

Where Best to Ride Out the Climate Apocalypse? The Billionaires' Bunker Fantasies Go Mainstream

By [Jonathan Cook](#)

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Theme: [Environment](#), [Media Disinformation](#)

In-depth Report: [Climate Change](#)

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Having written posts on this blog for several years now, I have become ever more sensitive to how we, as news consumers, are subject to ideology – the invisible, shifting sands of our belief system.

Those beliefs are not inbuilt, of course. How could they be? We are not born with pre-loaded software like a computer – even if our mental “hardware” may shape what kind of information we are capable of processing and how we process it.

And whatever we may imagine, our belief system is not really self-generated, dictated by life-experiences. It isn't only real-world events that determine our values and views. Events and experiences are interpreted and given meaning by those beliefs and values. Which is why it is quite possible – common, in fact – for us to hold contradictory beliefs at the same time: like worrying about the threat posed to our children's future from climate change, while supporting political systems committed to building more roads and runways.

Psychologists have a term for this phenomenon: cognitive dissonance.

Rather, our ideological landscape is socially constructed and largely imposed on us from outside. Ideology frames experiences for us, adding a hidden layer of interpretation that encourages us to make sense of the world in useful ways. The most liberating question one can ask, therefore, is: to whom is any particular ideology useful?

Framing the world

We inherit much of our ideology from parents and teachers. But ideology is not static. It is adaptive. Our assumptions, beliefs and values subtly change over time. And they change as the needs of the powerful change.

The most powerful among us are powerful precisely because they create the dominant ideology – the thread of narrative that ties together what we imagine to be our personal understanding of why the world is as it is. That is why elites, whether the state or corporations, prioritise capturing the main channels of communication. They make sure to own and control the mass media.

When powerful external actors are framing the world for us – whether it be through broadcasting, newspapers or social media – they get to decide what matters, what should be prioritised, what is right.

That picture is particularly evident in the United States, where [six corporations](#) control almost everything the American public hears, sees and thinks – and, via Hollywood, much of what the rest of us think too. Even in the UK, where a trusted public broadcaster, the BBC, dominates much media output, the situation is little different. As the British state itself has been increasingly captured by a corporate elite, the BBC is run on its behalf. Just look at who has been appointed the BBC's current chairman.

New BBC chair Richard Sharp is not only a major donor to the Conservative party but he helped to fund a firm accused of 'human warehousing', stuffing benefit recipients into 'rabbit hutch' flats to profit from a Conservative government scheme <https://t.co/nR4wOeZoZv>

— Jonathan Cook (@Jonathan_K_Cook) [February 26, 2021](#)

Limiting factors

The role of the corporate media is to subtly alter ideology – the way we see and think about the world – based on the most pressing needs of corporations as they pursue a consistent strategy of increasing profits and accumulating greater wealth.

The biggest limiting factor on what the media can make us, the public, believe and how quickly we can be made to think new thoughts is not physical reality. It is the risk that too sudden a shift in ideology will create too much cognitive dissonance, to the point where we can no longer sustain our belief system.

The breakdown of an ideological system can manifest at the private level in a range of emotional and mental health states, including anxiety and depression, as well as chronic illness. But that is of little concern to corporate elites. Such “conditions” can be medicated – and to great profit, when we can easily be encouraged to buy drugs for our disease (disease) or to go on shopping sprees to make us “feel” happier.

The real problem is when the breakdown in the dominant belief system is shared widely – becomes collective – and threatens the elites' continuing grip on power. That path leads to political upheaval and revolution, when facts suddenly appear to be no longer solid but dubious, or even nonsensical, ideological claims.

For hundreds of years, kings ruled Europe's populations based on a supposed “divine right”. But that claim was no more preposterous than the current belief that our elites run so-called western civilisation based on an “economic right” – that through the survival of the economically fittest, they have risen to the top to guide our societies to a better, more efficient world in which we all ultimately prosper.

Apocalypse insurance

The insanity of our current economic reality is well illustrated by a new, self-serving ideological movement among the super-rich. Their emotional investment in their right to

remain immensely wealthy is naturally much stronger than the investment of the rest of us in their staying rich. Which is one reason billionaires are capable of coping with much greater levels of cognitive dissonance when justifying the continuation of the current economic order.

The greatest ideological challenge facing the super-rich is imminent climate collapse: how to rationalise an economic system designed to satisfy their hunger for profit, and the continuation of their privilege, when it is so obviously causing that collapse.

Some have fled into ridiculous schoolboy fantasies – the billionaires’ equivalent of derangement. [Elon Musk](#) and [Jeff Bezos](#) are pouring money – while offsetting it against tax – into the escapism of space colonies, premised on the same technological exploitation and monetisation of nature that have been rapidly making our own planet uninhabitable.

Others are looking in more practical, if equally futile, directions. Reid Hoffman, the co-founder of LinkedIn, has estimated that half of his fellow billionaires in Silicon Valley have bought what he calls “[apocalypse insurance](#)”, investing in [safe-haven islands](#) and [luxury underground bunkers](#). Fancifully, they imagine that this will be their life-belt when the planet’s climate system breaks down beyond repair.

Mankind’s ‘misstep’

But even these approaches seem reasonable compared to another ideology the super-rich are coalescing around that has been labelled “[longtermism](#)”, an off-shoot of the “effective altruism” movement. As ever with language used by the powerful, reality is being inverted. The intention is to deceive – themselves as well as us. There is nothing long term or altruistic about this new cult. It is simply a rebranding of Gordon Gekko’s mantra “Greed is good”, even when that greed has been outed as suicidal.

Faced with a disastrous near-future for which they are supremely responsible, the super-rich wish to telescope our attention into the distant future – thousands and millions of years hence. By focusing on aeons ahead, they can distract from the immediate present. After all, they won’t be around to be blamed for what happens – if anything human is happening – 10 or 20 millennia hence.

One of their gurus is Nick Bostrom, an Oxford University philosopher, who has contributed an academic gloss to this new religion masquerading as rationalism. He argues that, seen from tens of thousands of years in the future, the looming climate catastrophe won’t seem such a big deal – it will look as important as the crimes of the Roman empire or Genghis Khan appear to us today.

The imminent suffering of millions or even billions of human beings from rising seawaters, wildfires, droughts and food shortages pales when compared to the survival of the few who will reseed the planet and wider universe with conscious life. With the expansion of technologies already under development (by the billionaires), there will be many, many trillions of future biological humans colonising the universe or digital equivalents living in a post-human world.

In Bostrom’s words: “The breakdown of global civilization is, from the perspective of humanity as a whole, a potentially recoverable setback”. Or as he [puts it more bluntly](#), what

is coming is “a giant massacre for man, a small misstep for mankind”.

Digital Supermen

For the billionaire class, this is soothing music to their ears. Altruism is not putting their enormous wealth to the service of fellow human beings or finding a path to a genuinely sustainable future. It is ensuring that a human elite survive the apocalypse: those with the deepest bunkers and the most remote, and elevated, islands. As long as they hoard their wealth to survive the storm, they will be able to continue into a new age in which human “potential” can be fully realised in the long term.

The rationalisation of longtermism amounts to this: If the steerage class is going to drown as the boat sinks, at least they can die happy in the knowledge that the first-class passengers – the greatest innovators and entrepreneurs, the billionaires – are in the lifeboats and ready to build afresh a better future for coming generations.

To think otherwise – to believe that the billionaires are part of the problem and that they must be required to become part of the solution – is small-minded and selfish. It stands in the way of progress. It risks preventing humanity’s survival by dragging everyone down, denying our species the chance of a glorious, technologically enhanced future we can only dream of now.

Bostrom argues too that, when measured against the moral imperative for humanity to unlock its full potential – for its development into a superior breed of Nietzschean digital Supermen – curbs on our current freedoms are justified. That could entail the development of more sophisticated global surveillance systems, greater authoritarianism and, if necessary, preemptive violence. It is hard to see what could not be justified on these grounds to ensure humanity’s “most deserving” survive the apocalypse.

Bostrom even hijacks a key concept of the environmental movement – that the planet’s resources are finite – to make the case for maintaining our current gross inequalities and reifying greed. If there are limited resources, they should not be “frittered away” on “feelgood projects” and philanthropy to save those about to reap the whirlwind of the very economic system – capitalism – that created the billionaire class. That would be to betray the survivors – the super-rich and a few lucky others – who will need those resources to create a new civilisation built on the ruins of the current one.

Billionaire’s burden

If this all sounds like a reinvention of old-fashioned colonialism with a new twist – the white man’s burden becomes the billionaire’s burden – that is because it springs from exactly the same ideological source.

Stated so bluntly, it may sound patently ridiculous – and dangerous – to those of us who are not super rich. But these ideas are already subtly permeating the wider culture through media narratives.

The long term success of the super rich in gaslighting us can be measured in the fact that billionaires are seen as fulfilling a legitimate, philanthropic role in our societies – so much so that they grow ever richer – rather than parasites leeching the planet of its resources. (Listen out for those so brainwashed that they eagerly rush to the defence of the billionaire class, not only accusing critics of envy but warning us off comparing anyone to parasites.)

During the first 16 months of mass suffering spurred by the pandemic, the world's 2,690 billionaires [increased their fortunes](#) by \$5.5 trillion – hoarding more global wealth than they managed in the previous 15 years. And a large part of the reason for their accelerating enrichment is that western politicians and corporate lobbyists – now barely distinguishable – have made sure that the corporate class pays ever less tax. That this in itself has not provoked an uprising is down to our soma-fication by the corporate media.

But the indulgence of the super rich runs deeper, and is only made starker, by the report this week of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). It warns that the effects of the manmade “climate crisis” on temperature rises and more extreme weather events are now “irreversible”, and that urgent action is needed to stop runaway overheating of the planet.

The billionaires own the media. So one can hardly be surprised that the IPCC's warning that we are standing on the edge of a precipice writing our species' suicide note rated second billing in many papers, while others frantically grasped for silver linings or attention-grabbing but mind-numbing “Code Red” headlines worthy of a Thomas Harris thriller.

And, of course, even the IPCC avoided pointing the finger directly at the corporations and their obfuscating media for our dismal plight. It was a generalised, faceless “humanity” that was [guilty](#): “Humanity, through its actions, or lack of action, has unequivocally overheated the planet.” That might come as a surprise to the Kalahari bushmen, or Aboriginal elders in Australia or many Bedouin tribes across the Middle East. Are they really as guilty as Bezos or Musk?

Tuesday's TIMES: A-grades awarded in almost half of exams
[#tomorrowpaperstoday pic.twitter.com/6GsvHtB4FX](#)

— Helen Miller (@MsHelicat) [August 9, 2021](#)

‘Astronaut’ consumers

The IPCC's latest report received a more sympathetic assessment than the similar findings it produced in 2013, when much of the media felt the need to “[balance](#)” that report with [counter-claims](#) from climate “sceptics”. But that doubtless reflects the fact that the super rich are now far better positioned to profit from popular concerns about “climate change”. The billionaires have been investing in what they have persuaded us are green, planet-saving technologies. They have diversified their portfolios to monetise our fears. We are being persuaded that we can consume (more ethically) our way out of this “crisis”.

The signs that the IPCC's deeper message is not getting through the media obfuscation are clear.

No one abhors Richard Branson and his rich “astronaut” customers for frittering away many millions on a few seconds in space when the oceans are choked with plastics, the insects are disappearing and burning forests are not storing but pouring carbon into the atmosphere.

Instead, the BBC [reports](#) uncritically Branson's fairy-dust, ecological justification for the massive waste of resources – and addition of even more carbon to the atmosphere – jetting the wealthy into space:

Why shouldn't they go to space? Space is extraordinary; the Universe is magnificent. I want people to be able to look back at our beautiful Earth and come home and work very hard to try to do magic to it to look after it.

Similarly, Bezos' endless chatter about [colonising space](#) is treated seriously rather than greeted with the only rational response: revulsion. Both because Bezos is diverting attention away from a real-world crisis with a preposterous fantasy that, if he and his fellow billionaires get their way, no one will be around to benefit from; and because his ideas of space colonisation are either evidence of his desire to off-shore the rest of us into cylinders floating in space to become the human equivalent of battery chickens or, if his ambition is more limited, so that he and his retinue can flee the very planet he has played a key role in destroying.

Lightbulbs and cycling

But there are other ways the discourse around climate breakdown is being gradually manipulated to assist the super rich.

This [@exxonmobile](#) chart from 1982 predicted that in 2019 our atmospheric CO2 level would reach about 415 parts per million, raising the global temperature roughly 0.9 degrees C.

Update: The world crossed the 415 ppm threshold this week and broke 0.9 degrees C in 2017 1/ pic.twitter.com/sLpOVkwzTF

— Tom Randall (@tsrandall) [May 14, 2019](#)

Over decades, the media's interest in addressing climate breakdown has hewn closely to the corporate elite's interest in it. First, the science - evident more than half a century ago, even to the fossil fuel companies - was ignored because it would be bad for business. Then, through the 2000s, environmental concern became a niche interest among more liberal media, which promoted cycling to work and energy-efficient lightbulbs to save the polar bears - actions that were the individual consumer's responsibility. At the same time, the benefits of climate change were [played up](#): warmer summers in temperate countries like the UK would mean [new opportunities](#) for growing wines and the staycation economy.

The corporate elites bought themselves time as their media arms ostentatiously disagreed over the seriousness of climate change and offered, at best, coverage that framed it as some distant crisis our grandchildren would have to deal with. By the time a stream of extreme weather events arrived in the here and now, and could no longer be dismissed as aberrations, the billionaires were ready. They had reinvented themselves as guardians of the future, having diversified into supposedly green technologies - technologies designed to continue and expand our planet-destroying consumerism rather than curb it.

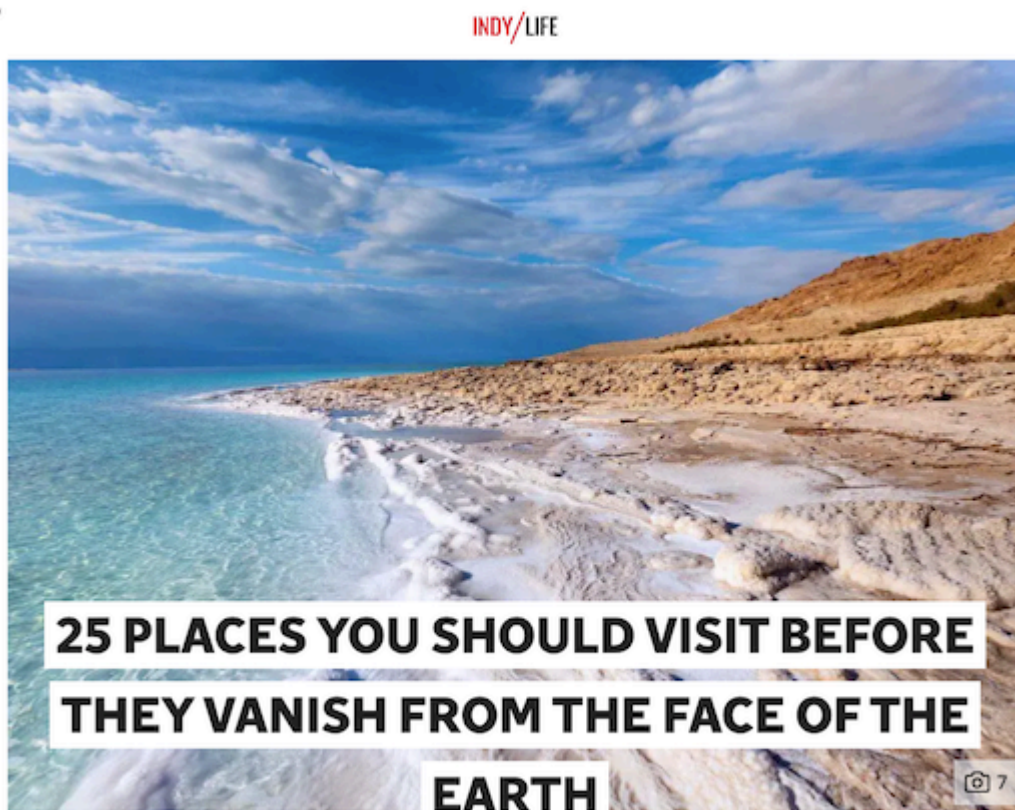
Even some of the preferred responses of western states to the pandemic - socially distanced living, increasingly as digital beings online, combined with surveillance capitalism and increased powers for the police - disturbingly foreshadow the "longtermist" fantasies of the super rich. It is not simply conspiracy thinking to be wary of where ideological adaption may take us, especially when corporations control our means of communication and have

the power to impose consensus by silencing anyone, even experts, who challenge the dominant ideology that serves the interests of the super rich.

https://twitter.com/Jonathan_K_Cook/status/1374463909457895425

The public discourse echoes the thinking of the billionaires in other ways. We have rushed headlong past the stage of a proper reckoning with the causes of the unfolding climate catastrophe to the global equivalent of the children's game of musical chairs. If the super rich are pondering where to build their bunkers, and which islands to buy or planets to colonise, to escape the coming collapse, we are being conditioned to think in similarly deranged, if cut-price, terms. New studies are assessing the countries [best placed](#) to ride out climate catastrophe. The winners apparently will be New Zealand, Iceland, the UK, Ireland and Tasmania.

Four years ago the supposedly liberal Independent newspaper offered, with a straight face, an eco-porn [travelogue article](#) suggesting "25 places you should visit before they vanish from the face of the Earth". Now, just a few years later, we are playing the reverse game: where can we hunker down most safely as the world vanishes? This is cognitive dissonance in over-drive.



From Patagonia's glaciers to Africa's Congo Basin, visit these threatened natural wonders before they're gone

Even when climate change is addressed in the so-called "liberal" corporate media, the language used corrupts our ability to think. We are told we must go on a "[war footing](#)" to deal with the crisis. Positive comparisons are made with the emergency response to the pandemic, as though the resource-depleting and polluting production of endless, disposable masks and plastic tubes for lateral flow-testing, and a new obsession with hygiene, offer some kind of model for a green revolution. And even the Green New Deal is promoted in terms of Roosevelt's consumption-driven New Deal of the 1930s.

The reality is that we can save our species - assuming it can be saved at all at this late stage - only by radically transforming our societies: by ending inequality, by criminalising greed, by dispossessing billionaires, by nationalising corporations, by making economies and political systems far more localised, by introducing real democratic accountability, by abolishing the corporate media, by funding critical thinking in our education system, and much else.

These are the minimal and urgent preconditions for our species to adapt to a future in which we do not experience runaway global heating. And yet they are voiced nowhere in our political or media discourses. And for that we have the billionaires, and their bunker and space colony fantasies, to thank.

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Jonathan Cook won the Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism. His books include "Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East" (Pluto Press) and "Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair" (Zed Books). His website is www.jonathan-cook.net.

He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

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