

# Perspective

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## Shattered trust

*Boris Starling . Alice Roberts . Ed Balls . Kate Devlin . Jonathan Lis  
Susanna Forrest . Andrew Wilson . Lucy Ward . Kate Muir  
Alex McBride . Anne-Elisabeth Moutet . Amir Amirani*

+ Gavin Esler interviews Bill Browder

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# Wade Graham's Walden

## Fuelling the fires of violence



**R**ussia's attack on Ukraine has laid bare the negative linkage between our security and our dependence on fossil fuels. If Putin's aggression has any silver lining, it's that it has brought consensus on the need to accelerate our move to clean energy. It would be a grave mistake, though, to assume that the linkage is coincidental – specific to European security and Russian fossil fuels. The problem is global. The connection between fossil fuels and violence is fundamental – violence towards people and societies, and violence towards the environment that sustains us.

I've seen it up close. I've looked in its face. I've seen its menace, small-mindedness, and absolute conviction.

I've felt its rage – even once felt its angry spittle on my face. It's by no means a new phenomenon. Decades ago, in a small town in the Rocky Mountains, I was nearly attacked by a gas station cashier, who leaned across his counter to spit at me that “c-sucking environmentalists” were responsible for the season's mosquitoes, having objected to spraying poison on a nearby wildlife refuge. Though I was a tourist passing through, he clearly identified me as not of his tribe, as a likely environmentalist, and therefore to be subjected to, at minimum, verbal assault.

In a rural town in my own, supposedly enlightened state of California, I was nearly run off the road by an enormous pickup truck with giant Trump flags mounted in its bed, swerving and

spewing black exhaust in my windshield. All because, as far as I can tell, I was not driving a truck myself, but a small, Japanese car more typical of urban dwellers. At a roadside restaurant in Utah, I was stared down menacingly by a man wearing a black T-shirt emblazoned with a drawing of an AR-15 assault rifle and the slogan: “The 3 F's: Faith, Family, and Firearms.” Four F's, I thought – add Fascism. The connection between fetishising guns, pro-Trump and Confederate flags, racist nationalism, and a perverted Christianity that claims “family values” while embodying hate, is ubiquitous – and is no coincidence. Nor is the affinity for Putin's Russia: the far right has always yearned for authoritarianism, and has lately been emboldened by ▶



Donald Trump's fawning over the dictator. Now, even in the face of Russian atrocities in Ukraine, Fox News continues to parrot Russian lies, and Putin's state media gleefully replays Fox segments for its captive domestic audience. The trappings of fascism might no longer surprise us. But the linked violence towards the environment, and the anger towards people who want to protect it, should open our eyes. The people who marched for White supremacy in Charlottesville in 2017 and assaulted the US Capitol on 6 January, 2021, share the same political platform as those who seized a wildlife refuge in Oregon for 41 days in 2016 to protest public ownership of land, threatening federal agents with assault weapons. They stand with the same people who in the past year have shot dead almost 80 wolves on public lands, vocally equating protected wolves with environmentalists. They stand with the same people who have formed a nationwide movement of "coal rolling" – modifying diesel truck engines to blast black soot and smoke at will, using it as "Prius repellent" to attack perceived liberals and street-side protesters, especially those promoting Black Lives Matter.

Nor is calling diesel smoke "rolling coal" coincidental. The defence – at least rhetorical – of the vanishing coal economy is central to the rightist agenda, supported by the lies of climate-change-denying media and politicians, attacking environmentalism and renewable energy as liberal and/or Chinese plots to destroy White America. The "right" to coal has become the right to pollute, equal to the "right" to carry assault weapons without constraint, often with no other purpose than to intimidate others. The joining of anti-environmentalism to the rest of the "white-plus-might-makes-right" agenda is not coincidental. The simple reason is that environmental problems are Commons problems – threats to common goods such as air, water, wildlife, forests, and of course, the planet's climate. Commons problems are common problems, applying to everyone. Solutions to them require acceptance of community, of collectivity, of collective responsibility, and submission to laws and measures designed to protect the common weal. But commonality is anathema to the far right: their very identity lies in the defence of the right of individuals and

small groups to "freedom" – and their definition of "freedom" includes the freedom to inflict harm on others. This definition is unvarying despite variable historical circumstances, whether the harm to be defended is to enslave, exploit, marginalise, oppress, pollute, kill animals, or invade one's neighbours.

The fact that "freedom" from accountability for harming others is the only core principle of the extremist right explains the cartoonishly grab-bag nature of people drawn to the movement: religious conservatives, neo-conservatives, anti-abortionists, anti-feminists, anti-homosexuals, anti-taxers, anti-vaxers, fossil fuel interests, neo-Nazis, Q-anon conspiracists – the list is endless. The hallucinatory scene at the Capitol riot of an unhinged and bizarrely-costumed rabble intent on undermining democracy

*There can be no mistaking the fact that the enemies of a liveable future are everywhere, many-headed like the Hydra*

serves as apt illustration of the intellectual incoherence of this shifting alliance.

But the extremists I've described don't see themselves that way. Despite the glaring differences of belief among these groups, they are united by the conviction that they alone are in possession of truth. I believe their righteousness is enabled only by living sealed inside disinformation bubbles, false alt-realities in which distortions and lies can appear to be their opposites. But, within the bubbles, their justifications appear unassailable, and thus so is their righteousness. Many argue that extremists have been manipulated, and indeed they have been. Self-interested corporations and wealthy ideologues have long blown and shaped disinformation bubbles. The tobacco industry pioneered the playbook decades ago, sowing doubt about the scientific evidence of smoking's

harm; the fossil fuel industry perfected it to undermine climate science; Trump and Russia combined their efforts to tilt the 2016 US election; Putin's full disinformation seal of Russian media now drives the Ukraine invasion; everywhere, a galaxy of deadly-earnest madnesses have coalesced in a superheated disinformation gas cloud. But we can never lose sight of the fact that extremists – outside Russia, China, and other authoritarian spheres – are adults living in free societies, able to access good information if they so choose. To me, as to many of us, their ignorance is both wilful and intentional.

The prowess of the gas cloud engineers and the true belief of its inhalers also explains the movement's success in dividing and distracting its foes in the majority: by driving wedges, and by continuous bombardment with disinformation and lies, when not with physical weapons. There can be no mistaking the fact that the enemies of a liveable future are everywhere, many-headed like the Hydra. Like the Hydra, their attacks on a livable future come on multiple fronts. "Soft" attacks on science, objective information, and our very feeling of common interest are joined with military attacks on defenders, civilians and cities, and are part of the same purposeful strategy. To defend against this assault, the greater global community must first see itself as such, meaning that no building block of a livable future is less important than any other. And that, even in moments of dire existential threat, the big picture can't be broken into dissociated parts. The climate and broader environmental agendas are indissolubly linked to that of humanity, and must be defended with appropriate means, beginning with fighting disinformation and lies, insisting on scientific literacy and commonly verifiable standards of truth, and above all promoting an ethics of stewardship and non-violence, for everything, everywhere.

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