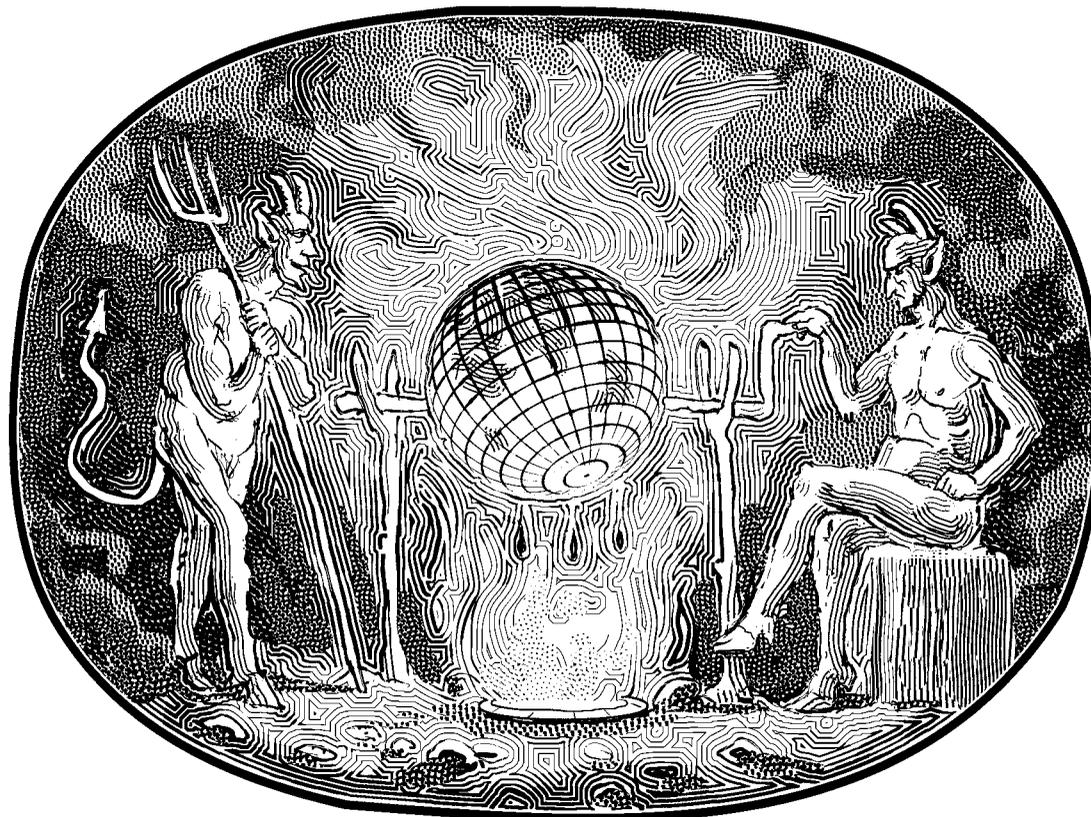
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## FROM SAVING THE EARTH TO RULING THE WORLD



**T**HE YEAR 1989 BROUGHT NOT ONLY THE end of the Cold War but also *The End of Nature*, one of the first books to address global warming, by the *New Yorker* journalist and climate activist Bill McKibben. Its title quickly crept into the folklore of environmentalism, overturning much inherited common sense about man's relationship to nature. The legal philosopher Jedediah Purdy, for example, while not denying that there was such a thing as a "natural world," nonetheless told an interviewer in 2015 that "nature" no longer exists independent of human activity. From now on, the world we inhabit will be one that we have helped to make, and in ever-intensifying ways."

Intellectuals have grown ever more confident that man is calling the shots. Some have taken to calling our epoch "the Anthropocene," on the model of a geological epoch, like the Pleistocene or the Holocene. One is reminded of the wiseacre high-school-yearbook quotation that was popular in the middle of the last century:

God is dead.

—Nietzsche

Nietzsche is dead.

—God

For surely the relevant problem is not that man has done away with nature but that nature might do away with him. We have courted danger in so many ways, with pesticides and disease research, with genetic manipulation, cloning, and nuclear fission. It was quite natural that, once the Cold War's distractions had passed, our relationship with nature would move to the center of our political life. Less expected was that the specific obsession that would seize the imagination of political activists was the weather.

### A New Ideology

**W**ORRISOME RUDIMENTS HAD LONG been known. Carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) absorbs heat. Swedish chemist Svante Arrhenius warned at the turn of the 20th century that, as coal and oil burned and CO<sub>2</sub> accumulated, the atmosphere would warm. In 1958 the oceanographer Charles Keeling set up a U.S. Weather Bureau observatory in Mauna Loa to measure atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations, which have shown a steep and almost perfectly linear rise ever since. Measurements taken of the Arctic ice cap in the 1960s showed alarm-

ing melting. But it was only at the end of the 1980s that scientists' data came to preoccupy politicians, bringing hearings by Democratic senators Tim Wirth of Colorado (who sought a "New Deal for global warming") and Al Gore of Tennessee. In 1988 an Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was founded at the United Nations. Ever since, the IPCC, backed by a hard core of professors and political agitators worldwide, has been locked in battles with the American, Chinese, Indian, Russian, Brazilian, and other national governments over how serious a problem global warming is, what measures must be taken to correct it, and who must pay for them. A "Green New Deal," going far beyond Wirth's early proposals, may soon be part of the Democratic Party platform.

The novelist Nathaniel Rich, in a new history, *Losing Earth*, has focused on the late Cold War origins of climate consciousness. His claim is that we might have stopped global warming in its tracks back then, had we been bold enough to act. "[I]n the decade that ran between 1979 and 1989, we had an excellent chance," he writes. "The world's major powers came within several signatures



of endorsing a binding framework to reduce carbon emissions.... [W]e came so close, as a civilization, to breaking our suicide pact with fossil fuels.”

No, we didn't. We didn't even come into the general neighborhood of doing that. A faithful reporter and a stylish writer, one with a gift for seeing complexity, Rich nonetheless has trouble thinking his way into the very different kind of environmentalism that existed before global warming became a global cause. But what did happen in those years is just as interesting, and visible at the margins of his book: a new internationalist ideology was born out of the ashes of the one that had just been vanquished.

The hero of Rich's tale is Rafe Pomerance, grandson of the financier, philanthropist, and New Deal architect Maurice Wertheim, son of an important nuclear disarmament activist, and himself a welfare agitator until his awakening to environmentalism. That is fitting. Just as the “Christian Right” at the end of the 20th century was invigorated by imports from other, not conspicuously religious branches of the Republican Party, the climate movement is full of people from various non-meteorological walks of progressive life. To take just intellectuals, the anti-capitalist activist Naomi Klein writes increasingly about global warming. So do the prison reformer Michelle Alexander and the Indian novelist and literary radical Arundhati Roy. The novelists Jonathan Safran Foer, Amitav Ghosh, and (in France) Fred Vargas have all put their fiction careers on hold to write short, urgent non-fiction books about global warming—Ghosh, strangely, wondering why *more* people aren't devoting their lives to writing about global warming. Rich's own “climate fiction” (or cli-fi, as it is called) includes a love story set in a submerged Manhattan of the future.

It is fitting, too, that Pomerance should be not a scientist but a lobbyist. It is an article of faith today among those who deplore global warming that the debate on it is closed. They are right to say there is a scientific consensus around rising CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations and increasing temperatures. But confidence in their own scientific rightness has made them science's enemies as often as its friends. Many in the anti-global-warming movement are so confident about their science that they do not think they *need* scientists. They need uncomplicated activists, such as the Swedish high-schooler Greta Thunberg. “The climate crisis already has been solved,” the 16-year-old Thunberg said at a TED Talk in Stockholm this year. “We already have all the facts and solutions. All we have to do is wake up and change.”

## Politics and Pollution

SO IT HAS BEEN FROM THE BEGINNING. If there is a low point for environmentalists' hopes in Rich's book, it comes with the 500-page National Academy of Sciences report *Changing Climate*, commissioned by Jimmy Carter in 1979 but not published until 1983, well into the Reagan Administration. Rich describes the moment as “lethal” to the climate activists' cause. The report gathered dozens of the nation's most distinguished oceanographers (including Roger Revelle of U.C. San Diego), economists (including William Nordhaus of Yale), climatologists and mathematicians—and lined them up behind

hole,” as Rich puts it, “and there was no layer.” But it resulted in a such a broad nationwide unease (albeit more over skin cancer than global warming) that Ronald Reagan, theretofore a skeptic, called for a 95% reduction in CFCs and signed the 1987 Montreal Protocol to limit greenhouse gases. The Antarctic ozone “hole” is now shrinking rapidly. If climate change (the science) is an “inconvenient truth,” climate change (the cause) frequently advances through convenient half-truths and even falsehoods.

Much of Pomerance's work was in goading the climatologists he worked with (for example, the NASA computer modeler Jim Hansen) to be more attentive to P.R., and to recognize that “[p]olitics offered freedoms that the rigors of the scientific ethic denied.” These freedoms have always lain temptingly within the grasp of scientists, but Rich misses the Faustian aspect to them. The authority of science wanes in equal measure as the political engagement of the individual scientist deepens. In recent years the same rules have applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to political journalism and journalists.

One of the reasons Rich believes the 1980s could have been a watershed moment for climate activists is that many industry-affiliated bodies had shown themselves ready to investigate and solve ecological problems. In 1968, the American Petroleum Institute (API) commissioned a study from the Stanford Research Institute—“Sources, Abundance and Fate of Gaseous Atmospheric Pollutants”—in which the authors alluded to the possibility of “significant temperature changes” before 2000. Temperatures did indeed rise by just under 1°F over that period, according to NASA. Rich is not alone among climate-change activists in treating this API report as a “smoking gun”—evidence of oil-industry foreknowledge, and thus culpability. But to examine the original document, which is available online, is to see that it is no such thing. The report is tentative and deferential, citing Revelle's warming theories, yes, but also research that warned of *cooling*.

The API did call it “ironic” that so much attention was then being paid to incidents of pollution here and there, so little to the overarching climate. They were right about this: in the early 1980s only seven of the 13,000 employees at the Environmental Protection Agency worked on climate. Yet you can see why an “abatement” approach, a mix of public-sector regulation and private-sector offshoring of dirty industries, was attractive in the 1980s. It was producing extraordinary results: the Charles River in Boston, so dirty at the start of the Reagan Administration that university rowing crews were required to get tetanus shots if they capsized, is swimmable a

### Books mentioned in this essay:

*The End of Nature*, by Bill McKibben.  
Random House, 224 pages,  
\$17 (paper)

*Losing Earth: A Recent History*,  
by Nathaniel Rich.  
Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 224 pages,  
\$25 (cloth), \$16 (paper)

*Small Is Beautiful: Economics as if  
People Mattered*, by E.F. Schumacher.  
HarperCollins, 288 pages,  
\$16.99 (paper)

*Learning to Die in the Anthropocene:  
Reflections on the End of a Civilization*,  
by Roy Scranton. City Lights,  
144 pages, \$13.95

*The Collapse of Western Civilization:  
A View from the Future*,  
by Naomi Oreskes and Erik M.  
Conway. Columbia University Press,  
104 pages, \$9.95 (paper)

a painstakingly documented case for the existence of global warming. So where is Rich's problem with that? Not so much in anything the report argued but rather in the reluctance of most of its authors, at the press conference rolling out the study and thereafter, either to hector the public or propose remedies. They were scientists, not politicians.

Conversely, the giddy high point in the 1980s climate struggle came when television networks alerted the public to the “hole in the ozone layer” over Antarctica in the course of a debate over aerosols and chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs). It was a poor description of ozone's place in the atmosphere—“[f]or there was no



generation later. Today, wolves have returned to the woods around Washington, D.C., and bald eagles to the coast of Maine. That is one reason why the country was not clamoring for a climate-change program at the end of the 1980s. If the problem was a form of “pollution,” then why risk upsetting the economy to fix a situation that was visibly improving?

There is no inherent reason why a scientific question such as climate should divide one political party from another. There is no Democratic and no Republican position on the temperature at which water boils. If today Republicans welcome climate skeptics more than Democrats do, their differences are probably over policy, not science. Just under half of Republicans agree that there is a scientific consensus that global warming is happening.

This statistic infuriates Rich. It ought to be unanimous, as he sees it, and the 1980s mark the moment when Republicans descended from the reasonableness of those API studies to Reagan’s “thuggish” deregulation, on their way to the “mustache-twirling depravity” of today’s party. George H.W. Bush’s chief of staff, John Sununu, whom Rich accuses of politicizing science, argues that no climate-change agreement was ever a possibility back then: “It couldn’t have happened,” he tells Rich in an interview, “because the leaders in the world at

that time were all looking to seem like they were supporting the policy without having to make hard commitments that would cost their nations serious resources.”

Rich does not believe him, but Sununu is correct. When Bill Clinton signed the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, the Senate, by a vote of 95-0, refused even to *consider* ratifying it. Barack Obama chose a different route after the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris. He ignored the constitutional requirement for Senate ratification altogether. Instead, Obama “ratified” the agreements reached in Paris by signing a personal “deal” with Chinese Premier Xi Jinping on a visit to Hangzhou in September 2016, promising (promising whom?) to “accept the said agreement and every article and clause thereof on behalf of the United States of America.” That bit of legerdemain did not make the Paris accords the law of the land. It did make them government policy—albeit for a much shorter while than had been anticipated in the autumn of 2016.

Rich ends his book on a “woke” note, if we can use that word to mean orotund, incendiary, and blind to any possibility of good faith in those who disagree with him. He accuses any politician who so much as claims to be unsure about climate change of “crimes

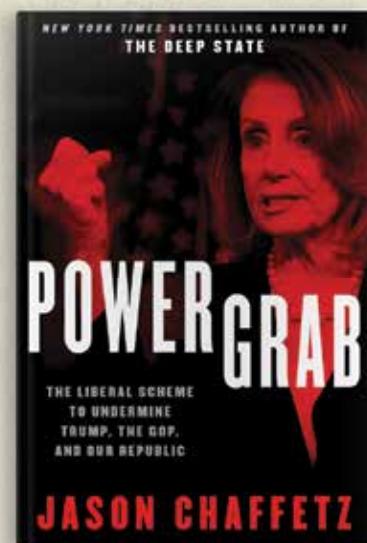
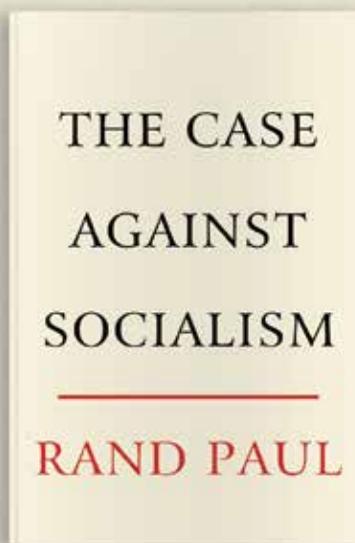
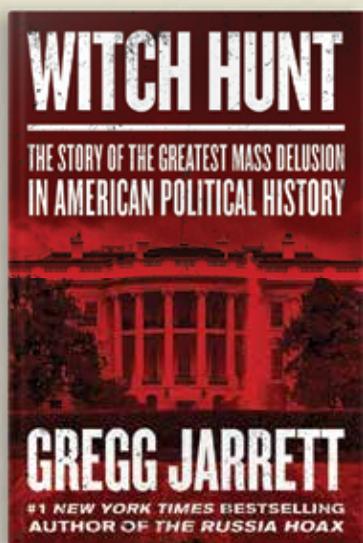
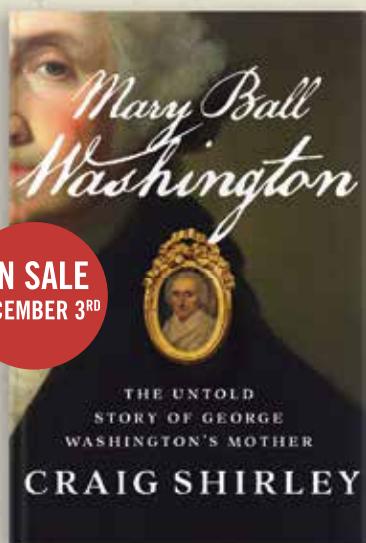
against humanity,” the offense that was established as a grounds for hanging Nazis at the Nuremberg trials. “There will eventually emerge a vigorous, populist campaign to hold to account those who did the most to block climate policy over the last forty years,” he writes, and today’s lawsuits “may seem tentative compared with the vengeance to come.” At this point, the reader who has been nodding off will snap alert and ask: am I reading too much into this, or is he proposing to string a few of these people up?

#### From Ecology to Environmentalism

**R**ICH, PERHAPS WITHOUT INTENDING to, charts a shift of paradigms—from the “ecological” perspective common to hippies and other nature-lovers at the start of the 1980s to today’s hard, “environmentalist” perspective, which is in some ways diametrically opposed to it. In the 1960s and ’70s, almost everyone had thought as an ecologist. It was understood that problems were accumulating in the “outdoors”: smog, junk floating down rivers, broken glass. A frequently aired public-service ad showed an Indian in tribal dress paddling his canoe out of a primeval forest, beaching it on a pile of garbage, then having a paper bag full of fast food heaved onto

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his moccasins from the window of a speeding car. The old “ecological” paradigm conformed to a long Western ethical and intellectual tradition. Its manifesto, to the extent it had one, was *Small Is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* (1973), a collection of essays by E.F. “Fritz” Schumacher, refugee from Hitler, head of planning at the British National Coal Board, and brother-in-law of the theoretical physicist Werner Heisenberg. Schumacher’s message was simple: The earth’s resources are limited and, in many cases, unrenowable. We are wasting them.

The countercultural theorist Theodore Roszak placed Schumacher alongside Tolstoy, Gandhi, William Morris, and Lewis Mumford in the tradition of “anarchism, if we mean by that much-abused word a libertarian political economy that distinguishes itself from orthodox socialism and capitalism by insisting that the *scale* of organization must be treated as an independent and primary problem.” So while Schumacher was a kindred spirit to this hero of the hippie movement, he was also someone whose vision could inspire anyone who thought about life in a traditional or religious way. It might be necessary, Schumacher argued, to take a step back and reconsider whether our position is sufficiently respectful of nature, or sufficiently respectful of God. Our problem was that we were “inclined to treat as valueless everything that we have not made ourselves.”

This was particularly the case with fossil fuels. As people in the 21st century would, Schumacher worried that we were using them too much—although part of his worry was that we were using them *up*. Modern man, like a dissolute heir, was burning through his inheritance, treating his capital as if it were income. Schumacher noted especially that we were burning through “a certain kind of irreplaceable capital asset, the *tolerance margins* which benign nature always provides.” While this perspective vindicates the global-warming concerns of our time, it also repudiates our time’s simple solutions. Because if Schumacher is right that fossil fuels are capital, then once we have run through them, we will have run through them. Abandoning fossil fuels will not necessarily mean carrying on modern life in a wiser, saner way. It might mean giving up modern life altogether. We will either find another source of stored energy, such as nuclear power, or we will revert more or less to the way we got energy before: water, and the labor of animals, including ourselves.

Schumacher’s “ecology” was a system that ordinary citizens could understand by looking at it. Ecological damage consisted of things that citizens could pick up and filter

out. People could thus judge the severity of the problem of pollution and instruct their elected representatives on how much they wanted done to fix it. The evidence from history is that they wanted quite a lot. That is why you can swim in the Charles today. The “ecological” understanding of nature and what it requires from us is compatible with democracy.

Modern “environmental” climate activism is less obviously so. Its science is mysterious to people, and science sometimes seems far from its main focus. To read almost any of the contemporary books that try to give an overview of climate change is to be struck by their non-scientific obsession with “capitalism.” Princeton English professor Roy Scranton, in *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* (2015), describes the environmental crisis as “the collapse of carbon-fueled capitalism” and warns that “global decarbonization is effectively irreconcilable with global capitalism.” Similarly, the Harvard historian of science, Naomi Oreskes,

If all our cars  
were solar, then  
advertisers would  
shill for sunshine just  
as ardently as they  
now do for oil.

co-authored a science-fiction dystopia about climate change, *The Collapse of Western Civilization* (2014). She and Erik M. Conway of the California Institute of Technology cast the enemy as the “carbon-combustion complex,” backed not just by energy companies but also by those who profit from them (advertisers, public relations, marketing firms). As Oreskes and Conway envision the future, “only China will succeed at managing climate change, owing perhaps to a sensible program of environmental regulation under Communism, and vindicating “the necessity of centralized government.”

These books are cult favorites among global-warming activists. The authors may be right that non-capitalist countries have a better chance of addressing climate change. But if so that is not because non-capitalist economic systems are better or cleaner: during the Cold War, Communist East Germany was the most polluted country on the European continent. The advantage of non-capitalist countries is rather in their greater willingness to com-

mand and interfere. As for the carbon complex, any industry that controls a dominant energy source in a free economy risks turning into a “complex.” If all our cars were solar, then advertisers, public relations companies, and marketing firms would shill for sunshine just as ardently as they now do for oil. Industry lobbyists and other insiders will fight for special favors, too. That is one of the lessons of the Obama stimulus package of 2009. It was notoriously a boon to the now-bankrupt California solar-cell maker Solyndra. Plenty of extravagantly expensive products appeared on the scene, like the solar-powered “smart” trash cans made by Bigbelly, which cost thousands of dollars apiece. (Eighty of them were scheduled for installation in San Francisco last fall.)

If Schumacher’s way of fighting pollution follows the pattern of a religion, Oreskes’s follows that of an ideology. It proposes not that we hesitate, or doubt ourselves and our present structures, but that we work through their contradictions to some new synthesis, as Karl Marx envisioned. Our overuse of carbon (which it requires esoteric expertise to quantify) calls for a new economic order (which it will require esoteric expertise to design). The case does not lack for supporting evidence. With a world population headed towards 10 billion, many of them in places with a precarious food supply, we might not have the luxury of a global economy subject to great fluctuation. But Oreskes and Conway have an additional gripe. Like Rich, they are frustrated that so many scientists resist being politicized. The scientists have been “hamstrung by their own cultural practices,” they write, “unable...to act upon what they knew. Knowledge did not translate into power.” More power to experts: perhaps this has been the real climate agenda all along, whether the world is ending or not.

#### First World Problems

“TODAY,” WRITES SCRANTON, “GLOBAL power is in the hands of a tiny minority, and the system they preside over threatens to destroy us all.” However true that might be as a description of economic privilege, it is diametrically wrong as a description of the politics of global warming. The problem is rather that access to (carbon) power has been democratized and decolonized, and that coal mining, traffic jams, and air-conditioned malls are now widespread in the most teeming parts of what used to be called the Third World. China accounts for 29% of global carbon emissions, the U.S. for 14%, Britain and other major European countries for a mere percent or two each.



If the United States still dominated the *consumption* of fossil fuels, we could make a dent in the world's carbon footprint by setting off on a jag of self-abnegation, however out of the national character such an impulse might be. But as Americans were aspiring to clean energy, the rest of the world began to aspire to the lifestyle that we had acquired (and maintain) through carbon energy. Our old profligacy had passed almost unnoticed as long as there were only a few tens of millions of us living this way; but as Asia and Africa caught up, the whole carbon game threatened to become unsustainable.

We have little to do for poor countries except lecture them. Oreskes's novel records that "a different version of denial emerged in non-industrialized nations, which argued that the threat of climate change was being used to prevent their development." Is this really so unreasonable? The average Indian observing this Western paroxysm of climate moralism has reason to be suspicious about its timing. And since global-warming ideology always arrives with a spring-loaded, fully elaborated governing and regulatory agenda, "denial" might be the wrong word for what is more accurately described as a reluctance to pay with Eastern prosperity to solve a Western problem. Americans and Europeans not of the governing classes might have similar misgivings. What they are "denying" is not reality but the will of their rulers.

Solving the problem of global warming in

the manner activists desire would require not only that we put our own moral house in order but also that we threaten those countries that insist on, say, burning coal to achieve the same lifestyle we already have. It would mean the equivalent of a non-proliferation treaty, to deny not weaponry but comfort and sustenance. (Although the weaponry would be denied, too, because to de-carbonize a society is essentially to disarm it.) Short of war, or statesmanship of the least democratic kind, it is hard to see how the anti-warming agenda can be carried out. Today's climate politics are incompatible not just with this or that state but with the continuation of the state system in general.

At root, climate change is a Malthusian problem. The Canadian energy scientist Vaclav Smil said, in a recent *New York* magazine interview with the climate author David Wallace-Wells, that the depopulation of advanced countries might be a plus for the earth's future. "Partially there is a 'hope,' I would say, in the sense that we are dying out," Smil said. "As we have seen over the past three decades, once you get to 1.3 or 1.4 [children per woman per lifetime, the rate in many countries of Europe], there's no... chance in hell that it could ever recover. Japan is losing now half a million people every year." But this is a "hope" only so long as the green space freed up by depopulation does not get filled with migrants. If it does, then the level of economic sophistication will like-

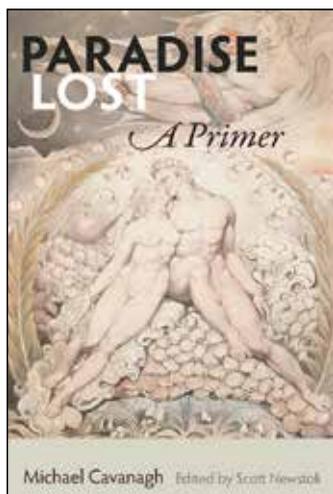
ly fall, and energy efficiency will fall along with it. *More*, not less, energy use will be the result. Most solutions to climate change are of this nature—miscalculation or poor execution can exacerbate the problem.

"As our technology grew more sophisticated," Nathaniel Rich writes, "our behavior grew more childish." It is a true and profound insight. Climate change is one of a family of crises of modernity involving Promethean hubris and unfunded externalities. It connects to all kinds of conflicts between nature and culture, or between barbarism and civilization, or between (to use Bertrand Russell's dialectic) freedom and organization. Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway speak for many climate-change activists when they imagine that future generations will marvel at "how we—the children of the Enlightenment—failed to act on robust information about climate change." They probably won't marvel at it so much if they recall that the Enlightenment has many aspects. It is the source of certain values, the source of a new type of domination by experts, and the source of energy-extracting technologies that have brought wealth beyond man's wildest dreams. Like many problems the Enlightenment gets called in to solve, this is one of its own making.

*Christopher Caldwell is a contributing editor of the Claremont Review of Books and the author of the forthcoming The Age of Entitlement: America Since the Sixties (Simon & Schuster).*



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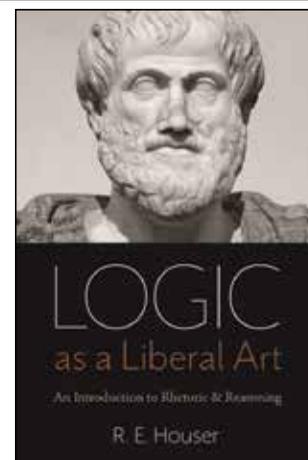
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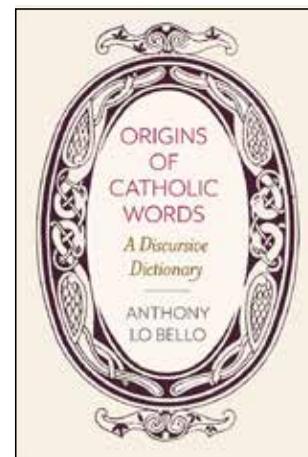
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