Still Heating: Unfolding a Typology of Climate Obstruction

Bernhard Forchtner, Martin Hultman, Kirsti M. Jylhä[1]

Abstract

Earth is on a catastrophic trajectory towards severe ecological destruction, and yet, there is little sign of halting the rise of global greenhouse gas emissions or stopping the extraction of fossil fuels. Against this background, in this article we re-engage with a recently proposed typology supposed to cover three modes through which effective climate action has been obstructed. These are, first, *primary obstruction*, that is, the spread of disinformation and/or denying the very existence of anthropogenic climate change. Second, *secondary obstruction* concerns more or less deliberate obstruction via opposition to climate action and policies via, for example, reference to "the threat of deindustrialisation". Finally, *tertiary obstruction* denotes modes of living which, while not necessarily obstructing effective climate change intentionally, concerns "living in denial". Drawing on recent research and examples, we revisit this typology.

Keywords: climate change skepticism; climate change denial; denial machine; disinformation; global warming

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With the two latest Conference of the Parties (COP27 and COP28) taking place in oil extractivist states (as will COP29, which will take place in Azerbaijan), concern over the influence of fossil-fuel lobbyists and the obstruction of climate mitigation policies has been widely reported (for example, Lakhani, 2023). This is part of a process, unfolding over the last decades, which has seen debates over climate change become ever more present in public debates as life on Earth is ever more visibly harmed. However, while varying attempts to keep fossil fuels in the ground and decrease greenhouse gas emissions have been observed, concurrently, diverse techniques have been utilized to block and delay these mitigation attempts. It is true that these techniques have never solely revolved around the denial of scientific knowledge relating to anthropogenic climate change (Ekberg et al., 2022). However, the various ways in which effective climate policy, from the level of international meetings to national policy making and public opinion has been undermined by financially and politically motivated actors, calls for complex conceptual frameworks rather than monolithic notions of, for example, "denial". In consequence, and while more complex conceptualizations exist (for example, Cohen, 2001; Capstick & Pidgeon, 2014; van Rensburg, 2015), we suggest going further. To do so, we draw on our earlier work (Ekberg et al., 2022) and taking the notion of obstruction as an umbrella term to integrate three broad dimensions. We refer to these as:

- primary obstruction (spread of disinformation and denial of the scientific evidence about anthropogenic climate change);
- secondary obstruction (opposition, delay or dismissal of effective climate action and policy); and
- tertiary obstruction (actions and inactions which, even unintendedly, hamper climate action).

Primary, secondary and tertiary obstruction signify different ways in which effective climate action is undermined by individuals and collectives—all of which entail varying levels of responsibility and capacity for reducing emissions. However, they all overlap and contribute to the same outcome: the collective failure to successfully address climate change. As we indicate in Figure 1, these three types of obstruction are neither separate nor only loosely connected. Instead, they are interwoven in complex ways, cutting across the political, economic and wider cultural sphere. One example of this are the so-called "industrial/breadwinner masculinities" (Hultman et al., 2019), which could, on face value, be categorised as mechanisms behind tertiary obstruction, given that such masculinities are traditionally interwoven with fossil-fuel-related ways of living even though they do not necessarily oppose effective climate action intentionally. However, such masculinities can be understood as effects of primary obstruction since these actions

have been partly reproduced by obstructionist think tanks (Pasek, 2021; Moreno-Soldevila, 2022) and fossil-fuel companies (Letourneau et al., 2023). Furthermore, they can also be seen as cases of secondary obstruction as in the case of the far right and its construction of masculinities (Vowles & Hultman, 2021).

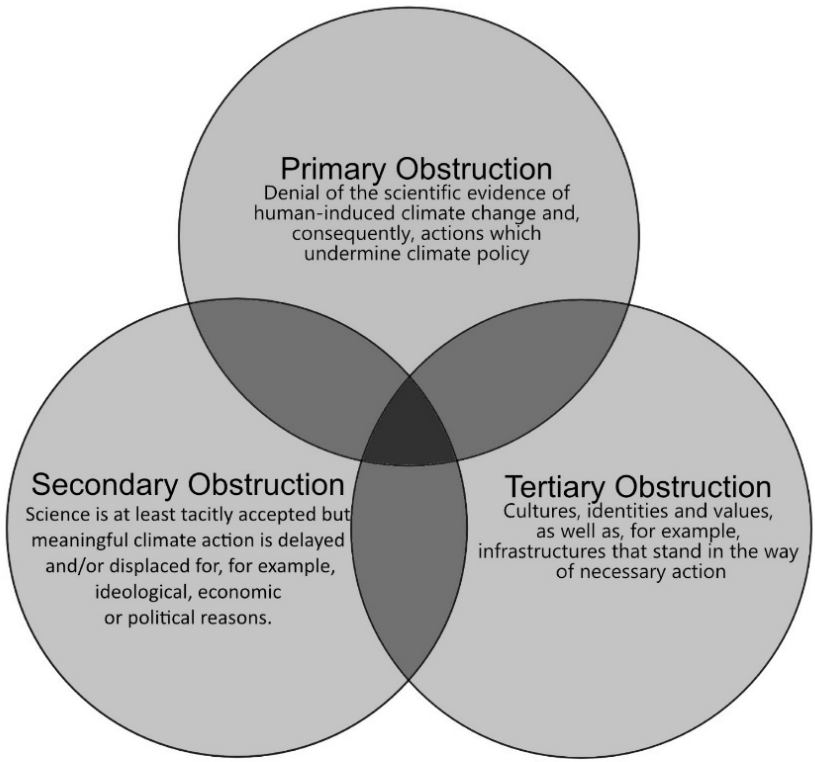

Figure 1: Three types of obstruction. While different, they can and do overlap.
Source: Ekberg et al., 2022, p. 12

Thus, our conceptualisation offers an integration of multiple perspectives and levels of society, as well as both strategic actions and unintentional behaviours which perpetuate the heating of our planet. And while we recognise that this contribution is limited in that our backgrounds and expertise lie in the Global North (from which obstruction has primarily emanated), we view our model as abstract enough to be of use around the globe. As such, we hope to offer an accessible

and comprehensive map to understand the historical failure to mitigate climate change.

Such an integrated proposal is certainly needed given that positive news concerning climate change mitigation remains overshadowed by less encouraging news on almost all fronts. Indeed, even though states around the world have pledged to address climate change, their actions have not corresponded to these pledges and emissions are not reducing at the necessary pace. Consequently, 2023 yet again broke records for being the hottest year on record (Copernicus, 2023) and we are increasingly seeing warnings concerning abrupt and irreversible changes in the climate system (that is, tipping points, including the collapse of big ice sheets in Greenland and the widespread thawing of permafrost; Lenton et al., 2023). Indeed, as the figures by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) show, there is little room for manoeuvring left. It is now necessary for greenhouse gas emissions to peak by 2025 and be reduced by 43 percent by 2030 to limit global warming to around 1.5 degrees Celsius (IPCC, 2023). Unfortunately, the climate policies that this goal would necessitate are still lacking, and the technological solutions that many have relied their hopes on cannot cut emissions fast enough (Lyytimäki et al., 2023; Stoddard et.al, 2021).

The influence of disinformation campaigns and fossil fuel lobbying is arguably a crucial reason for the failed attempts to formulate and implement effective climate policies. While this has been acknowledged for a long time (Ekberg et al., 2022)—now also explicitly in the IPCC report (Hicke et al., 2022)—serious attempts to address these sources of influence are still lacking. In fact, in the most recent COP in December 2023, a record number of fossil fuel lobbyists were given access, outnumbering almost all national delegates and official Indigenous representatives (Lakhani, 2023). This provided the fossil-fuel industry with yet again an unproportionally strong voice and possibilities for influencing climate policy. Indeed, pro-economy lobbying occupies a central position in climate policy networks, even though it may not be visible to the media and public (Vesa et al., 2020).

In the following sections, we discuss and exemplify the three types of obstruction further, drawing on different domains, from the economy to the political and the everyday.

1. Primary Obstruction: "Nothing to See Here"

Primary obstruction includes all those wilful or ignorant activities which have come to be known under the labels of denialism and epistemic/evidence scepticism. The history of such activities is by now researched and explained in much

detail, pointing out how incumbents and vested interests of the fossil-fuel industry aimed at protecting their business model. They did this by blocking environmental knowledge adversarial to their interests and limiting the effects of environmental legislation already during the mid-twentieth century (Ekberg et al., 2022). However, towards the end of the 1980s, and due to increasing successes by Green political parties and growing societal awareness and willingness to act, fossil-fuel companies were at a crossroad. Yet instead of acting upon what their own science showed (that anthropogenic climate change was happening), these companies have been at the centre of doubling total emissions of greenhouse gases since then (Dunlap & McCright, 2011). Indeed, an influential fossil-fuelled "denial machine" was set up in 1989, with the purpose of creating uncertainty and distrust of climate science by manufacturing and spreading disinformation and doubt. These activities have mainly been funded by extractive companies and performed by (neo)conservative and neoliberal think tanks and coalitions, right-wing media and blogs, and—later—networked influencers. For example, organisations such as the Global Climate Coalition (GCC), Heartland Institute, the George C. Marshall Institute, and other think tanks and lobbyist organisations aimed at shaping how climate change was perceived, most consequentially maybe by publishing pseudoscientific reports and articles claiming that the science surrounding climate change threat was uncertain (Oreskes & Conway, 2011). This led, for example, the George W. Bush administration to change its position on the climate issue by blocking international efforts to reach a climate agreement via the U.S. delegates. Several tropes of primary obstruction pioneered by the denial machine and spread by the GCC are still in use globally today. For example, Brulle (2023) has emphasized how the GCC has claimed that there is no ongoing heating; humans are not responsible; the consequences are positive; and/or any possible negative consequences are minimal in relation to other, more pressing issues. Political action to mitigate climate change was consequently impacted and has been slowed down in many cases through direct lobbying by fossil fuel companies (for example, Depledge et al., 2023; Graham et al., 2020; Crowley, 2015; McCright & Dunlap, 2003).

Major examples of such primary obstruction include, firstly, the so-called Climategate from 2009. That is, a few weeks before the Copenhagen climate conference COP15, thousands of e-mails were stolen from a server at the University of East Anglia in the United Kingdom and uploaded to various websites, including ones funded by the Heartland Institute. The term Climategate (first used on 20 November 2009 in a blog post by James Delingpole, a well-known climate obstructionist) suggests the existence of irrefutable proof that the criticism of the IPCC had been correct all along. The conspiracy theory came to dominate, for example, CNN's reporting during the first days of COP15, generating considerable

press attention across the U.S.A. and around the world. The charges of corruption, lies, cover ups and fraud by IPCC and climate scientist did not hold up to close analysis—but the perception took hold and was widely taken up by far-right political leaders and parties. Secondly, Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 U.S. presidential election and Jair Bolsonaro's election as president of Brazil in 2019 manifested the denial machinery's control of climate policy from inside democratic institutions. Trump made sure the fossil fuel industry was well represented in the administration and a "swamp" of lobbyists (that Trump promised to "drain") moved into the White House (Ekberg et al., 2022).

Relatedly, the denial machine's agenda has successfully spread doubt and influenced public opinion. Indeed, many ordinary members of the public, particularly in Anglophone countries, have adopted primary-obstructionist positions, be it against better knowledge, ideological motivations, or based on disinformation (Jylhä et al., 2023).

2. Secondary Obstruction: "Let's Look the Other Way"

The concept of secondary obstruction includes all those calls which do not deny the science of climate science, but nevertheless delay or forestall meaningful climate action. Arguably, such obstruction has been the dominant strategy of climate obstructers over the last decades and has been observed across the political field, spanning from the likes of Social Democrats to far-right political parties (Ekberg et al., 2022). While motives might differ, such obstruction drives dismissive claims, such as "one should take a rational, non-alarmist approach" and "one should move cautiously as we cannot destroy our industry, while others do nothing".

With regards to the interplay between politicians and citizens, research has indeed shown that people are not willing to support climate policies if they perceive them as unfair and ineffective, or if they do not trust the politicians who formulate and implement them (Cologna & Siegrist, 2020; Drews & van der Bergh, 2015). However, it is precisely here, with far-right actors fuelling dissatisfaction, distrust and anti-establishment views, that climate policies become a target. The intention of far-right actors is to affect voters' attitudes and to mobilize audiences.

Indeed, arguments against climate policy are especially weaponised by the far right[2] (see, for example, Ekberg et al., 2022, pp. 69–94; see also Schwörer & Fer-

2 This spectrum spans from anti-liberal, radical-right political actors to outright anti-democratic, extreme-right ones (see Mudde, 2019).

nández-Garcia, 2023). And while this political camp has long engaged in primary obstruction, for example with the neo-fascist British National Party preparing a 40-page Briefing Paper (*Debunking Global Warming*) for the 2009 COP in Copenhagen to dispute the existence of anthropogenic climate change; secondary obstruction is much more common here (for example, Forchtner & Lubarda, 2023; Küppers, 2022). Indeed, these authoritarian ethnonationalists, be they party or non-party political actors, have, for example, employed conspiracy theories ("climate change as a global hoax to force, for example, 'ordinary Swedes'—who are understood in ethnic/racial terms—under the iron fist of supranational elites") to support the claim that humans are not responsible. However, arguments against climate change policies are more often driven by an alleged concern over "deindustrialisation" and the economic despair it would bring.

Besides "deindustrialisation", dismissive arguments revolving around Greta Thunberg and climate activists/activism more broadly have been prominently employed in recent years. These are ultimately attempts to obstruct climate mitigation efforts by constructing climate activists/activism as irresponsible and irrational, as alarmist, hysterical and religiously deluded, in this way making climate activists out to be a problematic group in society. Such othering has a long history, not least vis-à-vis the aforementioned Thunberg, a history that is clearly gendered and misogynist (Vowles & Hultman, 2021; Forchtner, 2024; Mosquera & Jylhä, 2022). Those who accept such ideas, or at least who don't reject them, are likely to find climate activists/activism illegitimate, making it even less likely for climate mitigation to find support amongst these quarters of society. One could say that this line of argumentation has been radicalised over recent years, and it is here that the case of "climate terrorists" has become significant, as a way of framing and securitizing the issue.

Indeed, a brief analysis of posts addressing "climate" between 2018 and 2023 by the official Twitter (now X) account of the German far-right political party Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany) (for more on the party and its communication around the climate, see Forchtner & Özvatan, 2023; Küppers, 2022) illustrates this obstruction. Firstly, the centrality of the aforementioned othering, with the nouns "hysteria", "madness", "extremism" and "Greens" dominating their posts.[3] Furthermore, there is relatively little change in terms of who is othered: from "Greens", "Fridays for Future" and "Federal Government" in 2018/19 to "Extremists", "Traffic Light coalition" (simply *Ampel* in German) and, once again, "Greens" in 2022. However, in 2023 (until September) "Climate Terrorists" becomes the most frequent nomination. Not only does this arguably represent a radicalisation of the discursive struggle on the side of the far right

3 This is based on frequency word count (software: AntConc) in 137 tweets containing the word "climate".

(and beyond), but also attempts to fuel affective polarisation in order to obstruct attempts to mitigate climate change.

3. Tertiary Obstruction: "Living in La La Land"

Finally, tertiary obstruction denotes the various ways in which unsustainable systems are being maintained and reproduced even by collectives and individuals who accept the science of climate change and acknowledge the need for mitigation and adaptation.

In relation to tertiary obstruction, we, one the one hand, recognize the value of individual engagement in mitigation efforts in their roles as ordinary citizens, members of communities, political actors, normative influencers, and consumers. On the other hand, it is crucial to acknowledge the embeddedness of individual opinions and actions in a web of socio-economic relationships, information environments and societal structures (Ekberg et al., 2022). Thus, even though many of the factors may manifest at an individual level (for example, certain values and identities, such as "freedom" and "traditional masculinity" respectively, conflict with the proposed climate reforms), they are influenced by processes that take place at more collective levels. Moreover, certain infrastructures and cultures (for example, an extensive highway network and a culture which values private transport respectively) contribute to obstruction by making climate action too time-consuming, costly, or even impossible. To change these, policy makers need to implement extensive reforms, yet the citizen's voice is crucial in demanding and legitimizing these reforms (Ockwell et al., 2009).

One of the most obvious manifestations of tertiary obstruction is the "attitude-behaviour gap" in environmental engagement. As discussed already by Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002), there are myriad psychological, economic and structural factors that explain why individuals do not act in accordance with their pro-environmental values. For example, plant-based food may be perceived as a non-option because it conflicts with certain identities (for example, traditional masculinity) and cultural customs that put meat in a central position, but it can also be unavailable in some geographic areas and eating contexts. Norms and cultural practices are difficult to change, yet, it could be crucial for gaining momentum in climate action. Indeed, while individual lifestyle changes *per se* have a minor effect on the climate system, individuals can make a large difference by influencing the norms in their social environment and by signalling to the policy makers that they support climate reforms (see also, for example, Hampton & Whitmarsh, 2023). Some of the obstacles in the way of norms changing include that people tend to underestimate how interested and concerned other people are about cli-

mate change (Geiger & Swim, 2016) and overestimate the existing polarization over the topic in society (Jylhä et al., 2023).

To exemplify another possible source of inaction, we focus on the emotions, such as worry, anxiety, powerlessness, and guilt, that might be felt when living amidst an ongoing climate crisis. To maintain mental wellbeing, individuals need to find ways to cope with these feelings. Often, coping entails strategies that promote environmental engagement (for example, information seeking or collective action), and contributes to constructive forms of hope, whereby individuals can switch their perspective between (a) their concerns and (b) sources of hope and a sense of meaningfulness (Ojala et al., 2021). However, some may reduce their concerns by dismissing the dangers of climate change, leading to hope based on denial (Ojala et al., 2021). Anxiety can also take forms that lead to a state of paralysis and mental health problems (Clayton, 2020). Moreover, people can experience inner conflicts when recognising that their personal and collective lifestyles/livelihoods/identities are inherently tied to environmentally detrimental practices. To alleviate the discomfort caused by this, individuals and collectives can construct and share various self-defensive strategies, including avoidance of discussing/thinking about the topic (Norgaard, 2006; Wullenkord & Reese, 2019). These emotional processes highlight yet again the urgent need for rapid and visible climate action by those able to facilitate significant impact, such as policy makers and high-emitting industries, which would signal that climate change is (and should be) taken seriously in society, in turn providing sources for constructive hope and motivating climate action.

4. Conclusion: Adding Oil to the Fire

On 21 November 2023, during the run-up to COP28, Sultan Al Jaber who would preside over the event, claimed that "[t]here is no science out there […] that says that the phase-out of fossil fuel is what's going to achieve 1.5" degrees Celsius (Friedman, 2023). While he has also stated, for example, that "phasing down fossil fuels is inevitable" and "essential", this claim is yet another example of how even the most obvious and least controversial step to prevent future harm caused by climate change—that is, to stop burning fossil fuels—is still being questioned. This is not only astonishing, but illustrates the persistent effects of obstructionist activities, the way in which denial, delay and inaction have sedimented.

Indeed, it is the conceptualisation of different modes of climate obstruction within one framework—primary, secondary and tertiary obstruction—that we see as the greatest strength of our proposal, one which we furthermore believe to be applicable not only to countries of the Global North, but hopefully also in

other contexts. However, in light of a colonial past and capitalist present, climate protection and the assessment of its obstruction need to differ. After all, different parts of our planet are characterised by unequal conditions, also in relation to both historical/present contributions to relevant emissions and varying extents of suffering caused by them. For example, while specific groups in the Global South might engage in secondary obstruction similar to actors in, for example, Germany, the claims made by the latter, regarding "deindustrialisation" or the use of fossil-fuel-based private transport, unfold within a radically different context. As such, energy transformations and energy throughputs must be contextualised and assessed differently in the foreseeable future as historical and per capita emissions substantially differ.

Moreover, it is not the three types as such, but the dynamics between them, which are particularly relevant for further research. That is to say: how have the three types of obstruction introduced above interacted, been interwoven with each other, and have as such developed historically specific assemblages of obstruction? Dismantling these symbolic and material structures is paramount for preventing further harm to life on Earth.

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