

Who Is Guilty of Climate Crimes?

These are the key perpetrators of the largest human rights violation in history.

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Theme: [Environment](#), [Law and Justice](#)

Global Research, February 17, 2018

[Common Dreams](#) 16 February 2018

A fascinating exposé of the climate crisis awaits you in Peter Carter and Elizabeth Woodworth's, "[Unprecedented Crime: Climate Science Denial and Game Changers for Survival.](#)" It is a comprehensive look at the climate crisis through a legal frame, discussing the relevant national and international statutes and lawsuits, with a focus on the perpetrators of the climate emergency that confronts us all.

Human rights are explored at length, including the critical concept of "basic rights," the right to things necessary for human life— fresh water, food, and non-toxic air, which must come before non-basic rights. The author's quote the 1980 Presidential Commission on World Hunger on basic rights: "Whether one speaks of human rights or basic human needs, the right to food is the most basic of all. Unless that right is first fulfilled, the protection of other human rights becomes a mockery." With that frame, it becomes obvious that the climate crisis is indeed an "unprecedented crime," as it strips people from their access to the building blocks of life, and it is happening on an almost incomprehensibly massive scale.

State-Corporate Crime

Not surprisingly, the authors' focus is primarily on the fossil fuel corporations—who are engaged in an elaborate, multi-billion dollar misinformation campaign — and on the governments who have subsidized them and colluded with them through inaction. These are the key perpetrators of the largest human rights violation in history.

It was fascinating, and sickening, to learn more about how the climate-denial machine actually works, such as the Heartland Institute mailing a climate-denying DVD to 200,000 high school science teachers. The description of the Koch brothers' activities was particularly staggering:

'The Kochs are a vertically integrated fossil fuel conglomerate, and they have a vertical integrated influence-peddling apparatus to go with it'... The Kochs are bigger than either of the Democratic or Republican parties, manipulate both, and are determined to keep the Senate Republican...A major focus of Koch money has been to ensure that no legislation is passed to curb the burning of fossil fuels.

Carter and Woodworth also cast their withering gaze on the media. They convincingly argue the media is guilty of criminal negligence for giving airtime to deniers and for failing to warn the public about the true nature of the climate crisis and about the banks that put billions of dollars into fossil fuel projects.

Are Ordinary Americans Guilty?

Clearly, there is a lot of guilt to go around. The authors cast some— though in my view probably not enough—blame onto the citizens of rich countries, for their their complicity in the climate crisis.

The authors speak of the “moral collapse” that most Americans and other westerners experience regarding the climate crisis, and they quote Clive Hamilton,

“there are three kinds of actors in this process of subversion: those who tell the lies, those who repeat the lies, and those who allow themselves to be seduced by the lies.”

Most Westerners act as though the climate crisis was not happening, and as if they have no responsibility to help prevent catastrophe.

Americans tend to feel like victims rather than perpetrators. And indeed, we are victimized by the corrupt and cruel system that is deeply unequal and driving hard towards ecocide. But when we are complicit in “business as usual,” we are also perpetrators. My grandmother was a Holocaust survivor, and she impressed upon me the moral duty to confront evil. She felt so betrayed by the former friends who would not stand up for her and who avoided her on the street. One didn’t have to be a Nazi to be guilty, but just to go along with the genocide.

As citizens, we must start taking personal responsibility for preventing the full and horrific unfolding of the climate emergency. Even though we did not directly cause the climate crisis, we still have — it is still our job to fix it. More specifically, we must force our government to treat the climate crisis like the emergency it is.

One of the most difficult things about climate crimes, is that they are primarily crimes of omission. All we need to do to ensure the deaths of billions of people is.... Nothing. Just continue with our lives and our business as usual. In order to act in accordance with our highest ideals, our morality, and our basic common sense, we need to activate ourselves, and the world’s governments— we need to enter “emergency mode”.

A Non-Criminal Response

What would an adequate, non-criminal response to the climate crisis would look like? Carter and Woodworth describe it. It starts with a declaration of climate emergency, and that then leads to a program which rapidly transitions our economy to zero emissions and draws-down of excess CO₂ from the atmosphere. Their ideas are largely compatible with [The Climate Mobilization’s Victory Plan](#). that they cite.

They include many fresh and exciting examples that The Climate Mobilization should be incorporate into our next version. I will just share a few items that were new and exciting to me: 1) retrofitting fossil fuel cars as electric (indeed 30,000 already have been— by amateurs!) 2) using small nuclear fission, the type of reactors that power nuclear submarines, to provide industrial power and heating, 3) covering skyscrapers— not just roofs— with solar panels.

I believe that it is my moral duty— and yours, and everyone’s— to do all we can to ensure that

this emergency mobilization for rescuing our climate gets started as soon as humanly possible. Thank you, Peter Carter and Elizabeth Woodworth, for your important contribution to this necessary effort.

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