

McKibben's climate math is too narrow and too broad

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David Schwartzman is co-author [A Solar Transition is Possible \[PDF\]](#). He submitted this article in response to Bill McKibben's [Rolling Stone](#) article, [Global Warming's Terrifying New Math](#), which we included this week's [Recommended Reading list](#).

by David Schwartzman

McKibben's article could not be more timely, highlighting the growing danger of our world plunging into irreversible catastrophic climate change (C3) if rapid and radical reduction of carbon emissions is not implemented. He is right to point to the fossil fuel industry as an enemy, but I find his focus both too narrow and too broad.

Too narrow because this industry is an integral component of the Military Industrial Complex (MIC), more precisely the Military Industrial Fossil Fuel, Nuclear, State Terror Complex.

And too broad because he lumps all fossil fuels together with the main focus on hydrocarbons (petroleum), rather than prioritizing the rapid phase out the consumption of coal and non-conventional petroleum (mainly tar sands and fracked gas).

Why focus on MIC, more specifically on militarism and the imperial agenda of the US and other major capitalist countries in connection with the threat of C3? McKibben has long ignored this issue, in contrast to other prominent environmentalists such as Lester Brown and Jeffrey Sachs who have called for big cuts in the military budget. I doubt it is because the Pentagon is "going green," i.e., boosting biofuels and solar power in Afghanistan. As Michael Klare put it the Pentagon is the "oil protection service," the military arm to make the world safe for transnational capital.

Most critically, the imperial agenda blocks the global cooperation and equity required to prevent C3, witness the failure of Durban and Rio 20. The U.S./Israeli war threats to Iran and continuing U.S.-led demonization of Chavez and Correa are all about regime change to widen the control of MIC over global hydrocarbon reserves. And there are wider targets for what should be called the "resource protection service", including rare earth metals. lithium and coltan used in aerospace and wind technologies.

Yes, McKibben does recognize that "even if you could force the hand of particular companies, you'd still have to figure out a strategy for dealing with all the sovereign nations that, in effect, act as fossil-fuel companies." But all sovereign nations are not equal with respect to exerting power in the present world. Is Venezuela really the equivalent of the U.S.?

And now returning to his too broad focus advocated in this article. To be sure, McKibben's heroic efforts to block the X-L Keystone Pipeline identified big carbon-footprint tar sands as a "game-changer for the climate" (Jim Hansen's words). In this article McKibben urges "effective action" that "would require actually keeping most of the carbon the fossil-fuel industry wants to burn safely in the soil, not just changing slightly the speed at which it's burned."

But only conventional petroleum can supply the energy needed to create a wind/solar power infrastructure to replace the fossil fuel-dominated existing supply of global energy, while simultaneously minimizing future carbon emissions bringing us closer to C3. Coal and unconventional petroleum (tar sands, fracked gas and

oil shale) have significantly higher carbon emissions per energy delivered and should be rapidly phased out. And this is exactly what is on the agenda of 350.org.

McKibben points out “even if we stopped increasing CO2 now, the temperature would likely still rise another 0.8 degrees, as previously released carbon continues to overheat the atmosphere.” Hence, carbon sequestration with transfer from the atmosphere to the soil and crust is imperative to reduce atmospheric CO2 levels below the safe limit of 350 ppm (hence “350.org”). This is not “clean coal”!

In our own study, we show that a full wind/solar transition is achievable in no more than 30 years with the consumption of less than 40% of the proven reserves of conventional petroleum, while supplying sufficient energy to sequester CO2 from the atmosphere using a combination of global agroecologies increasing soil carbon storage and solar-powered-industrial-burial of carbonate in the crust. This approach would maximize the possibility of reaching a safe atmospheric CO2 level before the tipping points to C3 are reached as well as ending energy poverty in the global South, reaching a rough minimum delivery necessary for state of the science life expectancy for everyone on Earth (for details go to www.solarUtopia.org).

Finally, McKibben points to a strategy:

“If people come to understand the cold, mathematical truth – that the fossil-fuel industry is systematically undermining the planet’s physical systems – it might weaken it enough to matter politically. Exxon and their ilk might drop their opposition to a fee-and-dividend solution; they might even decide to become true energy companies, this time for real.”

And while McKibben quotes George Monbiot, here is something more relevant to this issue from this *Guardian* columnist, writing about Rio 2012:

“World leaders at Earth summits seem more interested in protecting the interests of plutocratic elites than our environment... To see Obama backtracking on the commitments made by Bush the elder 20 years ago is to see the extent to which a tiny group of plutocrats has asserted its grip on policy....

“The environmental crisis cannot be addressed by the emissaries of billionaires. It is the system that needs to be challenged, not the individual decisions it makes. [In this respect the struggle to protect the biosphere is the same as the struggle for redistribution, for the protection of workers’ rights, for an enabling state, for equality before the law....

“Without mass movements, without the kind of confrontation required to revitalize democracy, everything of value is deleted from the political text. But we do s not mobilise, perhaps because we are endlessly seduced by hope. Hope is the rope from which we all hang.” (June 18, 2012)

I submit that McKibben is not being as radical as reality itself.

Will Exxon go green because of political pressure? Or are the requirements for a robust Global Green New Deal higher, the actual transfer of power from the 0.1% to the 99.9%, including nationalization of the energy industries?

The political requirement for realizing the “other world that is possible” is transnational, multidimensional class struggle. Class struggle in the 21st Century transcends the narrower conceptions of the 19th and 20th centuries centered around the activity of the industrial working class. 21st Century class struggle encompasses the creative activity of the 99%. It is profoundly democratic, aimed at expanding democracy to

all spheres, political, economic and social.

Maybe McKibben is thinking along these lines already, but he is not yet willing to advocate this path. But it should be ours.

Related articles... (auto-generated)

- [How can we build the movement to stop climate change?](#) (posted on April 20, 2012)
- [Why the fossil fuel industry fights so hard to block action on climate change](#) (posted on February 8, 2012)
- [Ten propositions on the climate crisis](#) (posted on August 29, 2011)
- [Fossil Fuel, Climate and Anti-Capitalism](#) (posted on April 24, 2007)
- [Confronting the Climate Change Crisis](#) (posted on February 1, 2007)