

A Bomb in the Center of the Climate Movement: Michael Moore's Damage

It hurts to be personally attacked in a movie. It hurts more to see a movement divided

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By

BILL MCKIBBEN

If you're looking for a little distraction from the news of the pandemic — something a little gossipy, but with a point at the end about how change happens in the world — this essay may soak up a few minutes.

I'll tell the story chronologically, starting a couple of weeks ago on the eve of the 50th [Earth Day](#). I'd already recorded my part for the Earth Day Live webcast, interviewing the great indigenous activists Joye Braum and Tara Houska about their pipeline battles. And then the news arrived that Oxford University — the most prestigious educational institution on planet earth — had decided to divest from fossil fuels. It was one of the great victories in that grinding eight-year campaign, which has become by some measures the biggest anti-corporate fight in history, and I wrote a quick email to Naomi Klein, who helped me cook it up, so that we could gloat together just a bit. I was, it must be said, feeling pleased with myself.

Ah, but pride goeth before a fall. In the next couple of hours came a very different piece of news. People started writing to tell me that the filmmaker Michael Moore had just released a movie called [Planet of the Humans](#) on YouTube. That wasn't entirely out of the blue — I'd been hearing rumors of the film and its attacks on me since the summer before, and I'd taken them seriously.

Various colleagues and I had written to point out that they were wrong; Naomi had in fact taken Moore aside in an MSNBC greenroom and laid it all out, repeating the exchange with him while campaigning in Iowa. But none of that had apparently worked; indeed, from what people were now writing to tell me, I was the main foil of the film. I put together a [quick response](#), and I hoped that it would blow over.

But it didn't. Perhaps because everyone's at home with not much to do, lots of people watched it — millions by some counts. And I began to hear from them. Here's an email that arrived first thing Earth Day morning:

“Happy Dead Earth Day. Time’s up Bill. You have been outed for fraud. What a MASSIVE disappointment you are. Sell out. Hypocrite beyond imagination. Biomass bullshit seller. Forest destroyer. How is it possible you have led all of us down the same death trap road of false hope? The YOUTH! How dare you! Shame on you!”

More followed, to say the least. (If you’re wondering whether it hurts to get this kind of email, the answer is yes. In a time of a pandemic, it’s hard to feel too much self-pity, but that doesn’t mean it’s easy to read someone accusing you of betraying your own life’s work.)

Basically, Moore and his colleagues have made a film attacking renewable energy as a sham and arguing that the environmental movement is just a tool of corporations trying to make money off green energy. “One of the most dangerous things right now is the illusion that alternative technologies, like wind and solar, are somehow different from fossil fuels,” Ozzie Zehner, one of the film’s producers, tells the camera. When visiting a solar facility, he insists: “You use more fossil fuels to do this than you’re getting benefit from it. You would have been better off just burning the fossil fuels.”

That’s not true, not in the least — the time it takes for a solar panel to pay back the energy used to build it is well under four years. Since it lasts three decades, it means 90 percent of the power it produces is pollution-free, compared with zero percent of the power from burning fossil fuels. It turns out that pretty much everything else about the movie was wrong — there have been at least 24 [debunkings](#), many of them painfully rigorous; as one scientist wrote in a particularly scathing [takedown](#), “*Planet of the Humans* is deeply useless. Watch anything else.” Moore’s fellow filmmaker Josh Fox, in an [epic unraveling](#) of the film’s endless lies, got in one of the best shots: “Releasing this on the eve of Earth Day’s 50th anniversary is like Bernie Sanders endorsing Donald Trump while chugging hydroxychloroquine.”

Here’s long-time solar activist (and, oh yeah, the guy who wrote “[Heart of Gold](#)”) Neil Young: “The amount of damage this film tries to create (succeeding in the VERY short term) will ultimately bring light to the real facts, which are turning up everywhere in response to Michael Moore’s new erroneous and headline grabbing TV publicity tour of misinformation. [A very damaging film to the human struggle for a better way of living](#), Moore’s film completely destroys whatever reputation he has earned so far.”

But enough about the future of humanity. Let’s talk about me, since I got to be the stand-in for “corporate environmentalism” for much of the film. Cherry-picking a few clips culled from the approximately ten zillion interviews, speeches, and panels I’ve engaged in these past decades, the filmmaker made two basic points. One, that I was a big proponent of biomass energy — that is, burning trees to generate power. Two, that I was a key part of “green capitalism,” trying somehow to profit from selling people on the false promise of solar and wind power.

The first has at least a kernel of — not truth, but history. Almost two decades ago, wonderful students at the rural Vermont college where I teach proposed that the oil-burning heat plant be replaced with one that burned woodchips. I thought it was a good idea, and when it finally came to pass in 2009, I spoke at its inauguration. This was not a weird idea — at the time, most environmentalists thought likewise, because as new trees grow back in place of the ones that

have been cut, they will soak up the carbon released in the burning. “At that point I would have done the same,” Bill Moomaw, who is one of the most eminent researchers in the field, put it. “Because we hadn’t done the math yet.” But as scientists *did* begin to do the math, a different truth emerged: Burning trees put a puff of carbon into air *now*, which is when the climate system is breaking. That this carbon may be sucked up a generation hence is therefore not much help. And as that science emerged, I changed my mind, becoming an outspoken opponent of biomass. (Something else happened too: the efficiency of solar and wind power soared, meaning there was ever less need to burn *anything*.)

The film’s attacks on renewable energy are antique, dating from a decade ago, when a solar panel cost 10 times what it does today; engineers have since done their job, making renewable energy the cheapest way to generate power on our planet.)

As for the second charge, it’s simply a lie — indeed, it’s the kind of breathtaking black-is-white lie that’s come to characterize our public life at least since Vietnam veteran John Kerry was accused by the right wing of committing treason. I have never taken a penny from green energy companies or mutual funds or anyone else with a role in these fights. I’ve never been paid by environmental groups either, not even 350.org, which I founded and which I’ve given all I have to give. I’ve written [books](#) and given endless [talks](#) challenging the prevailing ideas about economic growth, and I’ve run [campaigns designed entirely](#) to cut consumption.

Let me speak as plainly as I know how. When it comes to me, it’s not that *Planet of the Humans* overstates the case, or gets it partly wrong, or opens an argument worth having: it is a sewer. I’ll finish with just the smallest example: In the credits, it defensively claims that I began opposing biomass only last year, in response to news of this film. In fact, as we wrote the filmmakers on numerous occasions, I’ve been on the record about the topic for years. Here, for instance, is a [piece](#) from 2016 with the not very subtle title “Burning Trees for Electricity Is a Bad Idea.” Please read it. When you do, you will see that the filmmakers didn’t just engage in bad journalism (though they surely did), they acted *in bad faith*. They didn’t just behave dishonestly (though they surely did), they behaved *dishonorably*. I’m aware that in our current salty era those words may sound mild, but in my lexicon they are the strongest possible epithets.

A reasonable question: Given that the film has been so thoroughly debunked, can it really cause problems?

I’ve spent the past three decades, ever since I wrote *The End of Nature* at the age of 28, deeply committed to realism: no fantasy, no spin, no wish will help us deal with the basic molecular structure of carbon dioxide. That commitment to reality has to carry over into every part of one’s life. So, realistically, most of the millions of people who watch this film will not read the careful debunkings. Most of them will assume, in the way we all do when we watch something, that there must be something there, it must be half true anyway. (That’s why propaganda is effective).

To give one more small example from my email, here’s a note I received the other day:

*Stop killing trees you lying murderer.
Forests are life. you are killing us all.*

*You can change your stance and turn back the tide of destruction you unleashed...
or perhaps just go throw yourself in a fire and go down as one of the worst humans to ever
exist. Straight up evil.*

When I wrote back (and I always write back, as politely as I know how), explaining what I've explained in this essay, the writer's reply was: "I have read your dribble and am glad someone has finally called you out for the puppet you are."

I don't think most people are that mean-spirited (or maybe I just hope not) and of course dozens of friends within the climate movement wrote to express their solidarity and love. But I have no doubt that many of the people who've seen the film are, at the least, disheartened. Here's what one hard-working climate activist wrote me from Montana: "The problem is, this movie is all over the place and is already causing divisions and conflicts in climate action groups that I'm involved in — it's like they detonated a bomb in the center of the climate action movement." Which I'm sure is true (and I'm sure it's why the film has been so well-received at Breitbart and every other climate-denier operation on the planet).

Which may well mean that for now — maybe for a long time — my work will be at least somewhat compromised and less effective, because my work is mostly about trying to build that movement, to make it larger and more unified. Yes, there are days (and more of them than I would have expected) when it's about [going to jail](#), but mostly it's been a long, long process of reaching out and talking to groups and people — helping them raise consciousness (and sometimes helping them raise money). I've spent a very large percentage of my life in high school auditoriums and at Rotary lunches; I've traveled to every corner of the world, and in recent years, as the technology improved, I've traveled too by low-carbon Skype and Zoom. (Pandemic communications is old-school to me; for some reason I now forget, my invaluable colleague Vanessa Arcara assembled a [list](#) of the virtual talks I gave in one stretch of 2015-16, which will give you a sense of what my days are like). But if those visits and talks end up igniting suspicion and controversy, then they're obviously less useful. I want to help important organizing, not disrupt it.

I'm used to attacks, of course. The oil industry has been after me for decades, and some of their tactics have been far worse than Moore's — the period when they assigned videographers to literally follow me whenever I set out the door was another low point in my life, but I didn't complain [until](#) it seemed like they were doing the same to my daughter. I've gotten used to an endless and creative series of death threats — each one jolts you for a moment, but clearly, since I'm still here, most of them are not serious. And again, I've only [complained](#) once, when they were bandying about my home address and particular methods of execution on well-trafficked websites. But those kind of attacks don't confuse and divide environmentalists; if anything, they do the opposite. They're a punch in the nose, which turns out to be far less damaging than a stab in the back.

And I think this leads to the larger point, about what's useful for movements and what isn't. I'm going to begin by boasting for a moment, if only to make myself feel a little better: Here's what I'd like people to recall from my work these past years, as opposed to the notion that I am a forest-raping sellout. See if you can figure out what every item on this short list has in common.

- My role in helping found and build an actual climate movement. I decided at a certain point that we weren't in an argument over global warming (we'd won that), but that we were in a fight. And the other side — the fossil fuel industry — was so powerful they were going to win unless we built some power of our own. Hence my decision to go beyond writing and to try to learn how to organize.

In 2007, with my seven original undergraduate collaborators, we formed **Step It Up** and found people to organize 1,500 simultaneous demonstrations across the U.S.; two years later, at the start of 350.org, the numbers were 5,200 rallies in 181 countries.

- My role in helping nationalize the fight over the Keystone XL pipeline, and in the process lay the seedbed for much of the 'keep it in the ground' work that has led to challenges of fossil fuel infrastructure around the world.
- My role in helping launch the divestment fight, with a piece of [writing](#) and with the Do the Math campaign around the U.S. and then Europe and the antipodes. (Here's the [movie](#) from that; I think it's better than Moore's). We're currently at \$14 trillion in endowments and portfolios that have divested.
- My role in helping solidify and unify the newer fight against the banks, asset managers, and insurance companies that fund the fossil fuel movement — the StopTheMoneyPipeline.com effort that is fighting pitched battles right now with Chase Bank, Liberty Mutual, and BlackRock.

The thing that unites these four things is the word "helping." So many others have fought just as hard. If I started listing names I literally would never stop; the pleasure has been in the teamwork and collaboration.

And that's the point: Movements only really work if they grow, if they build. If they move. And that's almost always an additive process. The trick, I think, is figuring out how to make it possible for more people to join in. When we started 350.org, we gave out the logo to anyone. It was like a potluck supper; if you organized a little demonstration in your town, you were a part. (One of the early protests we were proudest of involved exactly one woman: an Iranian in a headscarf who worked her way through half a dozen army checkpoints to hold up a sign). The Keystone fight was well underway when we came on board — indigenous groups and Midwest ranchers had been fighting hard — but we helped to create ways to let anyone anywhere join in, framing it as a fight about [climate change](#) as well as land.

Divestment, similarly: not everyone has a coal mine in their backyard, but everyone's connected through a school or a church or a pension to a pot of money. [Banks may be the best example](#): Chase has tens of millions of credit cards out there. Or, to take the example of the movie, biomass: Thank heaven for campaigners like Danna Smith and Mary Booth and Rachel Smolker, who built a movement to help explain why this was a bad idea. It worked for me — I changed my mind, which is what you want movements to do.

You can, in other words, change the zeitgeist if you get enough people engaged — if they both see the crisis and feel like they have a way in.

But that's precisely what's undercut when people operate as Moore has with his film. The entirely predictable effect is to build cynicism, indeed a kind of nihilism. It's to drive down turnout — not just in elections, but in citizenship generally. If you tell a bunch of lies about groups and leaders and as a result people don't trust them, who benefits?

To be clear, I doubt that was Moore's goal. I think his goal was to build his brand a little more, as an edgy "truth teller" who will take on "establishments." (That he has, over time, become a millionaire carnival barker who punches down, not up — well, that's what brand management is for). But the actual effect in the real world is entirely predictable. That's why Breitbart loves the movie. That's why the tar-sands guys in Alberta are chortling. "People are going ga-ga over it," Margareta Dovgal, a researcher with the pro-industry Canadian group Resource Works, told [reporters](#). The message they're taking from it is "we're going to need fossil fuels for a long time to come."

Actually, we won't. We've dropped the price of sun and wind 90 percent in the last decade (since the days when Moore, et al. were apparently collecting their data). As Stanford professor Marc Jacobson has made clear, we could get much of the way there in relatively short and affordable order, by building out panels and turbines, by making our lives more efficient, by consuming less and differently. But that would require breaking the political power of the fossil fuel industry, which in turn would require a big movement, which in turn would require coming together, not splitting apart.

It's that kind of movement we've been trying to build for a long time. I remember its first real gathering in force in the U.S., with tens of thousands of us standing on the Mall in Washington on a bitter February day in 2013 to demand an end to Keystone and other climate action. "All I've ever wanted to see was a movement of people to stop climate change," I [told](#) the crowd. "And now I've seen it."

We did an immense amount of work to get to that moment, helping will a movement into being. But from that moment on, for me it's been mostly gravy — the great pleasure of watching the movement grow and then explode. Watching the kids who had built college divestment campaigns graduate to form the Sunrise Movement and launch the Green New Deal. Watching Extinction Rebellion start to shake whole cities. Watching the emergence of the climate strikers — and getting to know [Greta Thunberg](#) and many of the 10,000 others like her across the world. In each case, I've tried to help a little, largely just by amplifying their voices and urging others to pay attention.

I remember very well the night that same autumn after an overflow talk in Providence when my daughter, then a sophomore at Brown, said something typically wise to me: "I think you should probably be less famous in the years ahead." I knew what she meant even as she said it, because of course I'd already sensed a bit of it myself. It wasn't that she thought I was a bad leader — it was that we needed to build a movement that was less attached to leaders in general (and probably white male ones in particular) if we were going to attain the kind of power we needed.

And so, even then I began consciously backing off, not in my work but in my willingness to dominate the space. I stepped down as board chair at 350.org, and really devoted myself to [introducing people to new leaders](#) from dozens of groups. So many of those leaders come from frontline communities, indigenous communities — from the people already paying an enormous price for the warming they did so little to cause. Their voices are breaking through, and thank heaven: If you follow my twitter feed, you'll see that the most common word, after "heatwave", is "thanks," offered to whoever is doing something useful and good. If you get the chance to read the (free) *New Yorker* [climate newsletter](#) I started earlier this year, you'll see the key feature is called Passing the Mic: So far I've interviewed Nicole Poindexter, Jerome Foster II, Mary Heglar, Ellen Dorsey, Thea Sebastian, Virginia Hanusik, Tara Houska, Vann R. Newkirk II, and Christiana Figueres; this week Jane Kleeb; next week Alice Arena, helping lead the fight against a new gas pipeline across Massachusetts.

I think that one thing that defines those movements is their adversaries — in this case the fossil fuel industry above all. And I think the thing that weakens those movements is when they start trying to identify adversaries within their ranks. Much has been made over the years about the way that progressives eat their own, about circular firing squads and the like. I think there's truth to it: there's a collection of showmen like Moore who enjoy attracting attention to themselves by endlessly picking fights. They're generally not people who actually try to organize, to build power, to bring people together. That's the real, and difficult, work — not purity tests or calling people out, but calling them in. At least, that's how it seems to me: The battle to slow down global warming in the short time that physics allots us requires ever bigger movements.

It's been a great privilege to get to help build those movements. And if I worry that my effectiveness has been compromised, it's not a huge worry, precisely because there are now so many others doing this work — generations and generations of people who have grown up in this fight. I think, more or less, we're all headed in the right direction, that people are getting the basic message right: conserve energy; replace coal and gas and oil with wind and sun; break the political power of the fossil fuel industry; demand just transitions for workers; build a world that reduces ruinous inequality; and protect natural systems, both because they're glorious and so they can continue to soak up carbon. I don't know if we're going to get this done in time — sometimes I kick myself for taking too long to figure out we needed to start building movements. But I know our chances are much improved if we do it together.

Thanks so much to all who fight for all that matters. On we go.

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