

## The Ecological Danger of Compromise

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I have to admit that, after closely reading Huey-li Li's essay, I had to quell my inner Derreck Jensen.<sup>1</sup> For those of you who have not encountered him, he is one of the more radical, current, environmentalist writers. He makes no bones about being an advocate for the non-human world, suggesting a cultural re-prioritization in which anything that involves harming, destroying, dismissing, ignoring the non-human should not be done. Dams should be destroyed, salmon should be allowed to swim, industrial agriculture should end, topsoil and prairie grasses preserved, logging should halt so that apex carnivores can run free. In fact, humans should stop all destructive practices. He is not a man of humility, of dialogue, of compromise. Li's essay seeks all three.

The central suggestion of Li's essay is that we might find our way through the growing polarization between climate change believers and deniers by turning our attention to John Dewey's earlier attempts to bridge the gap between an important polarization of his time, religion and science. Dewey claimed that through the use of the something he called the "religious experience," which apparently exists in a recognizably similar form in both the followers of religion and those who follow science, one could bring these two poles together. Li's suggested parallel is to replace religion and science with climate change deniers and believers, rightly identified as a polarized pairing, and religious experience with the concept of inter- and intra-generational justice. Thus, setting aside the question of whether Dewey's idea was even viable,<sup>2</sup> the image provided is of these two polarized groups sitting across the table in the spirit of open-minded dialogue and through a shared commitment to their future children and grandchildren coming to what appears to be a common vision to try and limit the anthropogenic influence on the planet. It is at this point that my inner Jensen yells, "no way!"

For Jensen there are those who think climate change is happening and that it is human induced. And they are right — all the science points in this direction.<sup>3</sup> But most of these people are, in Jensen's mind, pretty pathetic because, although they see climate change as problematic and human induced, they do not really do anything in response to this planetary destruction and, if they do, it tends to be silly things like trying to negotiate with the climate change deniers, or the oil and lumber companies, or anyone else who has some kind of vested interest in continuing to destroy the planet. On the other side of the coin are those humans for whom Jensen has no time at all — they are the deniers.<sup>4</sup> Most importantly for my purposes, Jensen thinks that the climate change dualism is completely facile. The deniers are made up of powerful, well paid, politically motivated scientists relying on faux science (key members of this group include several scientists who worked long and hard obfuscating the truth about the health risks of smoking)<sup>5</sup> funded by big corporations<sup>6</sup> for whom ongoing use of fossil fuels and, by extension, other market-based

consumables is the priority and who are aided and abetted by a large group of the populace that is unwilling, for a variety of selfish, unselfish, lazy, fearful, and psychologically odd reasons to acknowledge the obvious truth and would prefer to hear the “noise” of supposed uncertainty rather than doing the work of changing their ecologically destructive lives.

The second reason why Jensen has no patience for this kind of thoughtful negotiation between human groupings is that never, in the entire history of these kinds of compromises, has the non-human world ever come out ahead. In many ways this kind of negotiation process resembles the reality of First Nations treaty negotiations with North American governments. As Thomas King points out, after conversation with several Elders, the only thing that is guaranteed to happen every time First Nations people and White folks enter into treaty discussions is that the First Nations people end up with less land.<sup>7</sup> Yes, the likely compromise between human climate change deniers and human climate change acknowledgers will possibly slow destruction. But that is Jensen’s point. Rather than cutting the entire forest we will cut only half the forest — is a great win-win success for humans. We keep the jobs, we keep the toilet paper, and we keep a little chunk of “natural space” but notice that even with this compromise nature has lost ... half the forest is gone!

But I do not think I should let myself get too carried away. For the sake of this discussion I want to make one quick point and then suggest two things about the major thread of this discussion.

The quick point is that there is a real danger in this discussion of putting too many environmental eggs in any one basket. Eco-anarchist Murray Bookchin made this point quite clearly thirty years ago in light of the no-nukes movement.<sup>8</sup> He felt that the environmental problem of the day was systemic and cultural, and that it was dangerous for the discussion to be brought into focus around a single symptom of the problem. Finding middle ground on the creationism-versus-evolution confrontation will not in and of itself solve the polarization that Dewey worried about. Nor will finding a bridge between climate change believers and deniers deal with a culture that is environmentally destructive. More troubling than this is that focusing on a symptom alone becomes a kind of compromise where, rather than dealing with the real problem — a culture that is environmentally destructive — we choose to focus on one small component symptom of the problem, while the planet as a whole burns.

The two things I want to suggest about this bridge-building exercise proposed by Li are that I think she is being both too nice and possibly too naïve about the process of finding solutions. Too nice because, as I have already mentioned, this is not a process of bringing equals together. ALL of the science suggests that climate change is happening, and the vast majority of that science directly lays the blame at the feet of humankind, particularly the modern western version thereof. Thus, offering to meet, discuss, dialogue, search for compromise with an untruth deliberately furthered by some for the explicit sake of obfuscation is just being, to say the least, too nice. Finally, I fear that Li may have fallen into what I might describe as

the left-leaning intelligentsia's "if only" trap. The trap is the assumption that if only we could sit down with the other side, whoever that might be — climate change deniers, the pro-gun lobby, or, in Dewey's case, religious believers — then we can show them through discussion, good arguments, solid ethical principle, and active open minds that they should change and deepen their understanding of the issue and as a result choose the "right" direction. This assumption in its turn assumes that the climate change deniers either have no future-based justice model, or that the one they have is incomplete and easily refuted by compelling argument.<sup>9</sup> However, climate change deniers do have an inter- and intra-generational ethical structure already. I have sat across the table and stood at rallies where it has been explicitly claimed that giving ground to the environmentalists would toss their grandchildren back into the hard scrabble lives of the dark ages, would deprive their children of necessary jobs, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. I have heard and experienced the power of that established and entrenched ethical structure. Maybe, what we need to find is another bridge, one that seeks to bring together these two distinct systems of justice, rather than attempting to bridge the two, relatively minor solitudes of climate change.

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1. Derreck Jensen, *Endgame, Volume 1: The Problem of Civilization* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2006).

2. It does beg the question a bit given the current divide that still exists between religion and science and Dewey's quite challenging demand that religion give up the supernatural.

3. Naomi Oreskes, "The Scientific Consensus on Climate Change," *Science* 306, no. 5702 (2004): 1686, found that of the 928 studies focused on climate change published in scientific journals between 1993 and 2003 none claimed that climate change was not happening and that 75% agreed on the anthropogenic nature of the change the other 25% did not disagree.

4. This group also includes those that think: "climate change is a natural occurrence," or "it doesn't matter anyway because we will find some kind of technical fix," or "humans are nature so our changing the climate is natural, why worry?"

5. For scientists see: Frederick Seitz, Sallie Baliunas, and Sherwood Idso. See Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway, *Merchants of Doubt* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010); and James Hoggan, *Climate Cover-Up: The Crusade to Deny Global Warming* (Vancouver, BC: Greystone, 2009).

6. For articles just on the role of ExxonMobil in funding the obfuscation, see Chris Mooney, "Some Like It Hot," *Mother Jones*, May/June (2005), <http://www.motherjones.com/environment/2005/05/some-it-hot>; and David Adams, "Exxon Mobile Continuing to Fund Climate Sceptics Groups, Records Show," *Guardian*, July 1, 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2009/jul/01/exxon-mobil-climate-change-sceptics-funding>.

7. Thomas King, *The Inconvenient Indian* (Toronto: Doubleday, 2012).

8. Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy* (Palo Alto, CA: Cheshire Books, 1982).

9. Note: Li does not suggest any radical ethical systems involving non-humans or land ethics or any move beyond humans at all.