

# Carbon Policy is not Climate Policy

*Toward a Different Agenda for  
Climate Activism?*

Denmark  
April 2020

## *A difficult reorientation?*

A suggestion: movements need to move further away from thinking about climate change in terms of **carbon**. It is more effective to think about it in terms of **work**.

This is hard because the idea that climate is about carbon is embedded in climate thinking on both the right and the left.

# *Carbon policies*



1997 Kyoto Protocol

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1997 Kyoto Protocol



2015 Paris Agreement

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1997 Kyoto Protocol



2015 Paris Agreement



Other carbon market schemes

# *Carbon policies*



1997 Kyoto Protocol



2015 Paris Agreement



Other carbon market schemes



Carbon tax schemes

# *Carbon policies*



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Other carbon market schemes



Carbon tax schemes



“Energy transition” plans

# *Carbon policies*

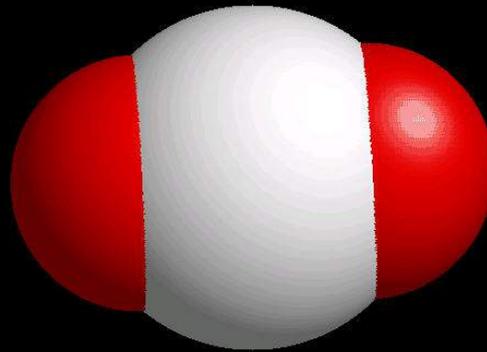
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-  “Energy transition” plans
-  Geoengineering

# *Carbon policies*

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-  Carbon tax schemes
-  “Energy transition” plans
-  Geoengineering
-  Green New Deals

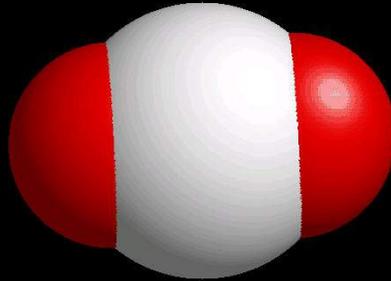
We're used to making fine distinctions among all these policies.

But they all have one thing in common.



They all start from the **CO<sub>2</sub>** molecule.

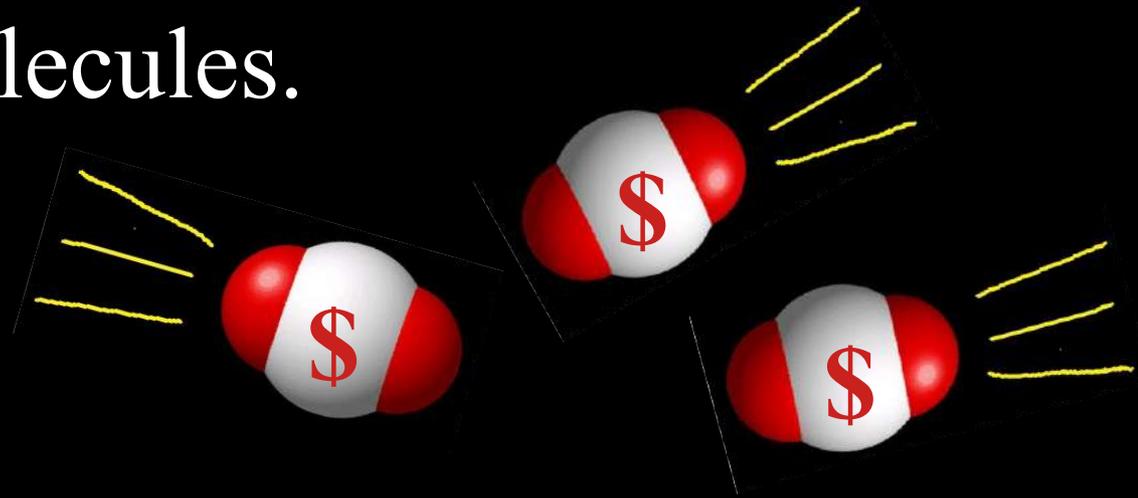
They **explain** climate change with the CO<sub>2</sub> molecule.



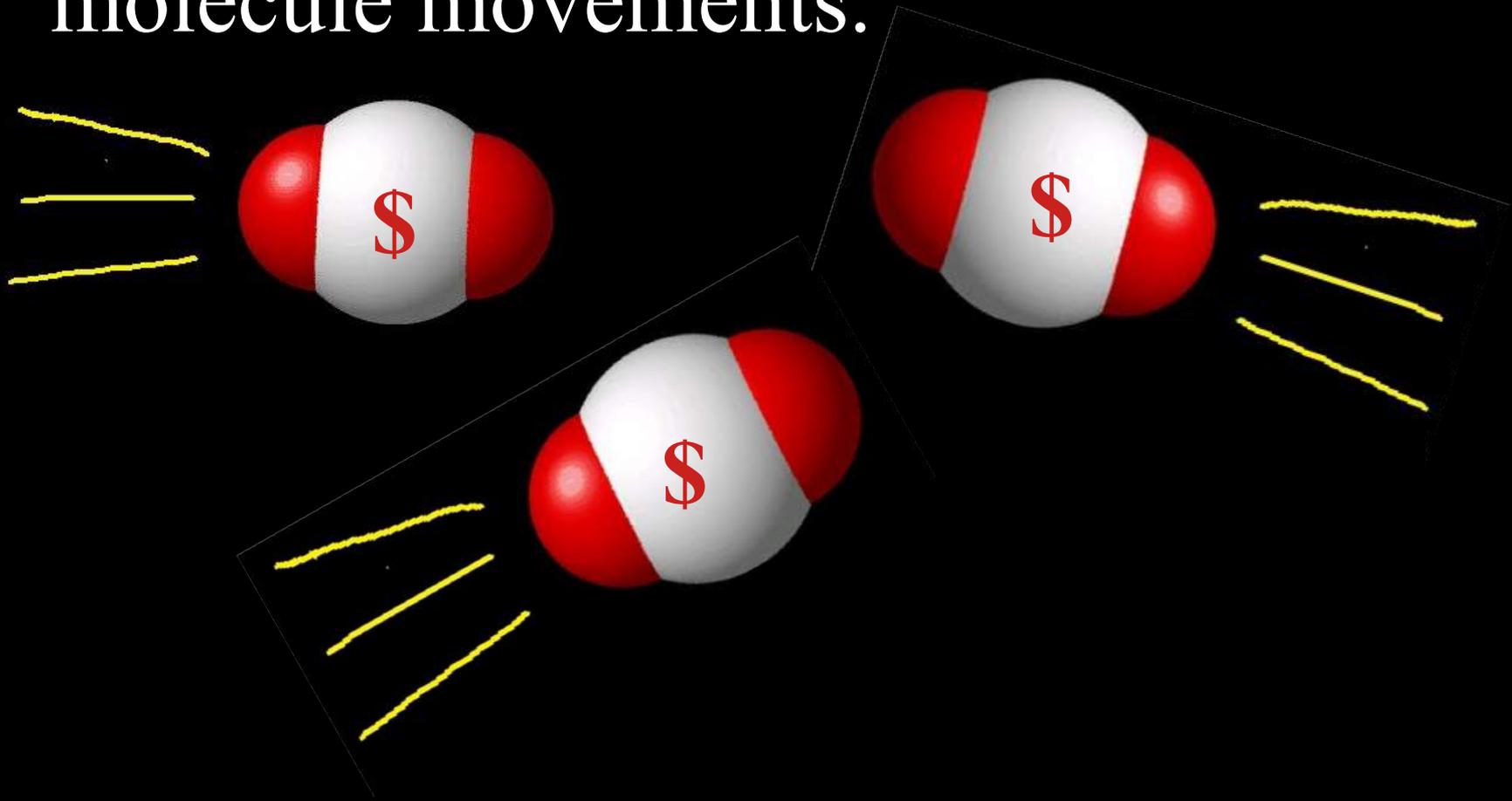
And their way of **addressing** climate change is to get **managers to predict and control** movements of CO<sub>2</sub> molecules and their effects.

*For example:*

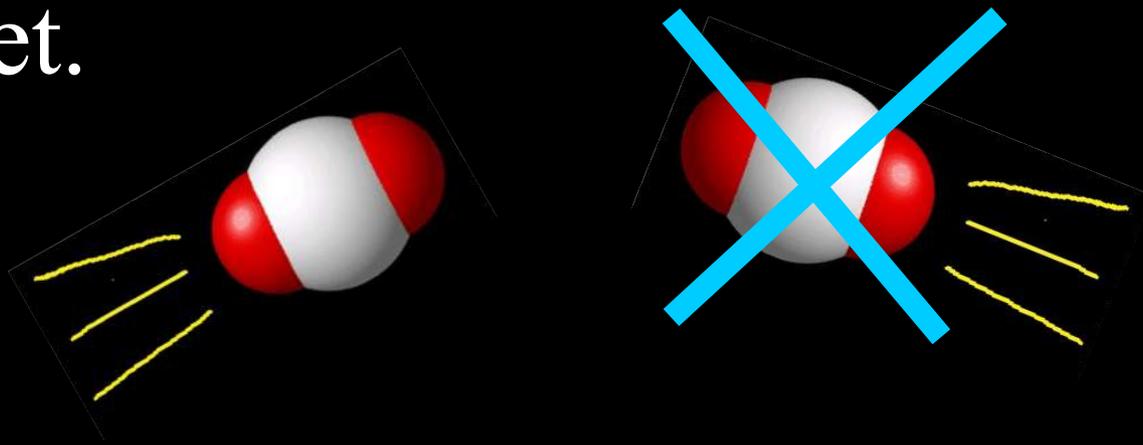
Carbon **market** schemes such as the Kyoto Protocol and Paris Agreement put their faith in the power of the state to limit and put a “correct **price**” on the movements of CO<sub>2</sub> molecules.



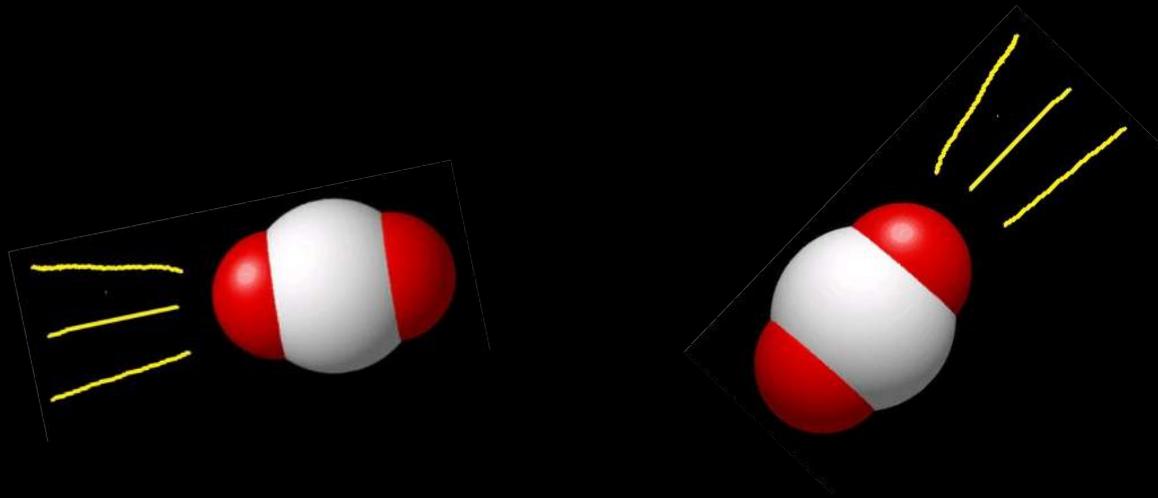
Carbon **tax** schemes also seek to address climate change by getting the state to put a **price** on CO<sub>2</sub> molecule movements.



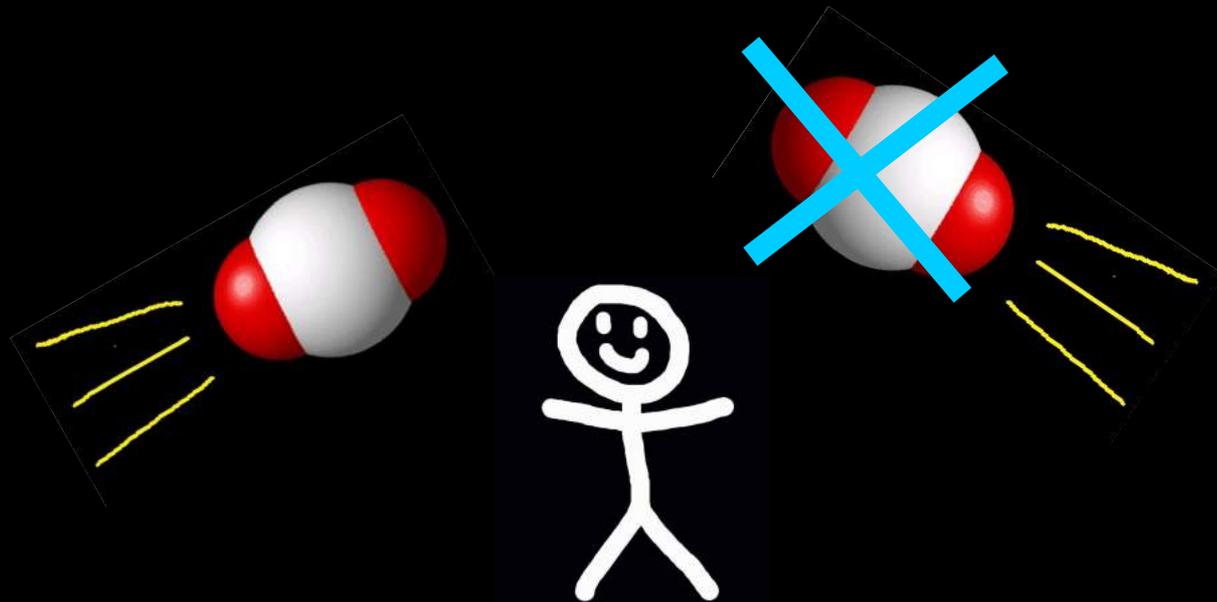
“Energy transition” plans accept capitalism’s energy regime but assume that the amount of carbon that it moves to the atmosphere can be reduced by the state or the market.



**Geoengineering** also leaves capital's energy regime alone and puts its faith in state prediction and control of the movements of CO<sub>2</sub> molecules – or the effects of those movements.



**Green New Deals** meanwhile accept the idea of a decarbonized capitalistic energy system, but suggest that the state push things along and add a few extras to try to cut the damage to the working classes.



(Or rather, **some parts** of the working classes. Nick Estes, an Indigenous historian, “cringes a bit” about the Green New Deal:

*“Whenever there’s a crisis of legitimacy for the capitalist system, it’s oftentimes Indigenous lands that are sacrificed ... With these transition plans the Navajo nation is going to be producing solar power to fuel the entire Southwest [US]. OK, so has it really changed from a resource colony? ... We have to address the primary contradiction, which is settler colonialism, if we’re going to honestly and justly transition out of the current carbon economy.”)*



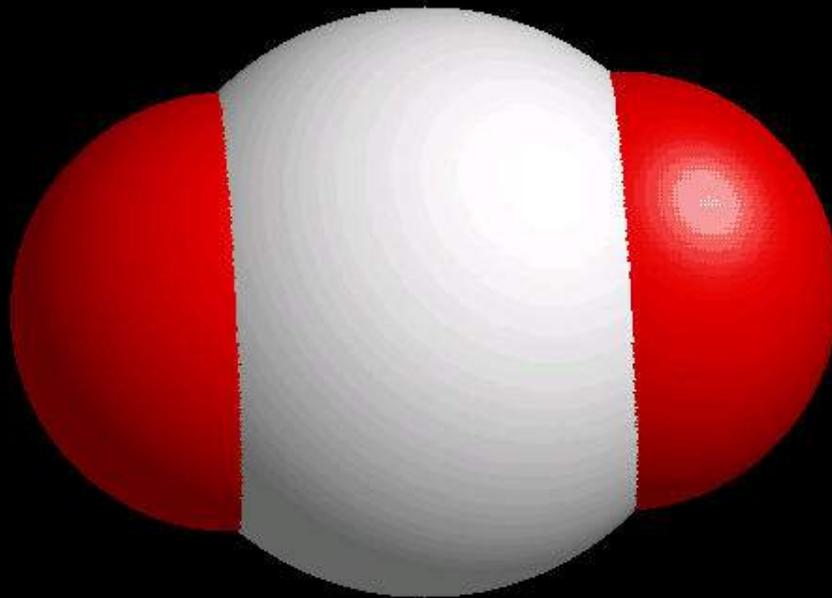
So far, I've been talking about the image of the state expert *predicting and controlling molecule movements* ...



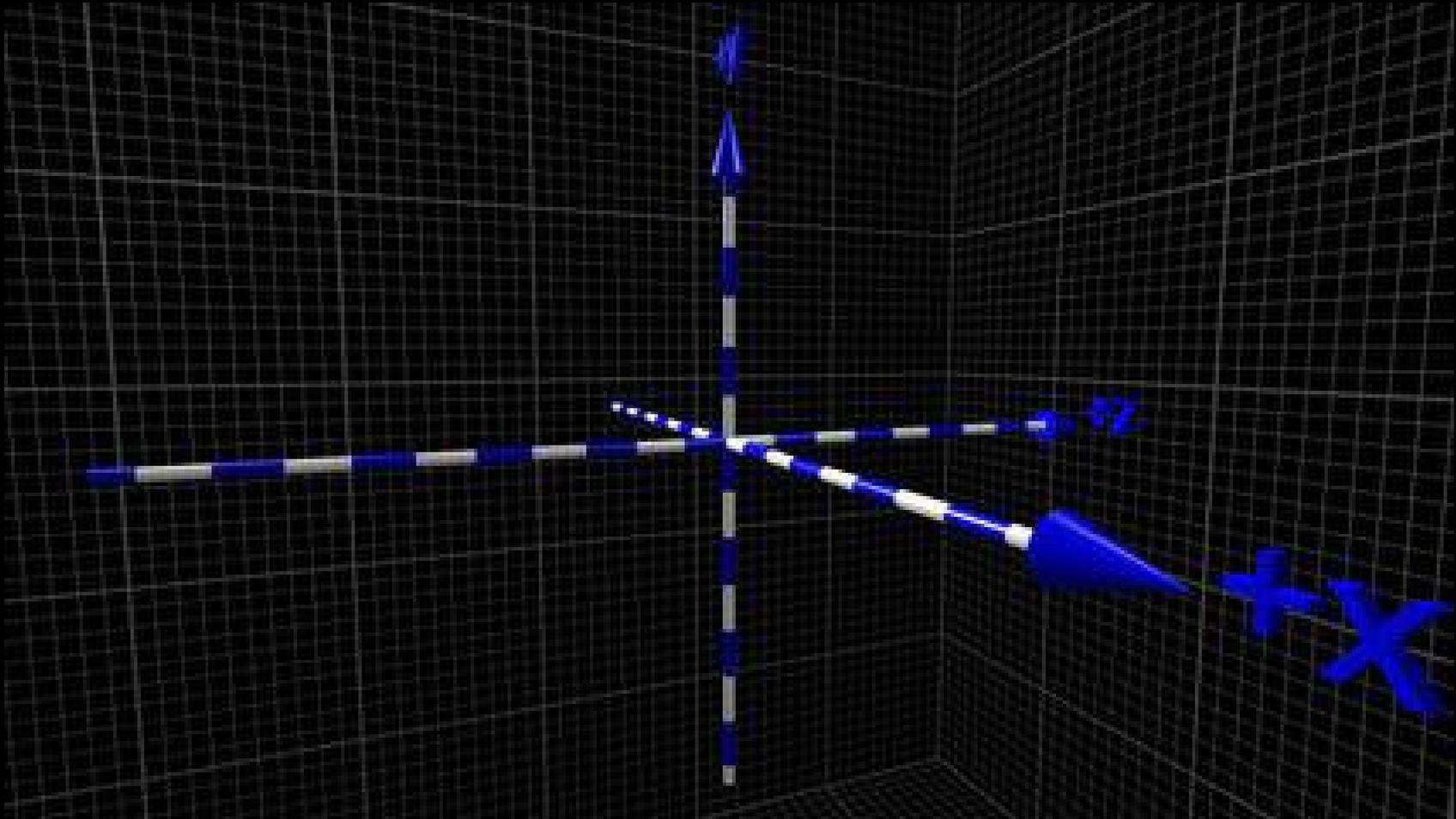
... through *price* or other means.



But of course the image of the CO<sub>2</sub> molecule is not an *isolated* image.



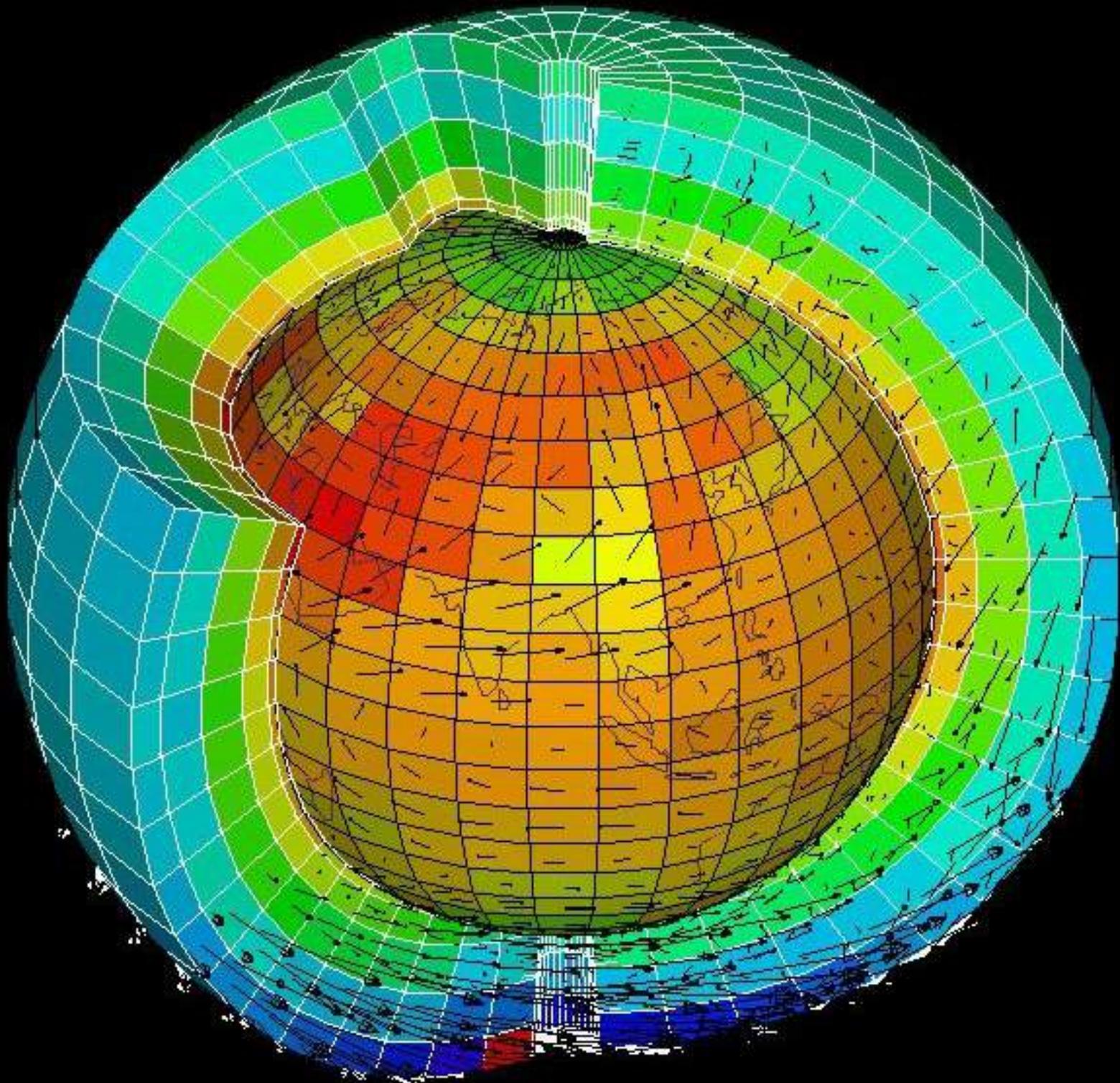
It comes complete with an image of universal,  
Cartesian space ...



... of dead physical things that can be bracketed, predicted and controlled ...



... and ultimately of the purely physical climate system described in General Circulation Models (GCMs).

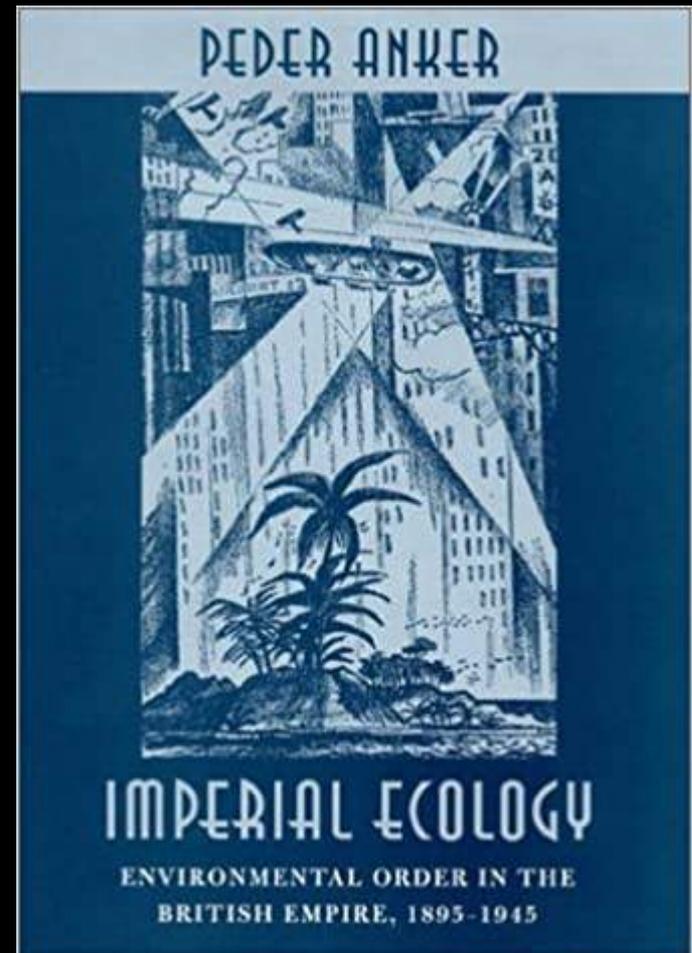
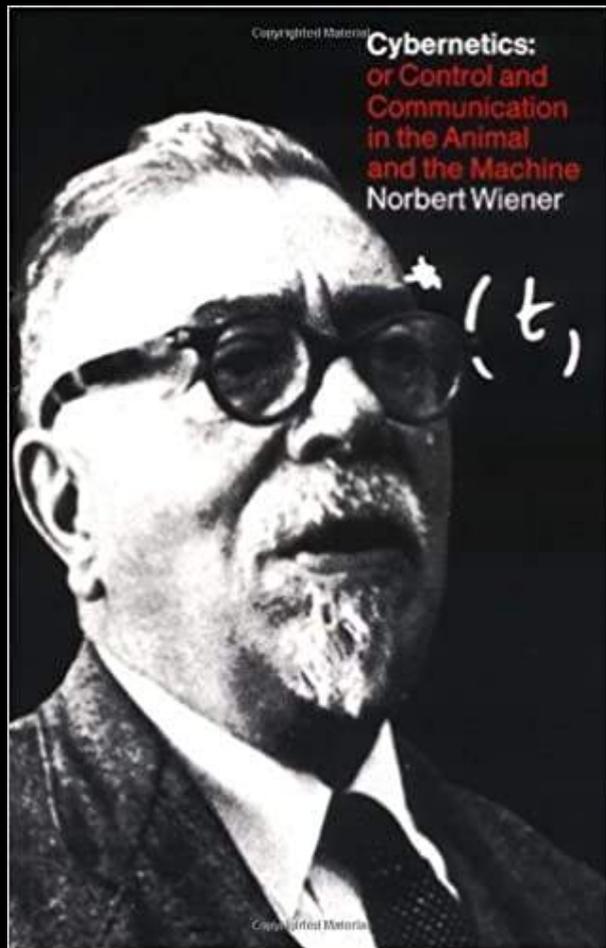




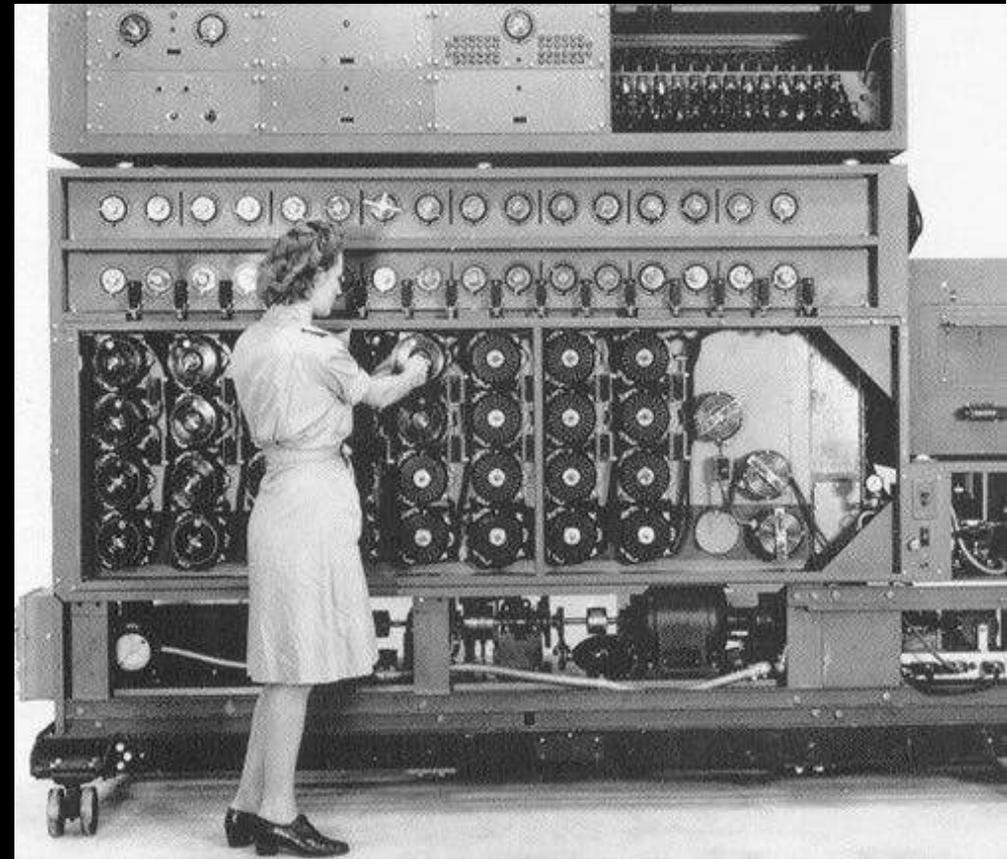
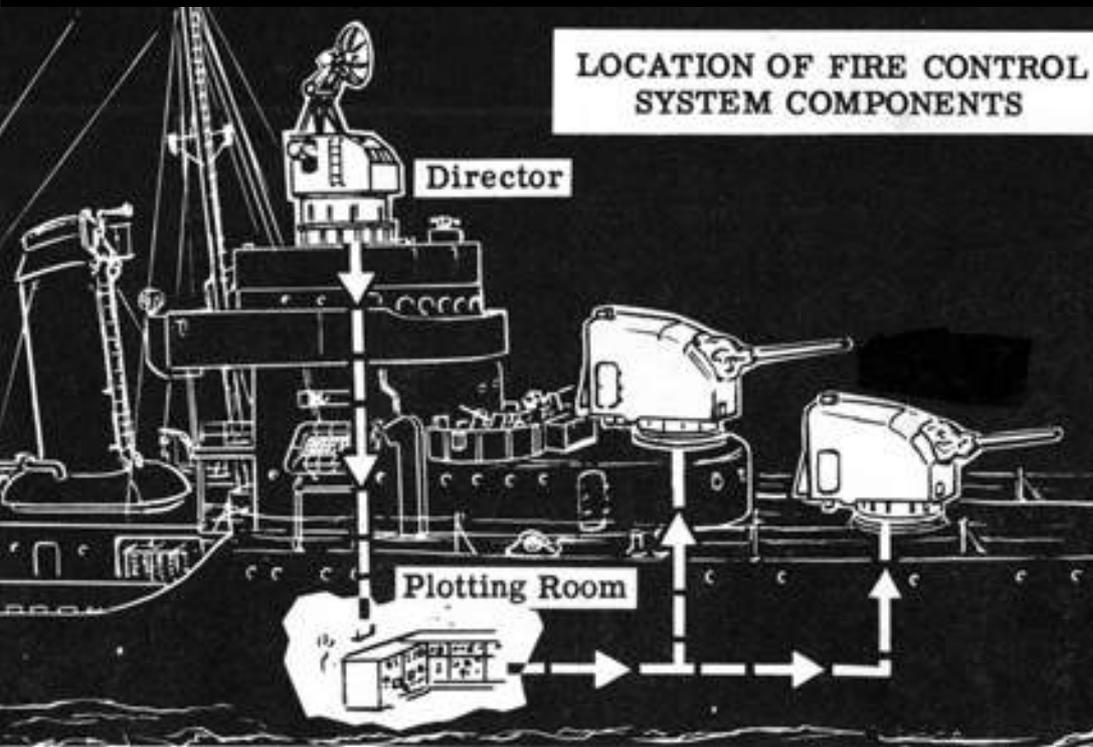
This picture of climate change as a matter of **molecular movements in a physical system** was built up bit by bit, *unintentionally*.

Over the years, it became more and more institutionalized via, for example ...

... post-World War II development of systems analysis, cybernetics and ecosystems theory.



... and the military-centred postwar development of digital computing.





More and more apparatuses for **prediction** and **control** of an “external” entity modeled inside computers ...

... less and less capacity to **interact** with a living climate, **anticipate**, analyze **history** and make rational **decisions**.



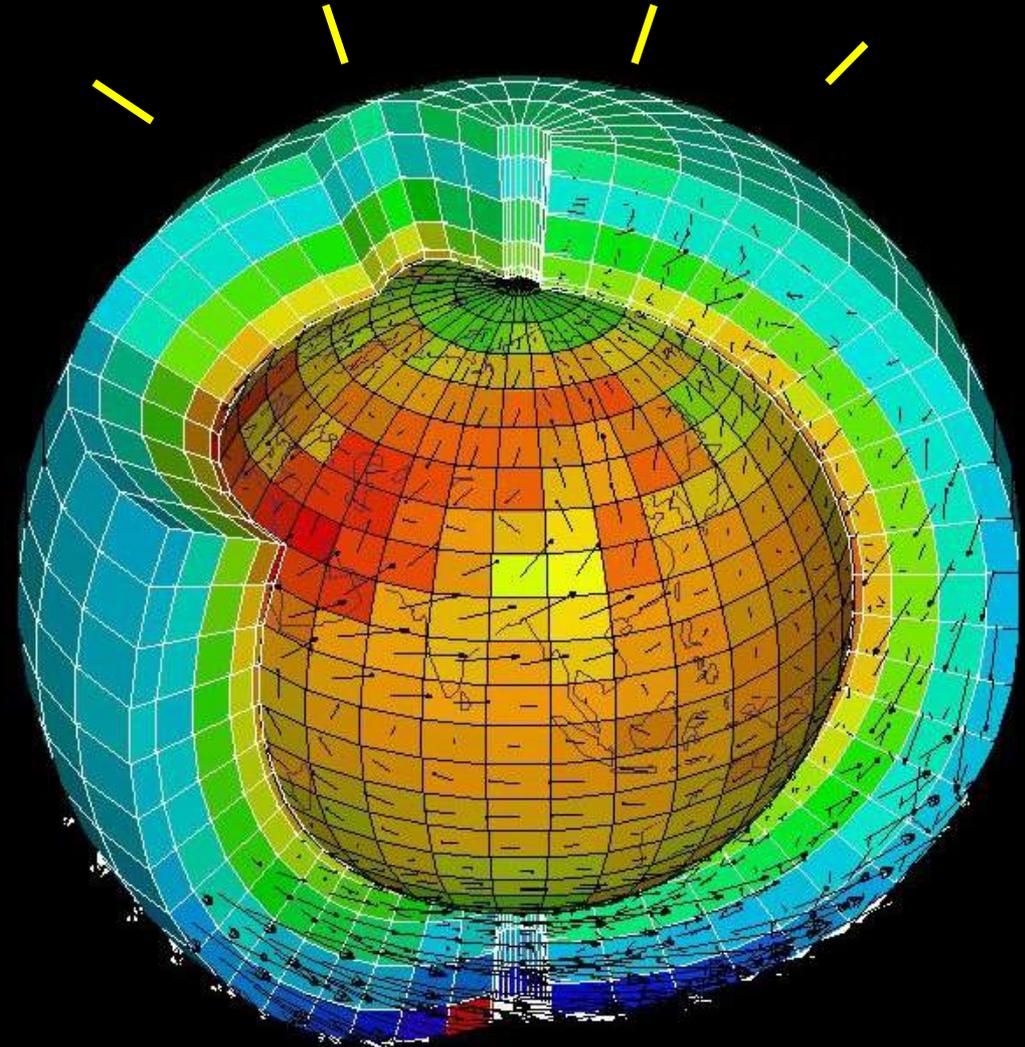
Climate change became seen as an “outside *‘forcing’* to an otherwise coherent model of atmospheric dynamics.”

And climate action became seen as a *reverse* “forcing” (or “mitigation”) of changes in this physical climate system by an unanalyzed (but implicitly capitalist) “social” regime “outside” it.



Marcus Taylor  
Queen's University

Two separate systems became “locked into an endless **dance of adaptation**” mediated by states, business and professional managers.

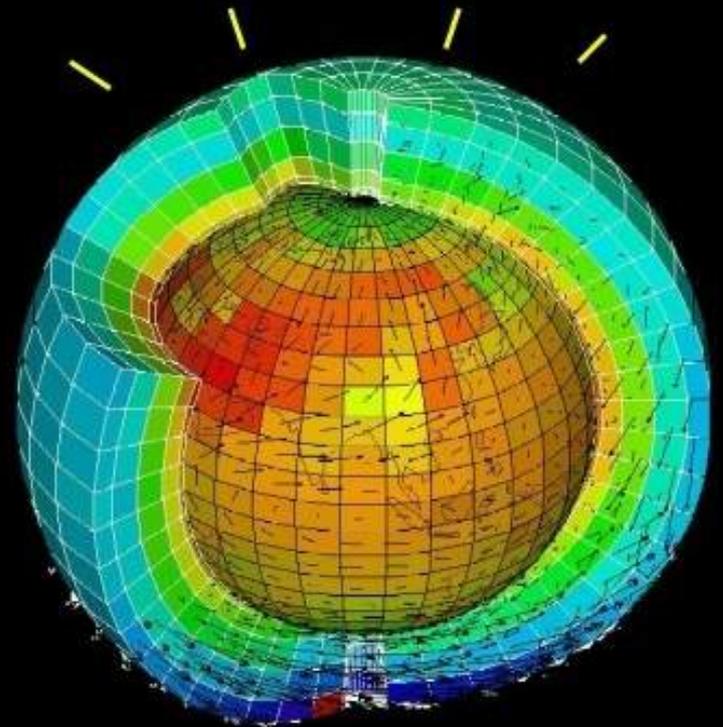


This picture fits beautifully with capitalist and neoliberal ideology ...

*Mitigate!*



*Adapt!*

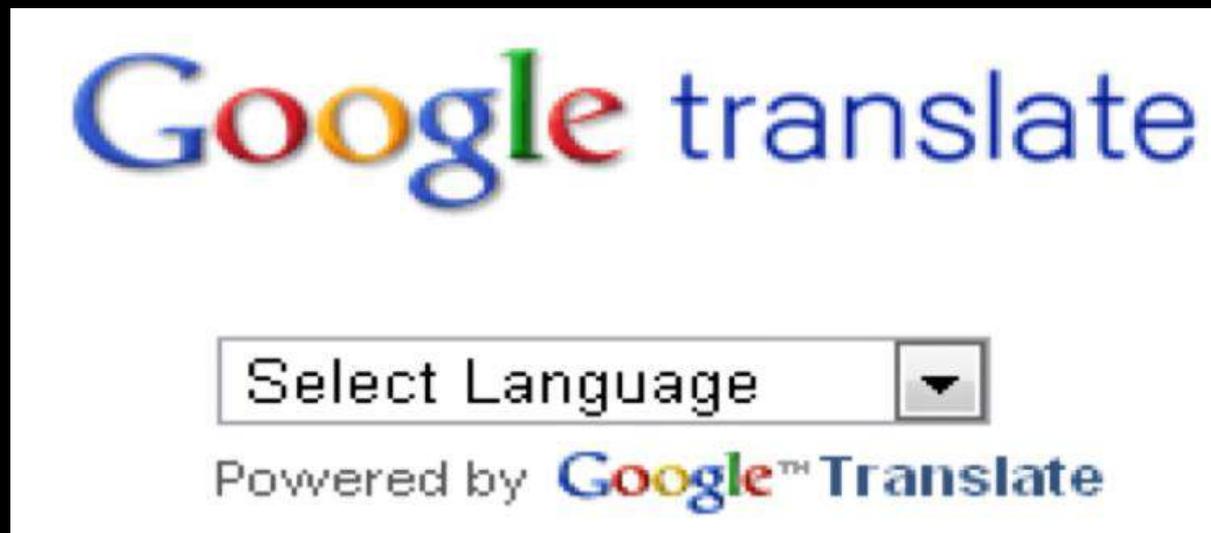


... even if it contrasts sharply with the global **majority's** understanding of climate change.

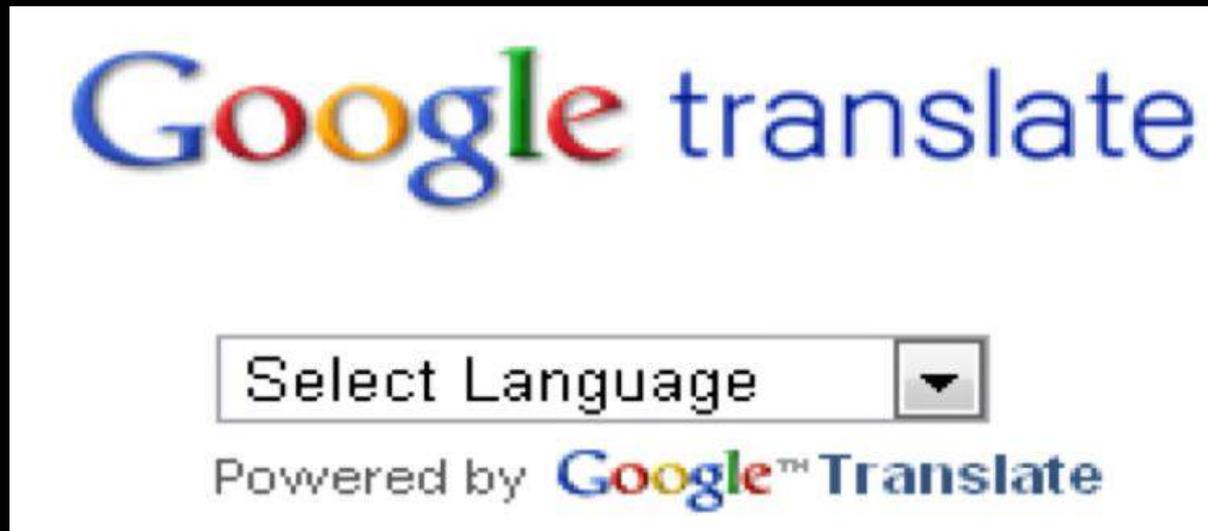


This is not at all to disparage climatology, which has shown us so much, but only to notice what kind of relationships it tends to reinforce.

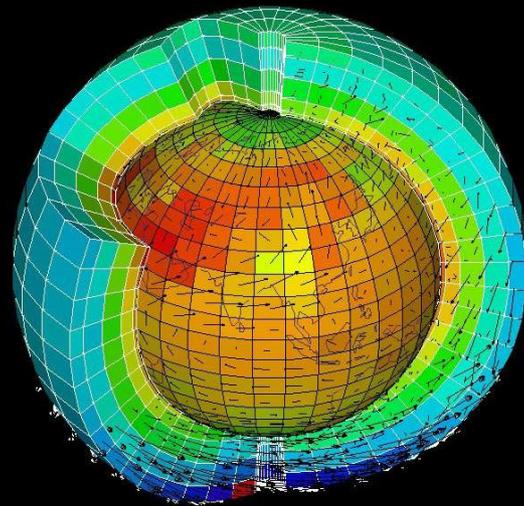
An analogy might be Google Translate.

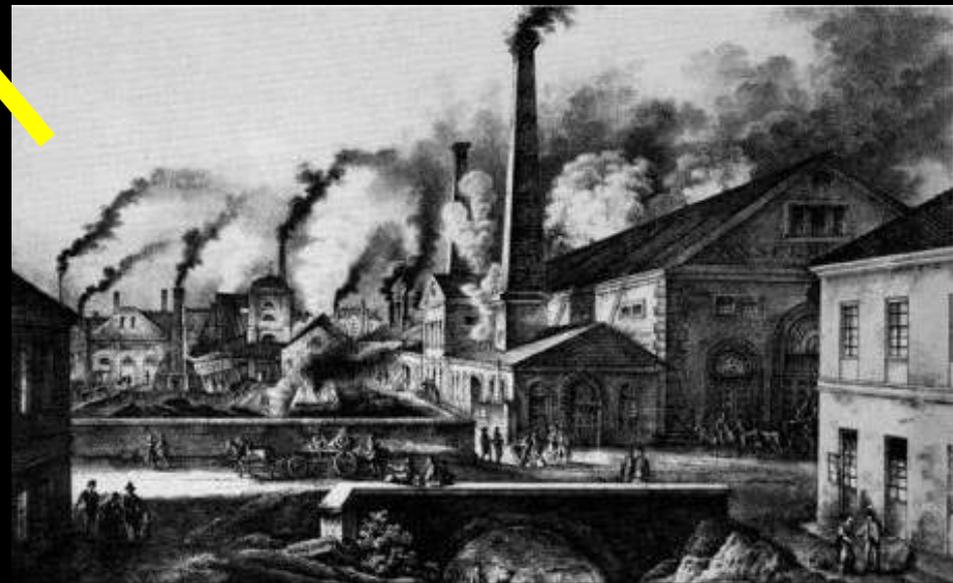
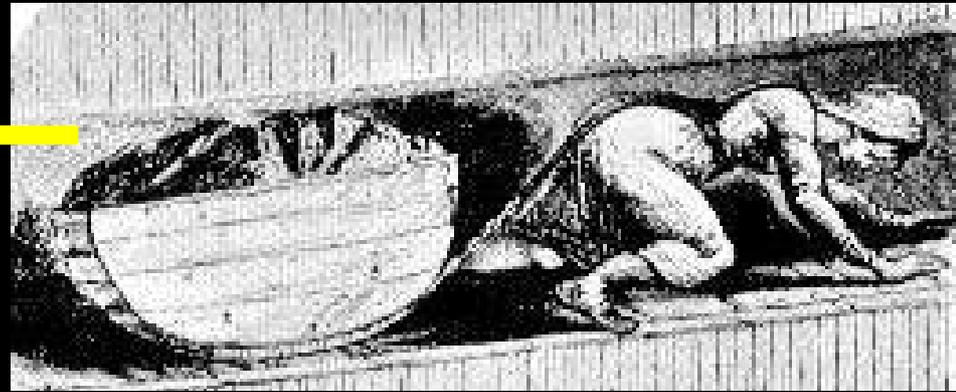
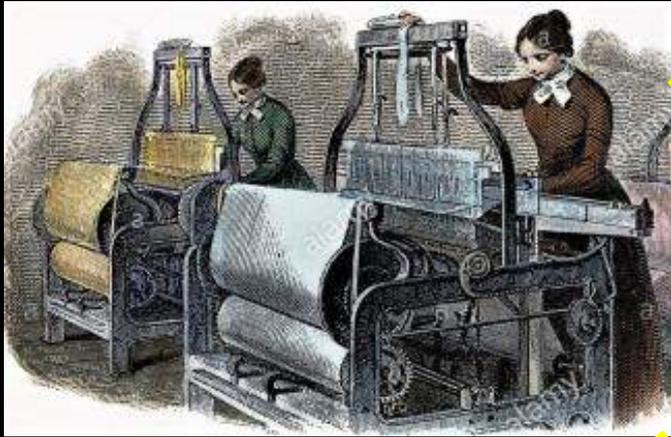


Everybody loves Google Translate. But Google Translate doesn't interact the way living human translators interact. Instead, it uses algorithms, fast processors, and large amounts of energy to **predict** what a good human translator would do, based on masses of digitized evidence from the **past**.

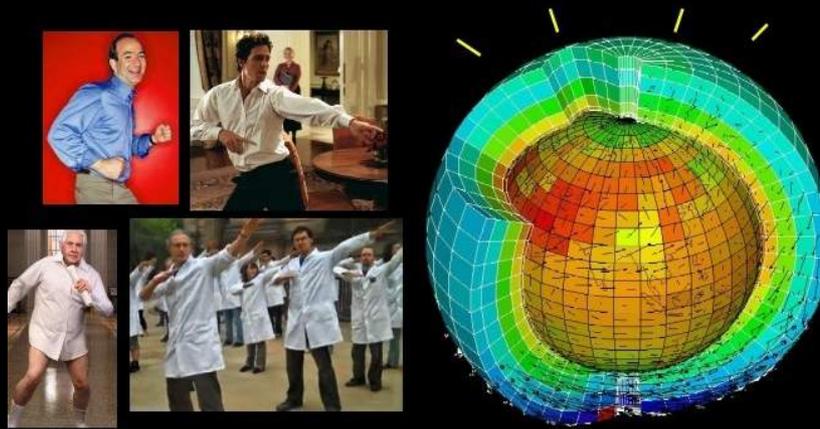


GCMs treat climate the same way: as a physical entity whose behaviour is to be more or less statistically **predicted** on the basis of **past** evidence, not as a living, creative being oriented toward an emerging future ... and whose actions are constituted partly by surplus accumulation involving the fatigue or “maxing out” of various kinds of living “work of nature,” including that of prehistoric Carboniferous organisms.





For example, none of these things are a part of climate change, on a climatological view.



*Without disrespecting the achievements of climatology and climate policy, we can see two irrational outcomes of this stance:*



Molecule fetishism.

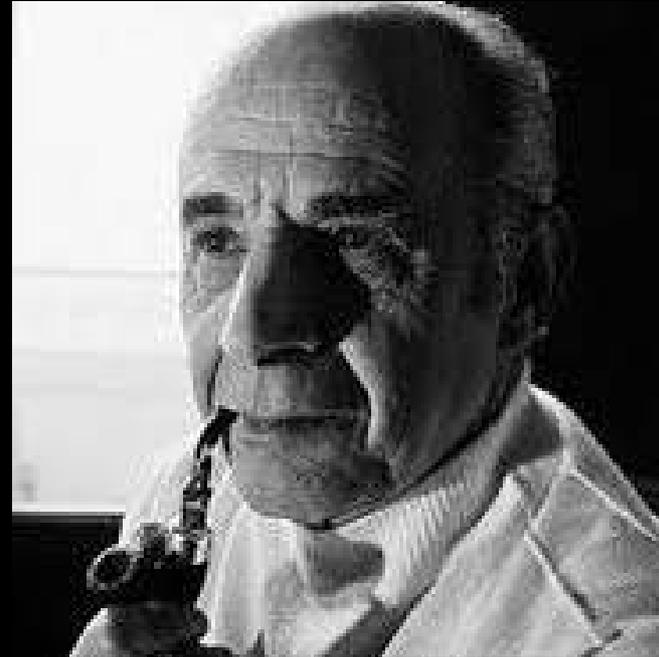


No analysis of the role of fossil-fuelled machines in the exploitation of living capitalist labour, and thus an inability to *anticipate* (as opposed to *predict*) the course of climate change.

When we talk about **molecule fetishism**, we are talking about the way *fantasy* structures reality inside climate science and policy.



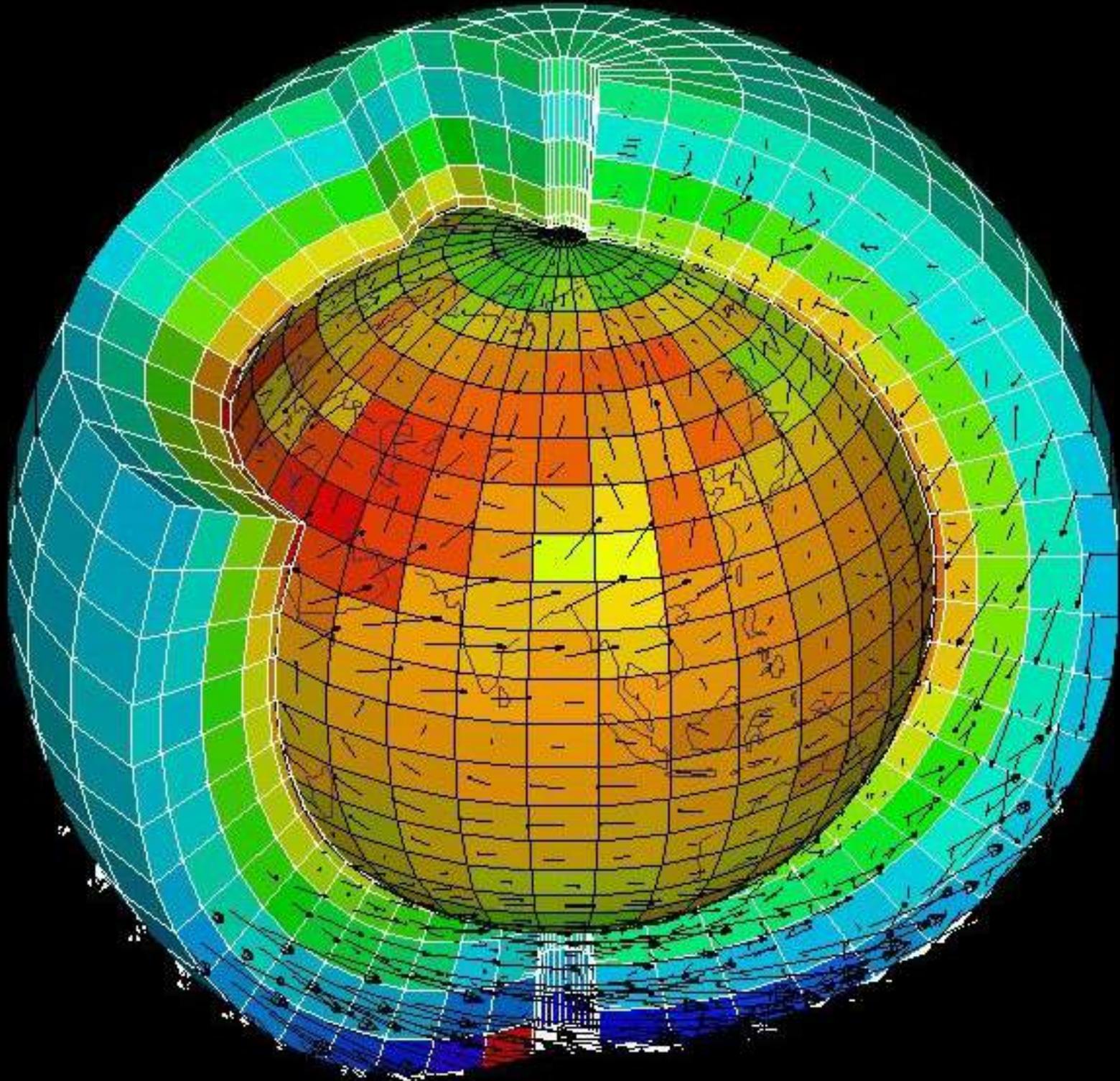
Jacques Lacan



Octave Mannoni

Let's return  
to that  
picture of an  
organic,  
ideally  
predictable  
climate  
modeled  
inside  
computer  
programmes

...





Slavoj Žižek  
*The Sublime Object of Ideology*,  
p. 142.

... and, looking at this picture, try to remember Žižek's point that "society as a corporate Body" – an organically-functioning whole, with all the different classes, genders, etc. contributing to the whole according to their function – is always "*the* fundamental ideological fantasy."



E.g., the Nazi fantasy of an organic, harmonious Aryan society couldn't have worked without the fantasy figure of ...



... the alien Jew  
spoiling everything  
from "outside."



Similarly, the 20th-century fantasy of a unique, exceptional, harmonious, non-racist “Thai society” ...



... paradoxically needed the racist fantasy of the disharmonious “non-Thai” inside or outside the country’s borders.

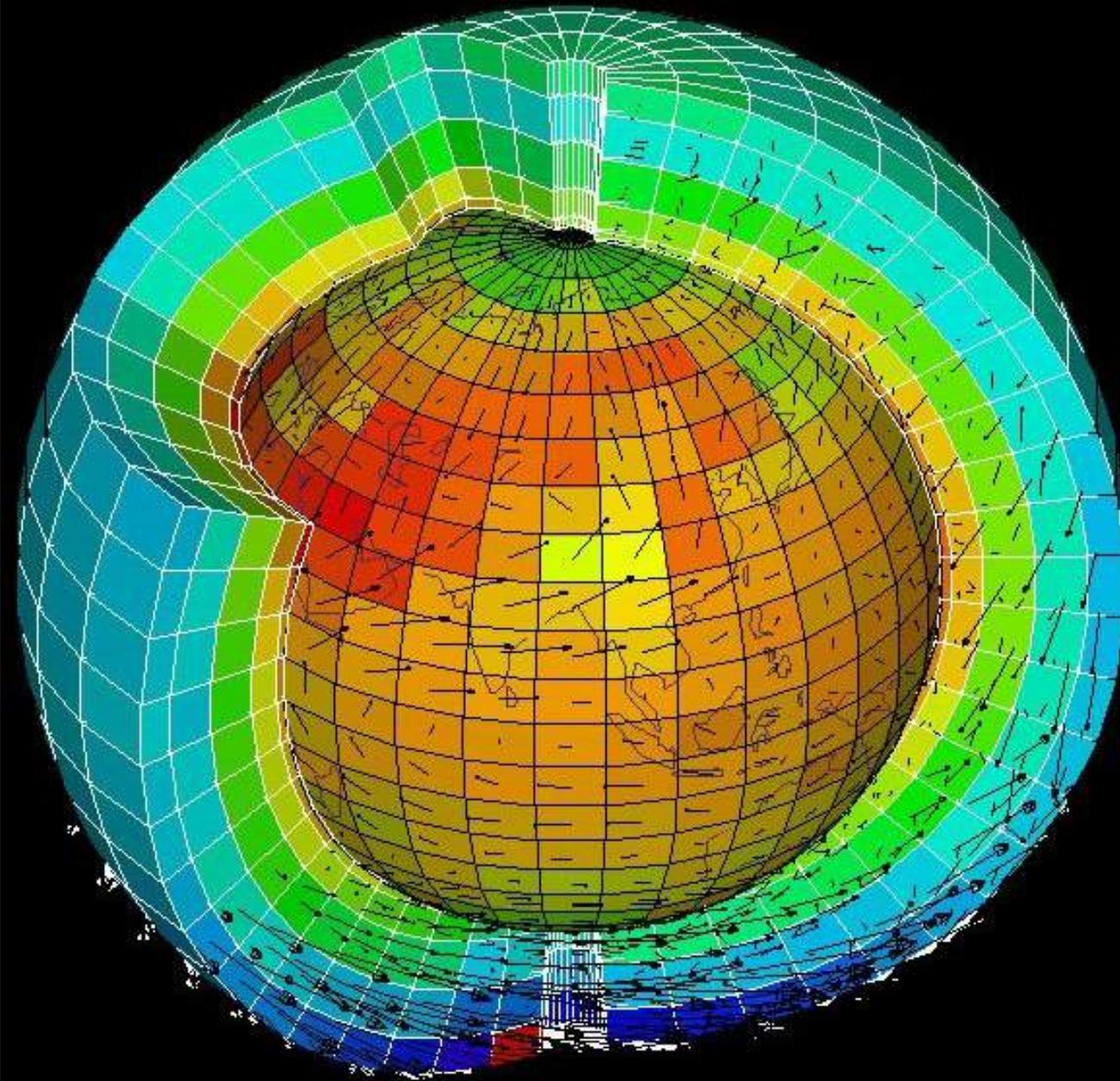




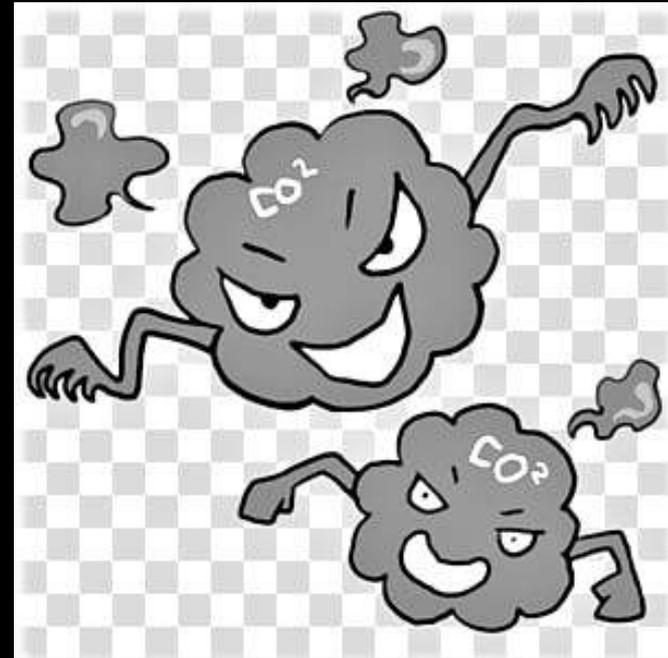
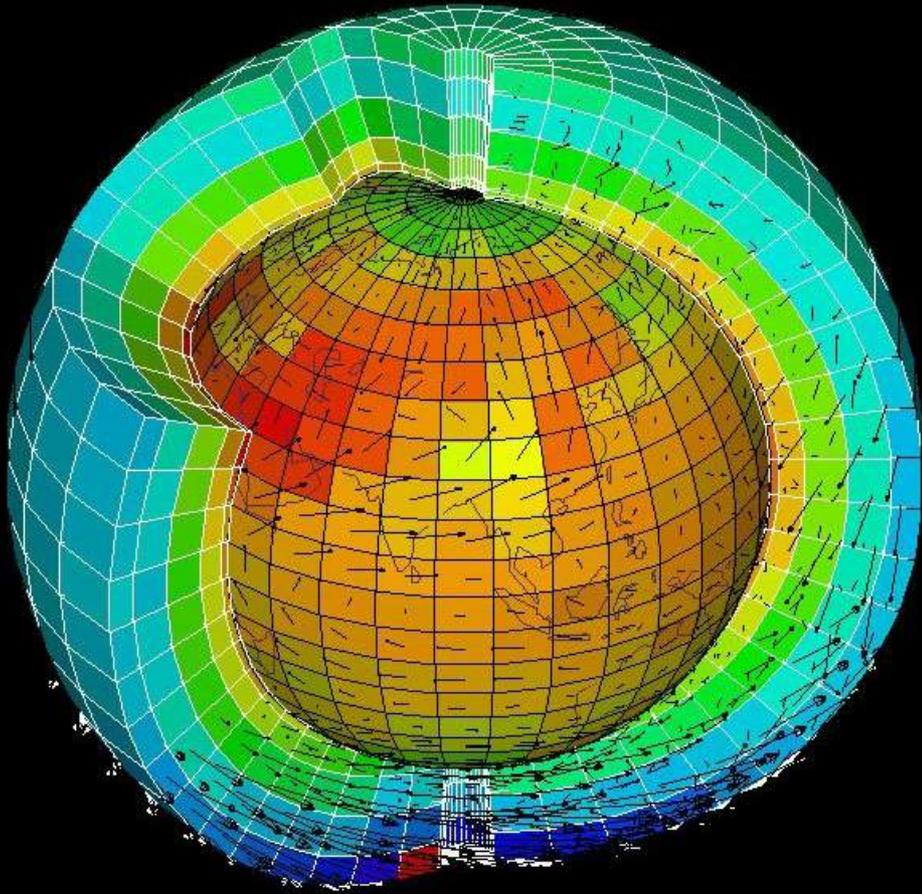
And today's Trumpian fantasy of "Great America" ...



... is incomplete without the fantasy of the dangerous immigrant (human or non-human).



So too the  
fantasy of a  
computer-  
modellable  
“climate  
system” ...

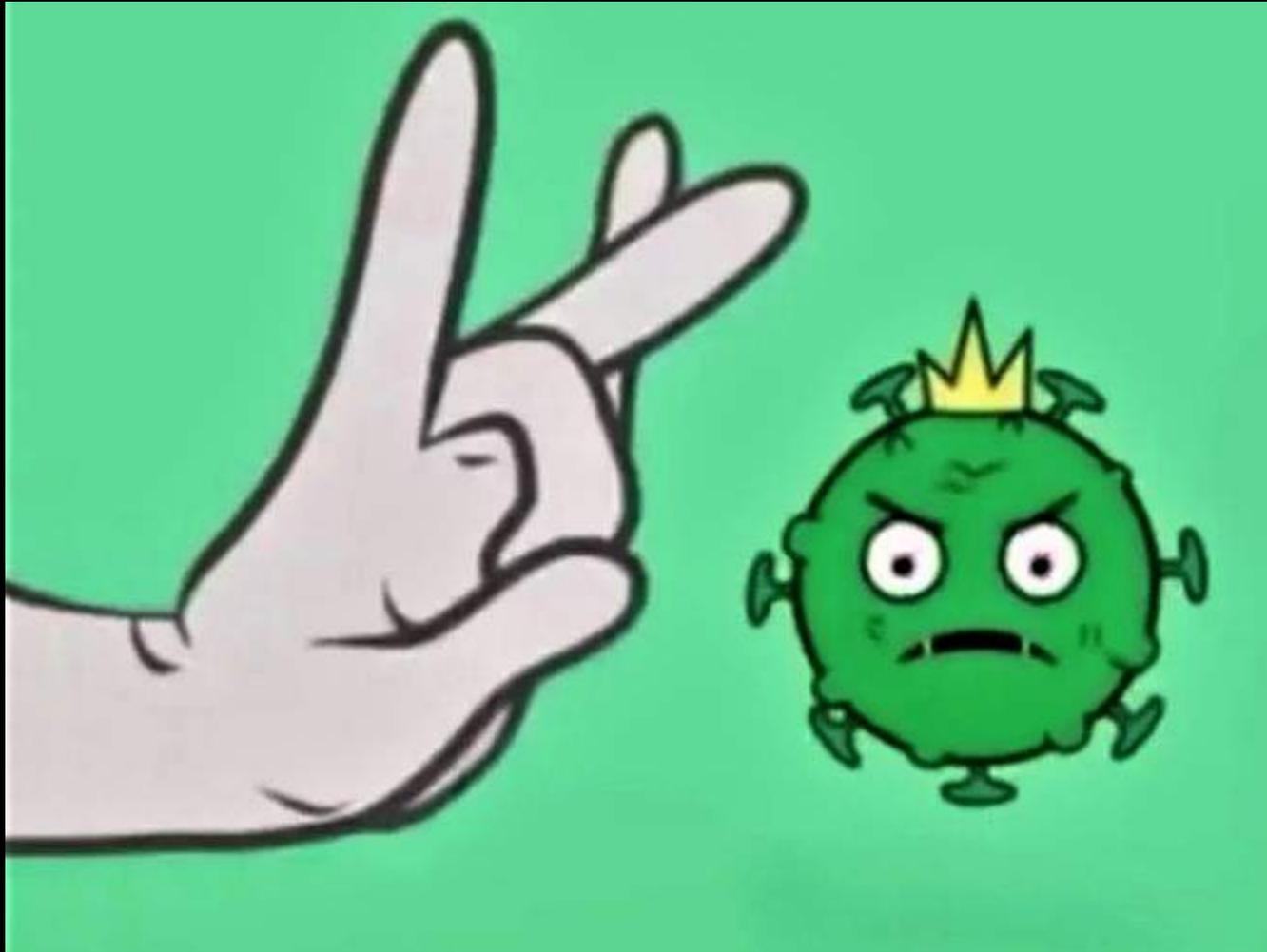


... is incomplete without, e.g., the fantasy that what “forces” a normal atmospheric system is  $\text{CO}_2$  molecules coming in from “outside” it.

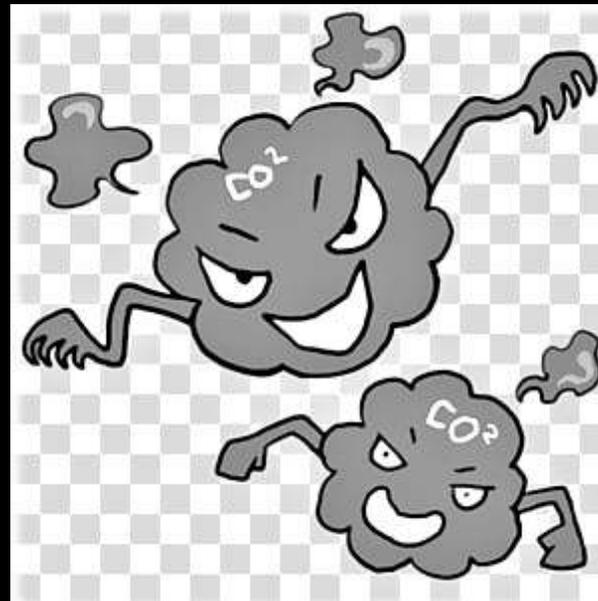
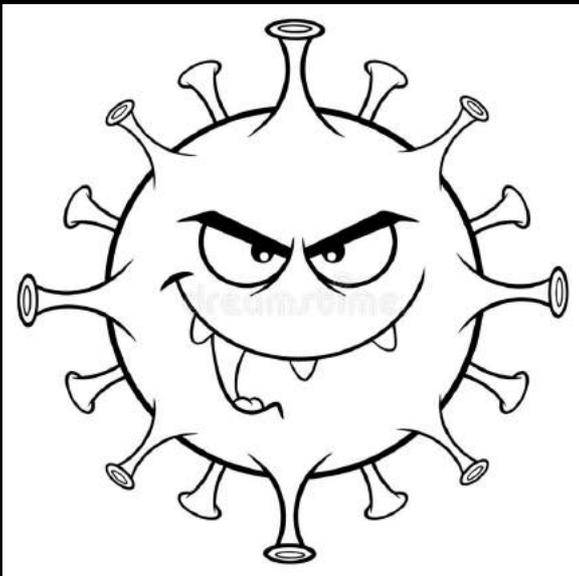
The fantasy logic is always to organize reality so that the “solution” to contradictions and conflicts becomes the *exclusion of the disruptive Other*. This Other can be human ...



... or other-than-human.



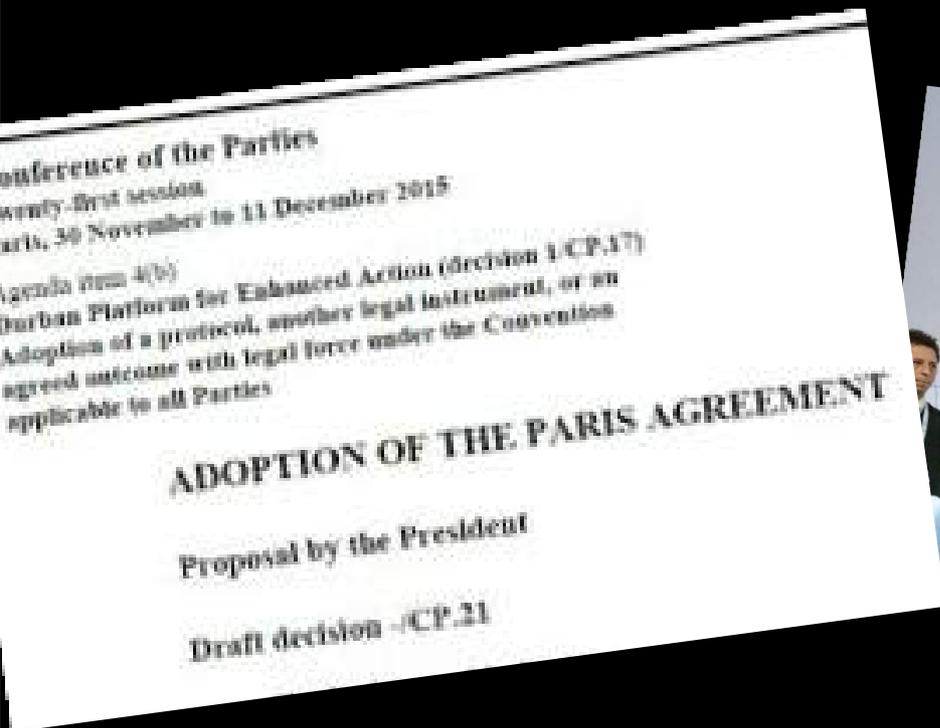
In order to be powerful enough to explain away deep ecological and political contradictions and conflicts, these Others must always be endowed with a special **magic**, a mystical **aura**, a superhuman **charge**, a *je ne sais quoi*, an indescribable **oomph**, an excess **zip** or **surplus**, a sinister “**Victoria’s Secret.**”



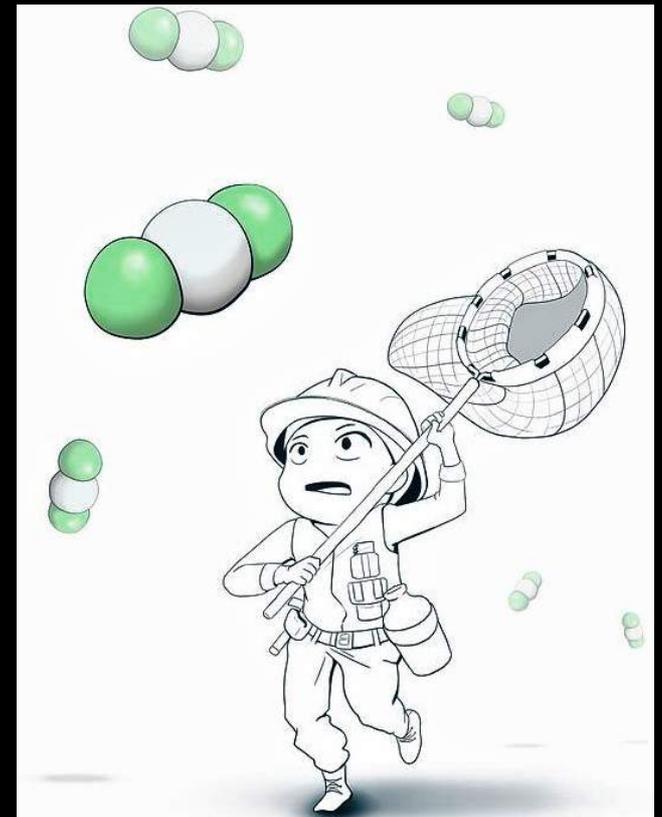
... which is why we have to have *equally* magic or mystical “beautiful walls” to keep them out. (These fantasies may be made from concrete and steel – but they are still fantasies.)



... or beautiful, magic **climate laws** to **exclude** excess alien carbon from the atmosphere, without changing anything else. (These fantasies may be made from real institutions and human actions – but they are still fantasies.)



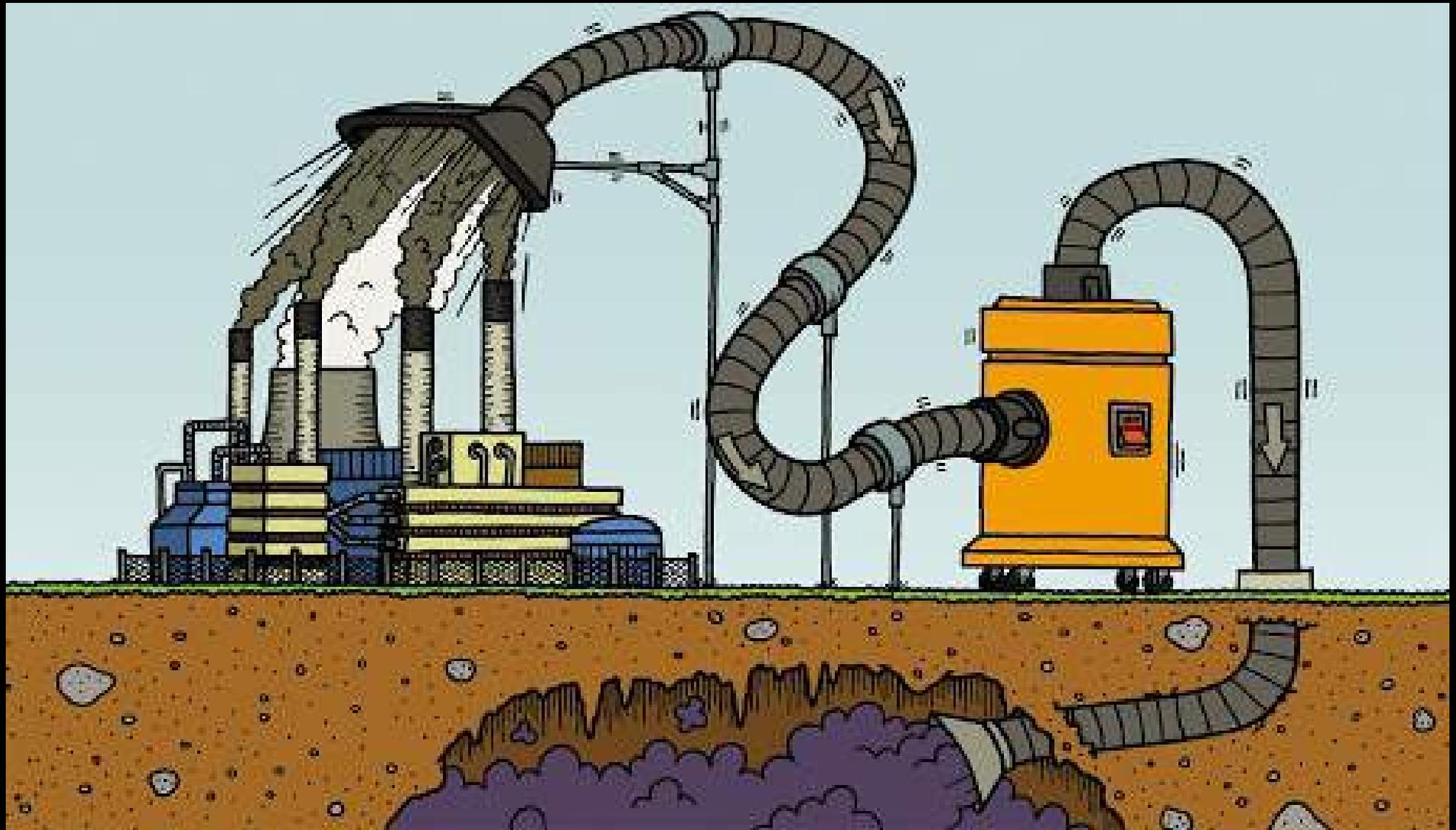
Thus the Paris Agreement (or your typical “energy transition plan”) has no problem with carbon extraction as such. It’s only when the carbon assumes “immigrant” form as CO<sub>2</sub> and crosses the border into the atmosphere that it must be controlled or detained.



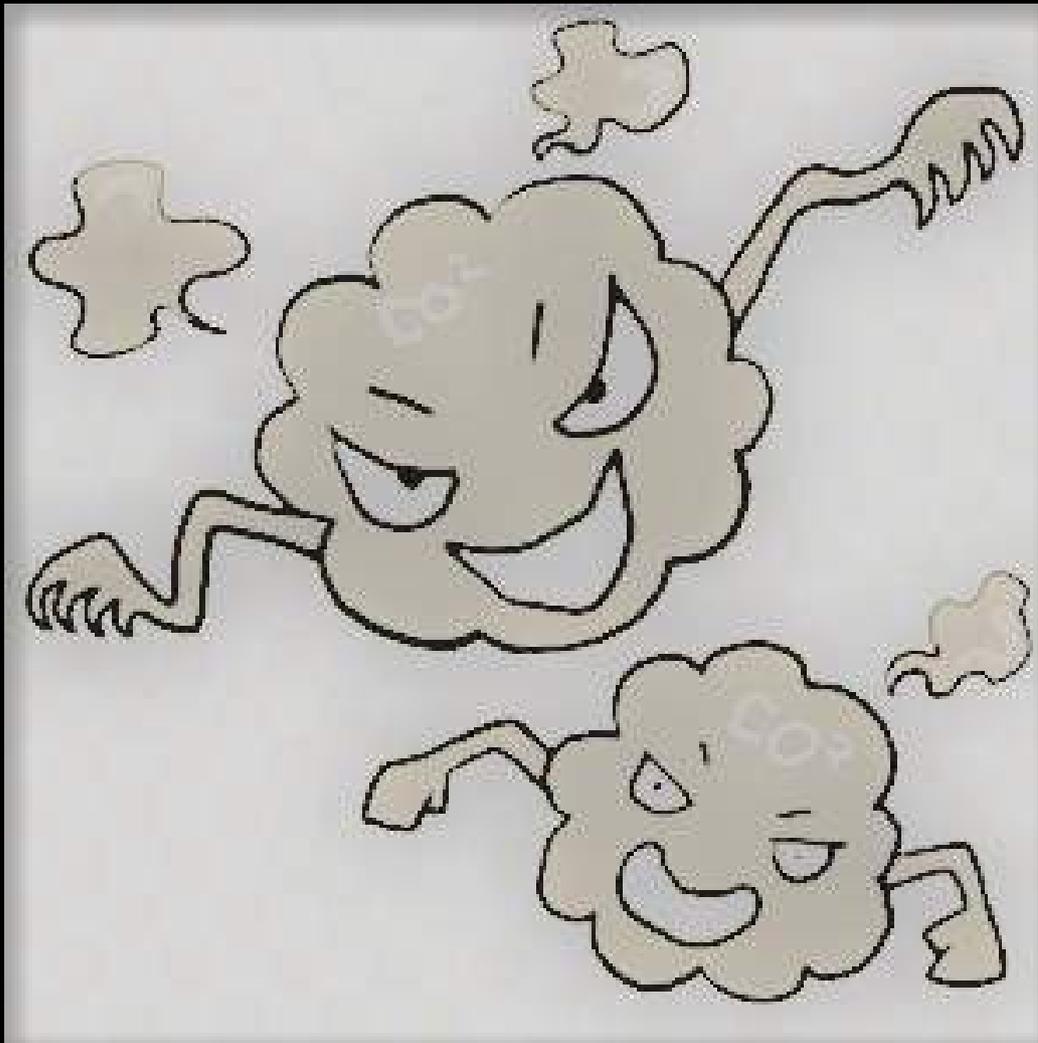
Maybe you arrest the carbon and “sequester” it in trees.



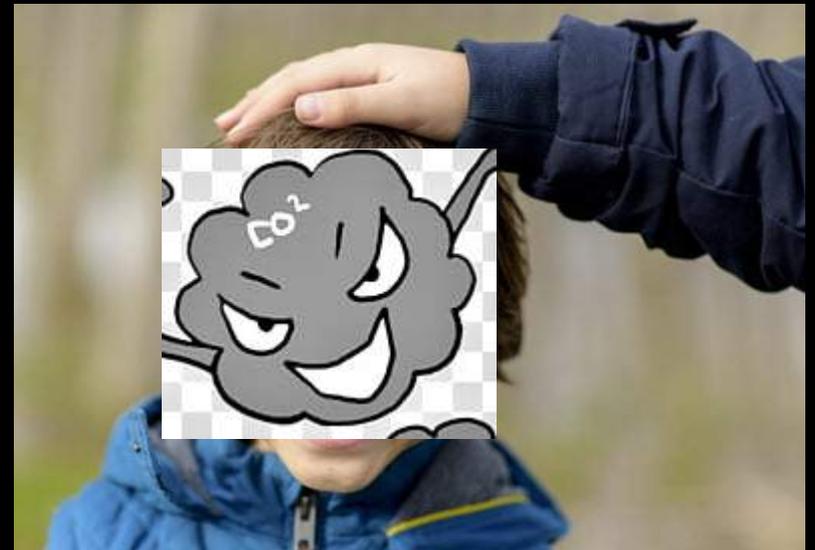
Maybe you bury it underground.



Or maybe you “rehabilitate” it by showing that it’s not as bad as the immigrants that might have arrived if you *hadn’t* rehabilitated it.



(Carbon offsets.)



Similarly, you can declare beautiful wars on various aliens to make everything all right again.



The U.S. Military Has Joined the War Against the Coronavirus. But Its Firepower Is Limited

**'We are at war': France mobilizes army, tight lockdown over coronavirus outbreak**

BY GLOBAL NEWS

Posted March 16, 2020 8:23 pm

Updated March 16, 2020 9:24 pm

News

Coronavirus outbreak: France imposes restrictions on movement to contain virus spread



Everywhere in the French territory, in the mainland as well as in overseas territories.

Of course, the fact that such wars are fantasies doesn't mean that they don't kill people ...

... whether they are the wars on Covid-19 that are now being questioned by the Zapatistas ...



★  
**JORNADA GLOBAL POR LA VIDA**

Del 4 al 10 de Abril. Según su modos, calendarios y geografías.

**#ElEncierroNoMeCalla**

LLAMAMOS A NO DEJAR CAER LA LUCHA CONTRA LA VIOLENCIA FEMINICIDA, A CONTINUAR LA LUCHA EN DEFENSA DEL TERRITORIO Y LA MADRE TIERRA, A MANTENER LA LUCHA POR L@S DESAPARECID@S, ASESINAD@S Y ENCARCELAD@S, Y A LEVANTAR BIEN ALTO LA BANDERA DE LA LUCHA POR LA HUMANIDAD.

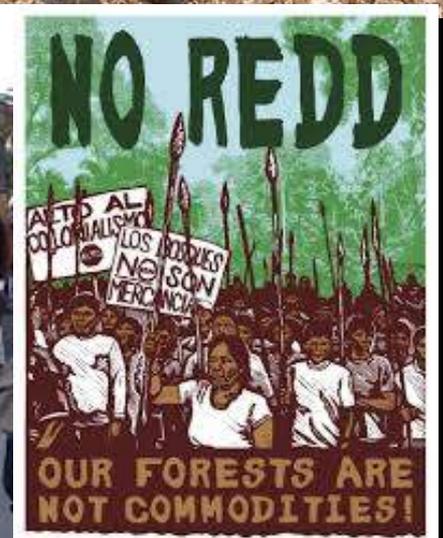
Subcomandante Insurgente Moisés, CCRI-CG del EZLN. Marzo, 2020

A101 años de su asesinato, Zapata Vive, la Lucha Sigue!

Registra tu actividad o acción de resistencia a:  
[cmaa.cig@gmail.com](mailto:cmaa.cig@gmail.com)



... or wars on immigrant CO<sub>2</sub> molecules that are also taking people's lives and livelihoods.

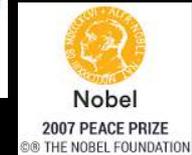


We European types often have a hard time accepting that contemporary mainstream science and policy are loaded with fetishes and fantasy in this way.



We can easily see the racism, fantasies and anti-science blustering in, for example, a Donald Trump or Jair Bolsonaro.

But we rather carelessly assume that the antidote to their racist, anti-science postures must be more peer-reviewed science and policy advice, without realizing the *structural similarities* of the fetishes that permeate and partly constitute both.



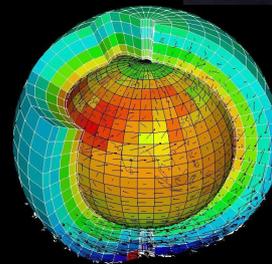
Let me give an example by moving from Trump to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the official group of scientists advising the UN climate apparatus.

In 2014, Sir John Houghton, founding member of the IPCC, gave an interview explaining why IPCC scientists could not mention the carbon in fossil fuels in their analysis of climate change, but only carbon that had become more mobile in the form of CO<sub>2</sub>.

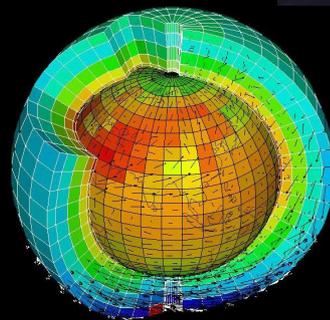


To follow what happens when carbon atoms move over the border into the atmosphere is “science,” Houghton said. But to analyze what happens to *make* so many carbon atoms migrate in this way “is not a science question.”

In other words, fossil fuel extractivism can have nothing to do with the “climate object” defined by climatology.



It is not just that IPCC scientists fear capitalist reaction, then. It is also that the **structure and institutions of their science** *itself* are defined by the same fantasies about, e.g., disruptive immigrants that can be found in the racism of a Trump or a Bolsonaro.

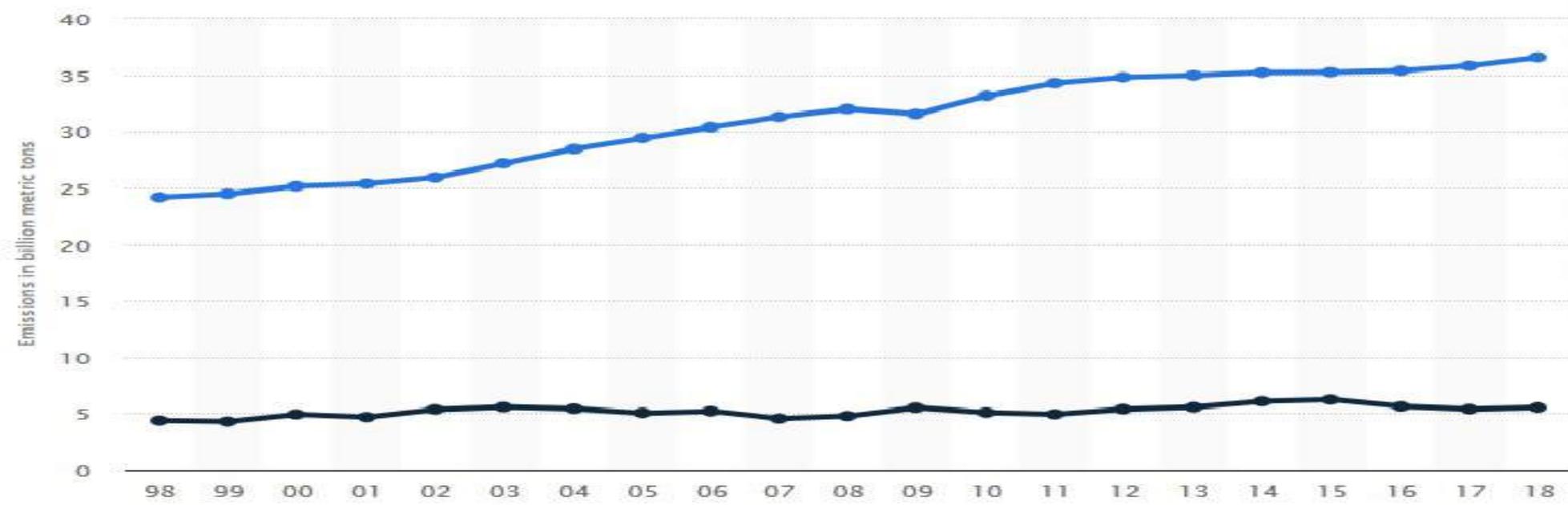


For activists, the political problem of such fantasies is that they persist whether or not they “work.”

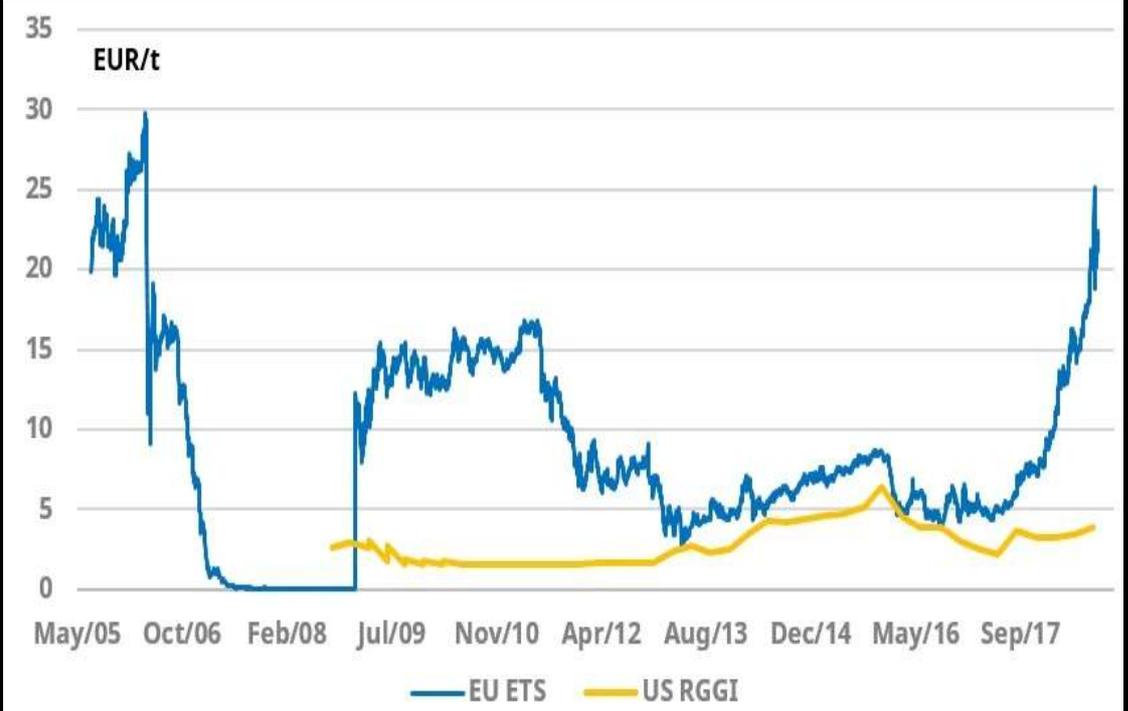


# Global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from 1998 to 2018

(in billion metric tons)



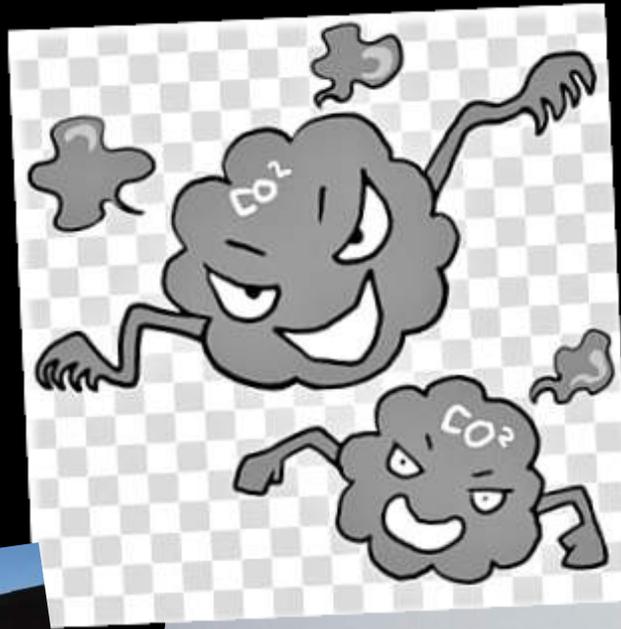
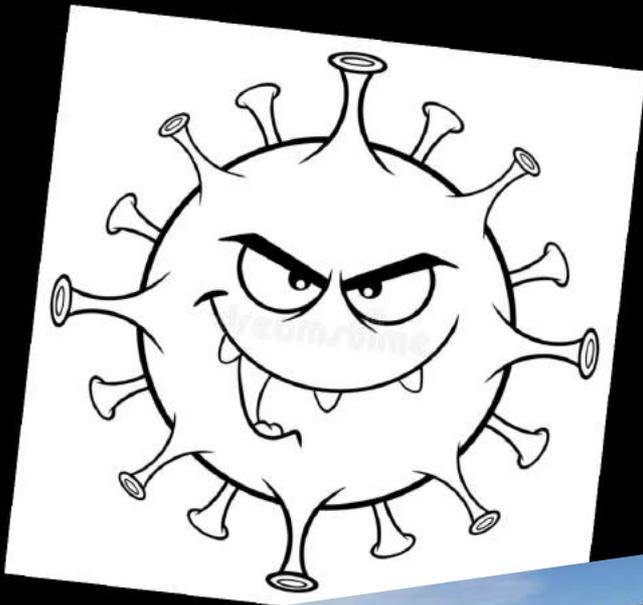
For example, everybody “knows” that CO<sub>2</sub> molecule immigration law has only increased CO<sub>2</sub> immigration and has negatively affected efforts to curb climate change.



But “knowing” that the underlying contradictions are ignored in carbon policy has made little difference to mainstream climate politics for over 25 years.



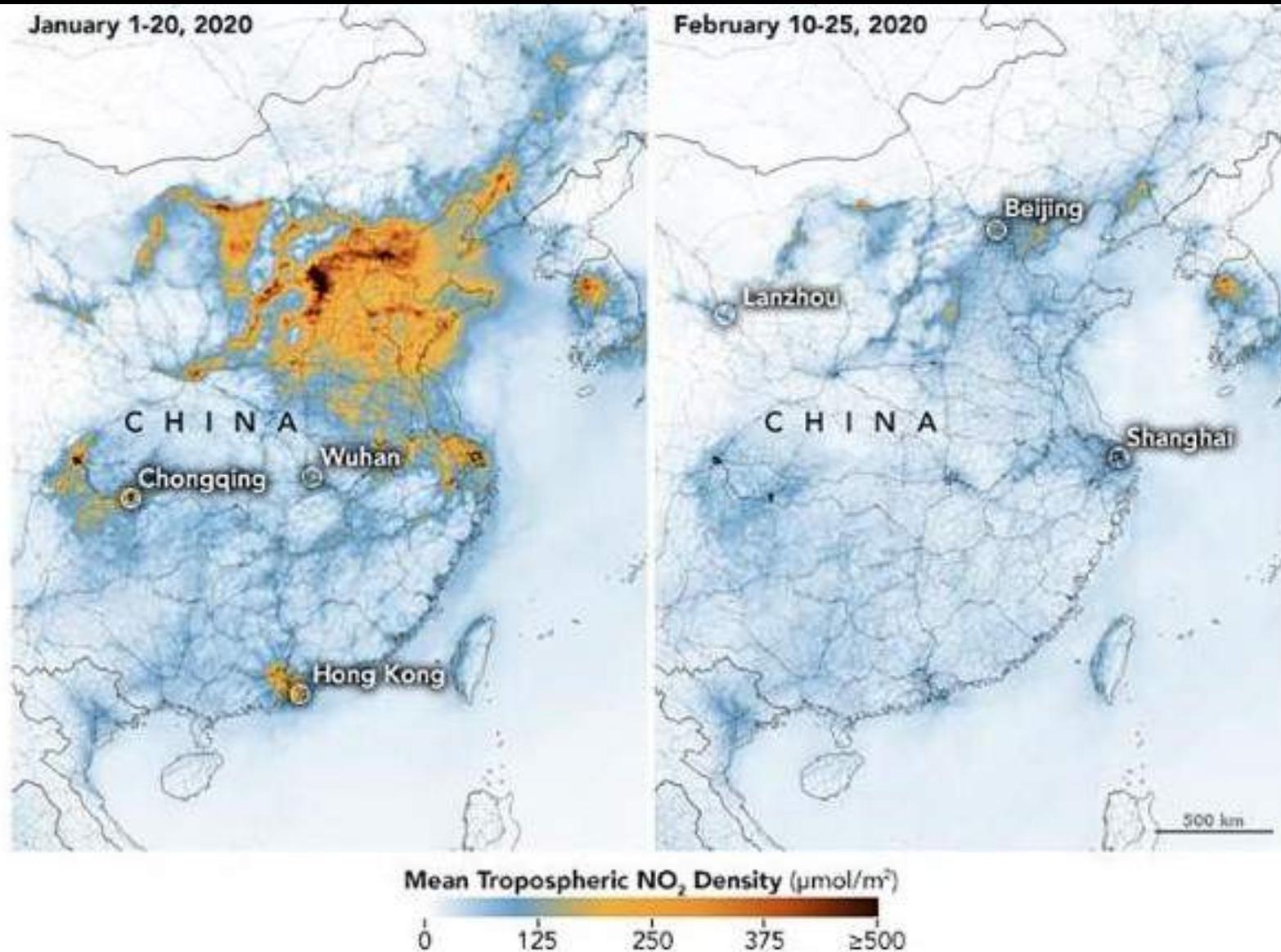
You can't undo the **magic powers** of any of these fantasy figures via rational argument ...



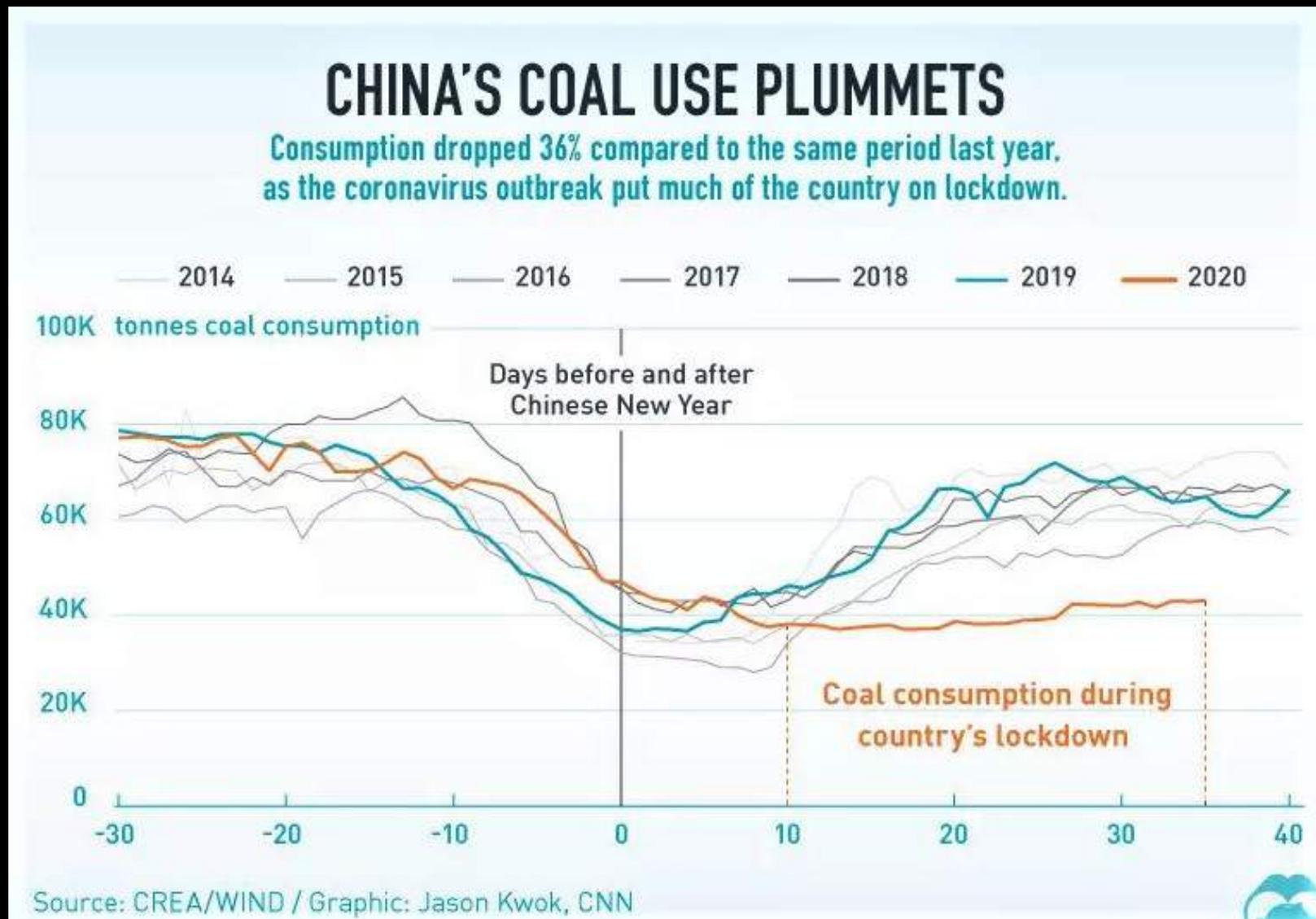
... any more than you can undo the magic powers of *any* ordinary, everyday fetish by refusing to “believe” in it, or by explaining the way things “really are.”



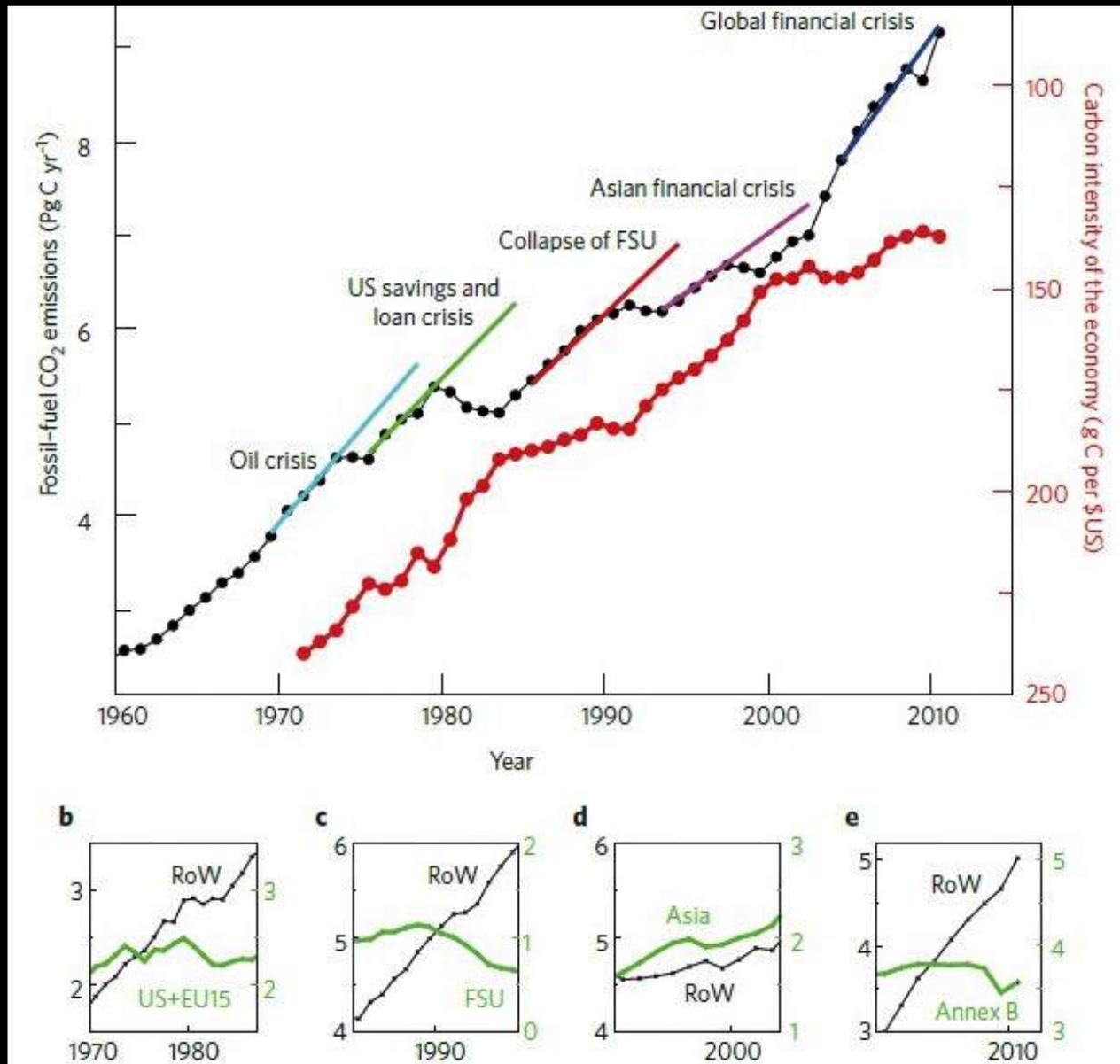
In this connection, it's interesting to note reactions to the familiar phenomenon of pollution reductions during crises. E.g., the  $\text{NO}_2$  reductions in China and Europe during the Covid-19 crisis, which are typically much greater than reductions due to climate policy ...



... are due mainly to the **idling of machines** used to exploit and discipline labour (whether production, circulation or consumption labour) ...



... a phenomenon also seen during previous capitalist crises.



## Instinctively, people seem to sense two things from these pictures:



First, that the pollution reductions are only temporary and indeed will probably be followed by *increases* in energy intensity and carbon intensity.



Yet second, that because these reductions, though temporary, are typically greater than those achieved by any carbon policy, they might offer indirect hints about what real climate policy would look like.

Which is another factor that might encourage us to have more subject-changing conversations that help “traverse the fantasies” inside climatology and carbon policy and move closer toward a real *climate* politics instead ...



... for example, conversations with movements already engaging settler colonialism, mining, living labour, and the history of machines and empires.

