



NASA Earth Observatory image by Lauren Dauphin

Climate impacts are growing rapidly in this El Niño affected summer. Despite [calls to declare a climate emergency](#), President Biden has responded only with new measures to help Americans cope with [extreme heat](#). The measures announced include hazard alerts, improved prediction of heatwaves, funding for air-conditioning and cool centers for low income groups, and guidance on enhancing tree canopy cover. These all help preserve the American way of life in the face of threats from the changing climate. Despite previously increasing spending on other climate measures, Biden's climate policies remain contradictory. The administration also continues to preside over increasing domestic oil production. It has granted new leases in both [Alaska and the Gulf of Mexico](#). And it has supported new fossil fuel pipelines such as the [Mountain Valley gas pipeline](#) in West Virginia.

Climate backlash

In the UK, despite the weather, there are not only contradictory actions, but also a political backlash against climate action. The lightning-rod was the plans of London mayor Sadiq Khan to extend the ultra-low emissions zone (ULEZ) to outer London. The ULEZ is primarily an air quality and health measure, but with climate benefits. However it [became a political](#)

[football](#) at the Uxbridge by-election, triggered by ex-PM Boris Johnson's resignation.

The ruling Conservative Party, emboldened by their narrow victory in Uxbridge, has doubled down on resisting immediate climate action. PM Rishi Sunak has declared he is '[on the side of motorists](#)'. He also announced plans to issue [hundreds of new licences](#) for oil and gas development. He promises benefits for jobs and national security – while offering merely a fig-leaf, placebo proposal for carbon capture and storage to make more fossil fuel extraction appear compatible with distant net-zero targets.

And as wildfires have raged and global temperatures soared, right-wing media and politicians have *elevated* their efforts to delegitimize and suppress climate protest. For example, the UK's minister for Net-Zero, Grant Shapps, has made repeated [attacks](#) on climate activists. He has even attempted to portray the opposition [Labour Party as captured](#) by the protest group [Just Stop Oil](#). What is going on?

Climate Societal Securitization

In a [new paper](#) in Global Security Quarterly, co-authored with Olaf Corry, I identify such moves as part of a deeply worrying process of 'climate societal securitization'. 'Security' is all about justifying exceptional measures against existential threats. Previous calls for 'climate security' have sought to legitimize exceptional measures such as restrictions on excessive flying, or other forms of emergency decarbonization, to tackle climate change itself. But in 'climate societal securitization' crackdowns on migration, and suppression of protest are being mobilised in defence of conventional high-energy ways of life and the supply of the fossil fuels on which such ways of life currently depend.

Our paper traces some of the logics of this process of 'inverting' the climate threat. We conclude that societal securitizations like this one mobilize defensively to protect the economic and elite interests of contemporary society. They manage inherent tensions between elite and wider interests hidden within the beguiling idea of defending 'society', chiefly by 'othering' outsiders as the threat. Critically this version of climate security preferentially supports [palliative or placebo interventions](#) on climate. Placebo policies promise future action or exaggerate benefits, such as carbon capture, or carbon offsetting. Net-zero targets are especially, and [worryingly susceptible](#) to such promises and rhetoric.

Creeping Authoritarianism

These trends are not just to be seen in the US and UK. There are similar patterns – resisting migration, suppressing activism, and supporting fossil fuel production – elsewhere in Europe and across the Anglosphere. In these societies Cara Daggett identifies similar attitudes and behaviours as the cultural defence of [authoritarian ‘petro-masculinity’](#). Here fossil fuels come to represent autonomy, self-sufficiency, masculinity and patriarchy. Andreas Malm and the Zetkin Collective diagnose in the same trends a risk of [fossil fascisation](#). They suggest that in the face of economic shocks resulting from climate impacts, the alignment of fossil interests, authoritarian politics and ethnonationalism would closely resemble those in 1930s Germany. This is today more than a fringe idea and we should take such concerns seriously.

Societal securitization, preventing immigration and controlling protest, opens a door to authoritarian responses to climate change. We must remember that some states’ preferred ‘responses to climate change’ may not even aim to mitigate the problem, never mind act in the common interest. If such fortress politics dominate, the worst [scenarios painted by the IPCC](#), of division, conflict and continued emissions growth seem highly plausible.

But states need not succumb to full scale fossil fascisation for climate impacts to grow. If placebo measures come to dominate, impacts will continue to worsen as greenhouse gases accumulate further and temperatures rise. In our paper we therefore consider what might come next. Can we expect – finally – serious action that puts cutting emissions and phasing out fossil fuels at the center of policy? Or are there more placebo promises to come?

Placebo Geoengineering?

On balance, the spread of societal securitization would make it less likely that appropriate emergency restraints will be imposed. Genuinely radical mitigation efforts would run directly against the dominant societal discourse. Their opponents will present them as existential threats to valued ways of life. Moreover, such measures would likely be dismissed as ineffective if limited to a domestic level. And resisted as a threat to global security if imposed on other states through military, cyber- or even economic action.

The rise of this kind of politics, we fear, could make solar geoengineering the next palliative promise – a means to avoid the worst impacts of climate change regardless of the prior

accumulation of greenhouse gases. This is not to dismiss the potential for geoengineering to reduce climate harms. But unfortunately, if advocated and deployed in line with the logics set out here, solar geoengineering would be unlikely to be accompanied by cuts in fossil fuel use – regardless of scientists’ warnings that it should only ever be seen as a [supplement to emissions cuts](#).

Negotiating the surrender of a way of life

If we want to avoid the worst of all worlds – risky geoengineering, failed mitigation, and a slippery slope to fossil fascisation – we should resist the mobilisation of geoengineering proposals as defence of ‘our way of life’. It’s more than 40 years since President Bush told the world that the American way of life was not up for negotiation at the Rio Earth Summit. It’s long since time to [reverse that doctrine](#).