



the weekly anthropocene



dispatches from the wild, weird world of humanity and its biosphere

By Sam Matey, June 10, 2020

Black Lives Matter. Over the last few weeks, unprecedented and overwhelmingly nonviolent nationwide protests have arisen in response to the brutal, thuggish murders by police of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and the hundreds like them that have been ignored over the years. There is little that this newsletter can share about this historic civil activism that is not already well known. The threats emanating from impeached President Trump and several Republican senators to use the military against peaceful protesters are despicable, fascist, and arguably borderline treasonous in their disdain for the First Amendment. A wide range of police departments in this country have revealed themselves as deeply, brutally racist and willing to use violence against civilians to an abominable degree.

Perhaps this newsletter can best discuss the connections to other major threats of our time. Living in the year 2020 can be overwhelming, and will likely be seen by future historians as a truly epoch-making, Earth-shaking period. The United States and the world are now in the middle of at least three existential, historic crises: the still rapidly spreading COVID-19 pandemic, the ongoing global climate crisis, and widespread protests against the latest deadly irruption of state-sponsored racist murders by police. (Arguably, President Trump's blatant and treasonous disregard for the US Constitution and the welfare of the American people constitutes a fourth crisis, amplifying the dangers of the previous three and greatly harming our capacity to constructively find solutions).

These crises are intertwined and are all made worse by pervasive racism. In particular, the fossil fuel industry both causes climate change and disproportionately damages African American lives. The "Fumes Across the Fence Line" report co-produced by the NAACP and the National Medical Association found that "Over 1 million African Americans live in counties that face a cancer risk above EPA's level of concern from toxics emitted by natural gas facilities" and that due to natural gas facility pollution "African American children are burdened by 138,000 asthma attacks and 101,000 lost school days each year." The report also noted that nationwide, 13.4 percent of African American children have asthma—that's 1 million children—compared to 7.4 percent of white children. The death rate for African American children with asthma is also higher. (See <https://www.naacp.org/climate-justice-resources/fumes-across-fence-line/>). In 2012, a different NAACP report found that 78% of all African Americans lived within 30 miles of a coal plant. (This one has likely gotten somewhat better, fortunately, as many coal plants have shut down). A 2014 study found that non-white Americans are exposed to 38% more nitrogen oxide pollution, another by-product of burning fossil fuels, than white Americans (see psmag.com/environment/pollutions-racism-blind-wealth-79290). Polls show that Black Americans care more about climate change than white Americans, but the racial inequities built upon and made worse by the fossil fuel industry are disproportionately harming their ability to deal with climate change. The wealth gap, the healthcare gap, and the "healthy-lungs" gap have all contributed to one of the latest shameful inequities, that African Americans are



the weekly anthropocene



dispatches from the wild, weird world of humanity and its biosphere

By Sam Matey, June 10, 2020

more likely to die from COVID-19 (see <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alexandrasternlicht/2020/04/07/higher-coronavirus-mortality-rates-for-people-exposed-to-air-pollution-black-americans/>). In sum, climate change is a racial justice issue, and the fossil fuel industry is a racist industry. (For a full rundown, see changewire.org/we-must-treat-climate-change-as-a-racial-justice-issue/).

It is ever more apparent that white supremacy, climate denialism, religious tyranny, predatory extractive industry and veneration of that industry, anti-vaxxer and anti-public health ideology, a deeply toxic vision of masculinity, and the old hatreds of racism, sexism, and homophobia are congealing into a nightmarish ideology that stands against everything decent that has ever brought humanity forward. This is the ideology exemplified by Donald Trump, and that governs his administration and a disturbingly high proportion of his supporters. The corrupt faux-conservative politicians, the brutal thug rings running all too many police departments and police unions and private prisons, the community-poisoning fossil fuel companies, and the financial systems that invest in and prop up racist power structures collude to perpetuate and proselytize this rotting structure of hatred and power-mongering, to control and manipulate the deluded voters who fetishize these monstrosities as what makes America great. Lately, with a very few honorable exceptions such as Senator Mitt Romney, this axis of awful has become synonymous with the Republican Party in America. This toxic waste dump of a political party, with its deep roots in slavery, Know-Nothingism, the white ethno-terrorism of the Reconstruction period, Scopes Monkey Trial-esque science denial, and all the other shameful bigotries of American history, is not only a danger to historically oppressed groups, but to all Americans and indeed all humans.

As antiracist scholar Dr. Ibram X. Kendi (pictured) put it in his landmark book *How to be an Antiracist*, “White supremacists are the ones supporting policies that benefit racist power against the interests of the majority of White people. White supremacists claim to be pro-White but refuse to acknowledge that climate change is having a disastrous impact on the Earth White people inhabit....They heil Adolf Hitler’s Nazis, even though it was the Nazis who launched a world war that destroyed the lives of more than forty million White people and ruined Europe....White supremacists love what America used to be, even though America used to be-and still is-teeming with millions of struggling White people....White supremacist is code for anti-human, a nuclear ideology that poses an existential threat to human existence.” Perhaps there can be no better term for this brew of racism and weaponized malicious stupidity than “anti-human.”





the weekly anthropocene



dispatches from the wild, weird world of humanity and its biosphere

By Sam Matey, June 10, 2020

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson, pioneering climate scientist and marine biologist (pictured), set forth a passionate call to action for those fighting both racism and climate change in a recent editorial in *The Washington Post*. Dr. Johnson wrote “Climate work is hard and heartbreaking as it is. Many people don’t feel the urgency, or balk at the initial cost of transitioning our energy infrastructure, without considering the cost of inaction. Many fail to grasp how dependent humanity is on intact ecosystems. When you throw racism and bigotry in the mix, it becomes something near impossible. Look, I would love to ignore racism and focus all my attention on climate. But I can’t. Because I am human. And I’m black.



And ignoring racism won’t make it go away. So, to white people who care about maintaining a habitable planet, I need you to become actively anti-racist. I need you to understand that our racial inequality crisis is intertwined with our climate crisis. If we don’t work on both, we will succeed at neither. I need you to step up. Please. Because I am exhausted.” (See [washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/06/03/im-black-climate-scientist-racism-derails-our-efforts-save-planet/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/06/03/im-black-climate-scientist-racism-derails-our-efforts-save-planet/)).

It is to be greatly hoped that the horror of this moment will be a turning point leading to real, deep, systemic change. There are some rays of hope: protests have united Americans from all walks of life against this brutality. Recent polls have found that a historically large proportion of Americans agree that there is police discrimination against African Americans, with 52% of whites agreeing now versus just 36% in 2016. 74% of all Americans believe George Floyd’s death was a result of systemic racial injustice compared to just 43% who believed that in 2014 after the murders of Eric Garner and Michael Brown. Democratic nominee Joe Biden has pledged “an era of action to reverse systemic racism” and has an in-depth policy proposal available at joebiden.com/justice/. A veto-proof majority of the city council of Minneapolis have voiced support for the unprecedented step of defunding the city’s out-of-control police department to be replaced with something new, although it’s unclear how that will turn out. And, of course, switching to renewable energy would reduce air pollution in minority (and all) communities, and break up the entrenched power of the fossil fuel companies/corrupt politicians doom loop.

COVID-19, systemic racism, and climate change will be with us for a long time. All of us, for years to come, will need to do all that we can to fight back these crises and their malignant enablers and work together to build a better world.

For more, check out Politico’s rundown of the situation (with polling) at [politico.com/news/2020/06/09/white-voters-2020-biden-304804](https://www.politico.com/news/2020/06/09/white-voters-2020-biden-304804). John Oliver shared a succinct analysis of the institutional racism of American police departments at [youtube.com/watch?v=Wf4cea5oObY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wf4cea5oObY).