

AMOR MUNDI

Using Technology to Deepen Democracy, Using Democracy to Ensure Technology Benefits Us All

Monday, July 23, 2012

Exxon-Mobil's "Geo-Engineering" Discourse Is Just More Futurological Greenwashing

Also posted at the [World Future Society](#).

A **speech** made by ExxonMobil CEO Rex Tillerson at the Council on Foreign Relations last month has been attracting greater and greater attention as its implications sink in.

Tillerson has supposedly "pivoted" from his predecessor Lee Raymond's relentless climate change denialism, and has acknowledged that global temperatures are rising. "Clearly there is going to be an impact," Tillerson admitted. But he remains as committed as ever to undermining any acknowledgment that might support a policy consensus that would cut into his corporation's profitability, insisting that climate models cannot predict the actual magnitude of the impact.

Tillerson glibly proposed that in order to preserve the record profits of his industry, humanity might have to "adapt" to rising sea levels and shifts in agriculture. Just to be clear, what "adapting to rising sea levels" means is the dislocation of millions and millions of humans living on coasts and what "adapting to shifts in agriculture" means is the starvation of millions and millions of humans in droughts and famines and widening vectors of insect attack. "We have spent our entire existence adapting. We'll adapt," Tillerson said.

A Spectacle of Myself

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In Lieu of Flowers

"LOVE LOVE LOVE your futurological brickbats! Love them! You are in fine company with Ambrose Bierce's Devil's Dictionary with these." – Paulina Borsook

"Devoted to highly rhetorical nitpicking, but it is fun to read." – Chris Mooney

"Rather close but correct reading." – Evgeny Morozov

"Mean, but true." – Annalee Newitz

"Dale Carrico's skewering of the salvific pretensions of Silicon Valley's soi disant savior/founders never disappoints." – Frank Pasquale

"Pretty breathless, but I guess it had to be said." – Bruce Sterling

"An essential reality check for those who are too entranced by transhumanism to notice the sordid reality behind the curtain." – Charlie Stross

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Needless to say, just because human beings have adapted to crises before does not in fact ensure that they can adapt to any situation, and certainly the historical record is full of examples of civilizations that have not survived environmental shifts, plagues, famines, or the social disruption exacerbated by environmental stress.

But more to the point there is that chilling pronoun, "we." Who is included in Rex Tillerson's imagined "we," exactly? Just how many human "theys" can perish in plagues and in famines and in climate refugee camps and in hails of bullets brought on by climate disruption in order to maintain Rex Tillerson's historically unprecedented profit-taking before the bubble of privilege within which resides the population of his personal "we" might begin to feel the least pressure? In time to realize it is too late for us all?

Of catastrophic anthropogenic climate change, to the extent that he is admitting its existence in public at all, Tillerson said: "It's an engineering problem and there will be an engineering solution." I have written extensively about so-called "geo-engineering" discourse, which I would describe as an apparently environmentalist discourse in which corporate-military organizations are imagined to declare and wage war on climate change on an industrial scale. Such discourses are only "apparently" environmentalist because they actually function to misdirect our attention away from environmentalist education and activism and regulation as these play out in the real world. They try to recast shared environmental problems as opportunities for elite incumbent profit-taking in the very modes that are yielding the ongoing crisis. And they proceed from a curiously alienated vantage on the earth itself, in which environmentalism becomes a kind of science fictional narrative in which humans are like aliens arriving on a distant planet and setting about "terraforming" it to suit their needs, rather than simply recognizing that we are earthlings evolved to flourish on a planet we have wounded, possibly fatally, through ignorance, aggression, and short sighted greed.

Does it really make sense to fantasize that the very agents most responsible for environmental catastrophe are finally the only ones suited to resolve it by attacking the ongoing

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outcomes of that catastrophe in the very mode of competitive profit-taking mega-scale brute-force extractive-industrial agency through which environmental catastrophe has been wrought? Well, does it?

Chris Mooney for one has **taken issue** with my characterization of "geo-engineering" discourse as a second order climate change denialism, one which is aimed not at a denial of the consensus of the relevant scientists that this phenomenon is occurring and that its consequences are catastrophic, but aimed instead at a denial that accountable democratic governance can be equal to the collective challenges of climate change which substantially yields the same result as the first, more conventional, denialism.

It is very difficult for me to understand how those who would declare themselves forced into advocacy of "geo-engineering" as a Last Resort or a Plan B because of the failures of environmental regulation and renewable alternative infrastructure investment, for example, supposed imagine the mega-engineering projects they daydream about like science fiction fanboys in digital renderings on YouTube or before rapt techno-fetishists at TED would actually be funded, regulated, and maintained if not by conventional funding and regulatory agencies, or just how such "hard-boiled realists" square their confidence that conventional investment and governance will prevail over "geo-engineering" with their despair over such governance ever being able to rise to the challenge of our shared environmental problems.

Tillerson insists that his industry "is built on technology, it's built on science, it's built on engineering" -- rather than on relentless greed and an opportunism that has demonstrated itself willing to despoil any environment, disrupt any community, dismiss any value that stands in the way of the brutal extraction of condensed banked energy through which the suicidal fraud of the petrochemical bubble he would no doubt describe in self-congratulatory cadences as "modern industrial civilization" remains hysterically inflated.

It should be needless to say that there is no such thing as

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"technology in general" or "science in general" for Tillerson's industry to be a special exemplar of, and in fact his personal position and privilege absolutely requires of him the selective application of some science together with the selective denial of other science (climate sciences that warn of the perilous consequences of his activities), the selective application of some technologies together with the selection repudiation of other technologies (renewable energy infrastructure at a scale that might threaten the profitability of his activities).

But by deploying "science" and "technology" as muzzy futurological abstractions he can elide all the relevant details on the basis of which public deliberation on the diverse stakeholder costs, risks, and benefits of his activities as against available alternatives might proceed in a reasonable and responsible way, the better to assume the mantle of The Great White Father bemoaning "a society that by and large is illiterate in... science, math and engineering, [for whom] what we do is a mystery to them and they find it scary" -- as if the reckless and border line sociopathic things he is saying aren't scary enough on their own! -- "an illiterate public" he adds, that must be "help[ed... to] understand why we can manage [environmental] risks."

Of course, the technoscientific illiteracy Tillerson speaks of is quite real: And he is *counting on it* to continue to get his way and make his profits while the sun shines, *laissez les bon temps rouler, après moi le deluge!* Futurological daydreams of mega-engineering boondoggles actively contribute to this ignorance and illiteracy, distracting people from our shared problems and their available solutions instead to space-opera cover art fantasias of orbiting mirror archipelagos, arctic cathedrals of steel piping icy water from the sea floor to the surface, fleets of airships spraying pseudo-volcanic aerosols into cloudbanks, and so on in an era when we cannot summon the will to bury our power lines so that they don't disrupt power delivery to millions every time it rains or snows or fill the potholes pimpling our highways let alone build obviously beneficial transcontinental high speed rail!

It is no surprise that Tillerson goes on to rail against "interested parties" -- he is the purely disinterested

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exemplar of pure science now, you will recall -- whose alarmism and activism "is going to... manufacture fear because that's how you slow this down." For such "interested parties" are precisely the ones seeking to educate the public about the shared problems at hand, about their incredible urgency, and about the changes in public policy, in personal conduct, in urban design that we must insist upon if we are to be equal to these shared problems. Since this education and the changes it would bring would undermine the status quo from which Tillerson personally benefits, he welcomes scientific illiteracy, he welcomes public confusion, he welcomes collective complacency.

Just so you know, the "this" that environmentalists would "slow down" with their fears is literally the ongoing unnecessary ruination of a human world just so that Rex Tillerson and his colleagues can continue to enjoy historically unprecedented profits for now. From denialism of the facts of climate change to distraction from politics into fantasies of profitable techno-fixes for the catastrophic outcomes testified to in those facts, Tillerson's speech was a full-throated declaration of a willingness and even eagerness to do harm for his parochial benefit, indifferent to the consequences to the mal-adaptive "they" that is very likely to include the entire "we" reading these words, right here, right now.

Posted by **Dale Carrico** at **11:01 AM** 



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