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ARTICLE

A Road to Denial: Climate Change and Neoliberal Thought in Sweden, 1988–2000

Kristoffer Ekberg and Victor Pressfeldt

Technology Management and Economics, Chalmers University of Technology, Goteborg, Sweden
kristofferekberg@hotmail.com
Department of History, Lund University, Lund, Sweden
victor.pressfeldt@hist.lu.se

Neoliberal and conservative actors, financed by the fossil fuel industry, have been identified as crucial parts of a climate change denialist counter movement since at least the 1980s. We claim that this intersection stems from more than just vested interest fuelling advocacy groups. By focusing on the intellectual developments and social networks of core actors in the environmental debate in Sweden, we trace the history of opposition to environmental regulation in a country proclaiming to be an environmental pioneer. Our analysis shows that while the framing of climate change in terms of complexity initially provided actors with arguments for neoliberal policies, the obstruction of climate and environmental action was steeped in a neoliberal thought style. Our findings demonstrate the importance of scrutinising economic paradigms and thought styles that has enabled the delay of climate policy as well as the continued need for historical and geographically specific studies of obstruction.

Introduction

In the late 2000s, several prominent Swedish intellectuals voiced their opposition to climate action in articles and books, as well as by forming associations with the aim to undermine the assessments of the IPCC. Several of these actors shared a similar political formation, namely they maintained relations to neoliberal think tanks and had long engaged with environmental issues. In this article, we argue that their active participation in the climate denialist and obstructionist organisations of the 2000s was not a coincidence but part of a longer history and based on both vested interest and a commitment to a certain economic and political 'thought style'.[1]

The diffusion of strategies to obstruct climate change policy, primarily in the mid- to late 2000s, is often attributed to the ambitions of a US climate change counter-movement or an organised climate change denial campaign.[2] In contrast, both the citizenry and elite in Europe more broadly in general (and Sweden in particular) are thought to accept the consensus on climate science and the need to

[1] Dieter Plehwe, 'Neoliberal Thought Collectives: Integrating Social Science and Intellectual History', in D. Cahill, M. Cooper, M. Konings and D. Primrose, eds., *The Sage Handbook of Neoliberalism* (London: SAGE, 2018), 85–97.

[2] Robert J. Brulle, 'Networks of Opposition: A Structural Analysis of U.S. Climate Change Countermovement Coalitions 1989–2015', *Sociological Inquiry* (2020); Robert J. Brulle, 'Institutionalizing Delay: Foundation Funding and the Creation of U.S. Climate Change Counter-Movement Organizations', *Climatic Change*, 122, 4 (2014); Ruth E. McKie, 'Climate Change Counter Movement Neutralization Techniques: A Typology to Examine the Climate Change Counter Movement', *Sociological Inquiry*, 89, 2 (2019); Robert J. Brulle, 'Networks of Opposition: A Structural Analysis of U.S. Climate Change Countermovement Coalitions 1989–2015', *Sociological Inquiry* (2020); Ruth E. McKie, 'Climate Change Counter Movement Neutralization Techniques: A Typology to Examine the Climate Change Counter Movement', *Sociological Inquiry* 89, 2 (2019); 2019).

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act.[3] We add nuance to these assumptions by delving into how Swedish neoliberal actors have addressed these issues since the 1980s. Fossil fuel companies (especially in the United States) have clearly been a significant force in terms of obstructing climate action since at least the 1980s.[4] Yet rather than looking upon this history as a unidirectional dissemination of tactics from the United States outwards, we argue that it is important not to overlook anti-environmental counter-movements and delaying tactics in other parts of the world. Further, while fossil fuel companies have been prolific in their opposition to climate action, focusing solely on vested interests risks over-simplifying a multi-faceted landscape of obstruction.[5] As such, this study complements recent calls to analyse the role of economic paradigms to understand the intentional delaying of climate policy.[6]

Sweden constitutes a revealing case for such an approach because it lacks any major fossil fuel extractive industry and is generally considered an environmental forerunner.[7] This perception is the result of the country promoting its environmental record since the late 1960s,[8] as well as its low per capita greenhouse gas emissions because of its reliance on nuclear power.[9] It is less well known that since the 1980s, Sweden has transformed itself from the avant-garde of welfare state governance to a neoliberal framework in which think tanks play a key role.[10] While climate change is a global issue, there are few national histories of climate change obstruction outside the United States.[11] If domestic distributive conflicts rather than global collective action determine the success of climate policy, as suggested by Aklin and Mildenberger, it is crucial to examine a wide array of national histories beyond the US case to understand the emergence of climate obstruction.[12]

This article is based on two tenets influencing contemporary discourses on climate action and neoliberal thought.[13] The first is that current environmental policy in most of the West has come to be dominated by neoliberal policies after having failed to substantially mitigate emissions.[14] The second tendency is the division of neoliberal thought into two contrasting branches: one conservative and authoritarian, and one 'progressive' and centrist.[15] On a conceptual level the duality and tactical nature

[3] Annica Kronsell, 'Can Small States Influence EU Norms? Insights from Sweden's Participation in the Field of Environmental Politics', *Scandinavian Studies*, 74, 3 (2002).

[4] Riley E. Dunlap and Robert J. Brulle, 'Sources and Amplifiers of Climate Change Denial', in L.M.D.C. Holmes and L.M. Richardson, eds., *Research Handbook on Communicating Climate Change* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2020).

[5] Isak Stoddard et al., 'Three Decades of Climate Mitigation: Why Haven't We Bent the Global Emissions Curve?', *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, 46, 1 (2021).

[6] Benjamin Franta, 'Weaponizing Economics: Big Oil, Economic Consultants, and Climate Policy Delay', *Environmental Politics* (online, 25 Aug. 2021), https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2021.1947636, (last visited 26 Apr. 2022).

[7] For a critical investigation of the history of this framing, see Melina Antonia Buns, 'Green Internationalists, Nordic Cooperation, 1967–1988', PhD thesis, University of Oslo, 2020.

[8] David Larsson Heidenblad, *Den gröna vändningen: En ny kunskapshistoria om miljöfrågornas genombrott under efterkrigstiden* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2021); Åsa Knaggård, 'Vetenskaplig osäkerhet i policyprocessen: En studie av svensk klimatpolitik', PhD thesis, Lund University, 2009.

[9] Swedish Energy Agency, *Energiläget 2020, ET 2020:1*, available at https://energimyndigheten.a-w2m.se/Home.mvc?ResourceId=168344, (last visited 26 Apr. 2022).

[10] Stefan Svallfors, 'Politics as Organised Combat: New Players and New Rules of the Game in Sweden', *New Political Economy*, 21, 6 (2016).

[11] Walker, *More Heat Than Life*; Christophe Bonneuil, Pierre-Louis Choquet and Benjamin Franta, 'Early Warnings and Emerging Accountability: Total's Responses to Global Warming, 1971–2021', *Global Environmental Change* (2021).

[12] Michaël Aklin and Matto Mildenberger, 'Prisoners of the Wrong Dilemma: Why Distributive Conflict, Not Collective Action, Characterizes the Politics of Climate Change', *Global Environmental Politics*, 20, 4 (2020).

[13] Sarah Birch, 'Political Polarization and Environmental Attitudes: A Cross-National Analysis', *Environmental Politics*, 29, 4 (2020); Farrell, 'Corporate Funding'; Aaron M. McCright and Riley E. Dunlap, 'The Politicization of Climate Change and Polarization in the American Public's Views of Global Warming, 2001–2010', *The Sociological Quarterly*, 52, 2 (2011).

[14] David Ciplet and J. Timmons Roberts, 'Climate Change and the Transition to Neoliberal Environmental Governance', *Global Environmental Change*, 46 (2017).

[15] Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (New York: Zone Books, 2017); Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019); Quinn Slobodian, 'Neoliberalism's Populist Bastards', available at http://publicseminar.org/2018/02/neoliberalisms-populist-bastards/ (last visited 24 Aug. 2021).

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of neoliberal environmental policy has been well established.[16] Here, however, we show how actors moved between these different strategies, providing empirical evidence on how these neoliberal strands of thought converged and became radicalised in the early 2000s.[17] Our findings thus add to the discussion on the rise of the authoritarian version of neoliberalism in terms of both breaks[18] and continuity.[19] Crucially, while we view the discussions in the analysed material as responsive to political developments during this period, we focus on the developments within the neoliberal sphere and do not offer an extensive analysis of specific policy effects of the neoliberal environmental publications.

Following the recent development in the vast research field on neoliberalism, we understand neoliberalism to be a broad, heterogeneous and historically evolving movement that, nevertheless, includes some common denominators that most neoliberals would agree on.[20] In line with Dieter Plehwe's work, such commonalities could be characterised as a neoliberal thought style.[21] Three pillars of such a thought style are important to us and have guided our analysis, even though we make no claim that they are capable of explaining all sides of neoliberalism. The first pillar is the novel epistemological position (primarily associated with Friedrich von Hayek) that assumes markets to be the best information-processor known to humanity. According to most neoliberals, through (primarily) price signals, markets are able to spread information that is (necessarily) decentralised, implicit or 'tacitly embedded in traditions and customs'.[22] This epistemological position has historically put neoliberals at odds with those who believe that government action can be planned on the basis of scientific models.[23] The second pillar is the notion that the logic of competitive marketplaces and a system of price signals (such as taxes on pollution, carbon emission trading and so on) can and should be actively constructed to serve as the foundation for all governmental action – including addressing climate change. Hence, neoliberalism is not an anti-state ideology but rather focuses on the restructuring of the state. The third pillar is the notion that if given the right conditions by active statecraft, human ingenuity and entrepreneurialism have the potential of solving all of humanity's problems.[24] Neoliberalism should thus not be confused with laissez-faire, where the market is seen as an isolated and natural sphere that should simply be left alone.

Crucially, however, not all neoliberals would agree on all the above-mentioned pillars. That means that in order to contrast and differentiate among actors as well as to situate the arguments and debates in the relevant geographical context, we analyse the actors by means of a situated group biography.

[16] Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown* (London: Verso, 2013), 336–9; Troy Vettese, 'Limits and Cornucopianism: A History of Neo-Liberal Environmental Thought, 1920–1970', PhD thesis, New York University, 2019.

[17] Jonas Anshelm and Martin Hultman, *Discourses of Global Climate Change: Apocalyptic Framing and Political Antagonisms* (London: Routledge, 2014).

[18] Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*.

[19] Leah Aronowsky, 'Gas Guzzling Gaia, Or: A Prehistory of Climate Change Denialism', *Critical Inquiry*, 47, 2 (2021); Walker, *More Heat Than Life: The Tangled Roots of Ecology, Energy, and Economics* [e-book] (Singapore: Springer, 2020); Ray Kiely, 'From Authoritarian Liberalism to Economic Technocracy: Neoliberalism, Politics and "De-Democratization"', *Critical Sociology*, 43, 4–5 (2017).

[20] Yet, we acknowledge epistemological differences between neoliberals where especially Milton Friedman tended to embrace the positivistic notions often found in neoclassical economics rather than the market epistemology of Hayek. See, for example, João Rodrigues, 'Embedding Neoliberalism: The Theoretical Practices of Hayek and Friedman', in D. Cahill, M. Cooper, M. Konings and D. Primrose, eds., *The Sage Handbook of Neoliberalism* (London: SAGE, 2018).

[21] Dieter Plehwe, 'Neoliberal Thought Collectives'.

[22] Martin Beddeleem, 'Recoding Liberalism: Philosophy and Sociology of Science against Planning', *Nine Lives of Neoliberalism* (2020), 33.

[23] For an elaboration on the emergence of different epistemological positions within neoliberalism, see Beddeleem, 'Recoding Liberalism'.

[24] See, for example, Mirowski, *Never Let*, 53–67. For a historical background, see Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018); Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society* (London: Verso, 2013). The third notion is often described as cornucopianism in the field of environmental policy, with Julian Simon serving as the main proponent and theorist. In Sweden, Johan Norberg is the most prominent individual within this school of thought; see Vettese, 'Limits'.

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Since Swedish neoliberals are situated in a small country with a highly centralised business interest organisation, it is not possible to define clear ideological collectives. Instead we acknowledge both the commonalities expressed in the above pillars but also the contradictions, conflicts and evolution of responses associated with the neoliberal actors we follow.[25] Further, we also acknowledge that neoliberal policies have not exclusively been carried out by self-defined neoliberals and that there are no straight lines between ideas and implementation.[26] This means that the social and intellectual worlds need to be analysed together as a historically changing process.

Focusing on climate change and following Karl Mannheim's conceptualisation, Plehwe describes collectives with a direct interest in the continued use of fossil fuels, such as extractive industries, as exhibiting *interestedness*, whereas those with no direct interest in the specific form of energy but with a desire to protect the capitalist system from disruption as exhibiting *committedness*.[27] The fact that Sweden lacks any substantial fossil fuel extractive industry[28] but still has a vocal climate change counter-movement enables us to investigate the intersections of committedness and interestedness.

Threats and Opportunities: The Emergence of Neoliberal Environmental Thought

While some business interests started to look upon limits to economic growth and resource depletion as an important problem in the 1970s, others responded by sowing seeds of doubt.[29] Already in the 1960s and 1970s, business interests and the transnational neoliberal thought community jointly started to view the environmental movement and especially the notion of limiting resource extraction as a threat that needed to be countered.[30] Here think tanks became crucial as a way for the corporate sphere to create semi-autonomous entities that could push preferred policies and tie influential actors to their projects. The profits from the high price of oil after the OPEC crisis of 1973 also offered the means for funding such entities.[31] The counterattack was twofold, as economists responded by both offering suggestions for addressing environmental degradation in the form of including negative externalities and by offering arguments that society will adapt and that technology will provide an answer.[32]

In Sweden the issue of pollution caught the eye of both the government and scholars.[33] During the late 1960s prominent economists Assar Lindbeck and Erik Dahmén were involved in a research programme with the aim to formulate 'a theory of investment under uncertainty'.[34] This aim resulted in Dahmén's 1968 book *Put a Price on the Environment* (*Sätt pris på miljön*). Following the Club of Rome report *Limits to Growth* and the Stockholm conference on the human environment in 1972, the debate on the economics of growth started to engage more actors in the Swedish public sphere.[35] During this period and in these debates, the three main characters discussed in this paper emerged as important voices in the environmental debates. The first was Marian Radetzki, an influential resource economist working as the head economist of the Intergovernmental Council of Copper Exporting

[25] Plehwe, 'Neoliberal Thought Collectives'.

[26] A point at the centre of the project 'Neoliberalism in the Nordics', headed by Jenny Andersson.

[27] 'Mirrored in the Concepts: Primitive Accumulation of Fossil Capital and Fossil Capital in General', in Andreas Malm and Zetkin Collective, *White Skin, Black Fuel: On the Danger of Fossil Fascism* (New York: Verso Books, 2021), 16.

[28] A situation that is about to change with Swedish oil and gas company Lundin Energy's operations in the North Sea. The company produced 165 Mpoepd (thousand barrels of oil equivalents per day) in 2020, with the ambition to sustain over 200 Mpoepd; see https://www.lundin-energy.com/operations/producing-assets/ (last visited 19 Aug. 2021).

[29] Romain Felli, *The Great Adaptation: Climate, Capitalism and Catastrophe* (London: Verso, 2021), 17–51; Matthias Schmelzer, *The Hegemony of Growth: The OECD and the Making of the Economic Growth Paradigm* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

[30] Walker, *More Heat Than Life*; Sara Holiday Nelson, 'Beyond the Limits to Growth: Ecology and the Neoliberal Counterrevolution', *Antipode*, 47, 2 (2015).

[31] Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in The Age of Oil* (London: Verso, 2011), 197–8, 223.

[32] Vettese, 'Limits'.

[33] Buns, 'Green Internationalists'.

[34] Larsson Heidenblad, *Den gröna vändningen.*

[35] Eva Friman, 'Domedagsprofeter och tillväxtpredikanter: Debatten om ekonomisk tillväxt och miljö i Sverige 1960–1980', *Historisk tidskrift*, 121 (2001).

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Countries in the mid-1970s. In his paper on copper for the special issue 'No Judgement Day' in the Swedish economics journal *Ekonomisk debatt* in 1974, he countered the narrative of *Limits to Growth*. Continued growth would enable the substitution of materials and the financial capacity to remedy environmental destruction and resource scarcity.[36] In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Radetzki served as the director of the energy section of the Centre for Business and Policy Studies (*Studieförbundet Näringsliv och Samhälle*; SNS), a think tank financed by corporate interests.[37]

In the months before the publication of *Limits to Growth*, our second actor, Swedish physicist and pro-nuclear power commentator Tor Ragnar Gerholm, published his book *Futurum Exaktum.* Here he questioned the gloomy images of the environmental debate and the newfound fondness of modelling and scenario building in planning and the environmental debate.[38] His book received a great deal of attention, even though critics argued that Gerholm only offered arguments for inaction and that he worked in the interests of heavy industry.[39] In 1977 Gerholm presented a report on resource use at the congress of the Swedish Employers' Confederation (*Svenska arbetsgivareföreningen*; SAF).[40] The confederation serves as the umbrella association for Swedish firms, and the event has been described as an ideological breakthrough for the Swedish right wing into the political mainstream.[41] When the neoliberal think tank Timbro was launched in 1978 as SAF's more confrontative branch, Gerholm was one of the main speakers.[42] Together with the aforementioned Dahmén, he became part of the scientific council of Timbro's publishing house Ratio. Further, Gerholm had been engaged in the early discussions on climate change in the 1970s, countering later IPCC chairman Bert Bolin and promoting an expansion of nuclear power.[43]

As part of the efforts to transition the Swedish energy system away from imported oil,[44] Swedish car manufacturer Volvo and the Swedish government established the project Swedish Methanol Development (*Svensk metanolutveckling*) in the late 1970s. This project was led by our third main character, Lars Bern. After the methanol project was cancelled, Bern continued working in other projects and companies focused on environmental issues and was well connected to the highest echelons of Swedish industry.[45] In the early 1990s, he appeared as one of the spokespersons of the environmental consulting agency The Natural Step (*Det naturliga steget*), which promoted corporate environmentalism and aided companies in their efforts to cater to the rising demands from the public in relation to environmental awareness and action. Radetzki, Gerholm and Bern were all in different ways connected to business interests under the umbrella of the Swedish Employers' Confederation and would all coalesce in the climate change counter-movement in the mid-2000s.[46] Hence, they represent interesting focal points for an analysis of the transformation of neoliberal environmental thought.

[36] Marian Radetzki, 'Koppartillgångarna: En fallstudie i resursuttömning', *Ekonomisk debatt*, 2, 8 (1974).

[37] SNS is financed by the Swedish Employers' Confederation and is characterised as a neoliberal think tank by Mark Blyth, *Great Transformations: Economic Ideas and Institutional Change in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[38] Tor Ragnar Gerholm, *Futurum Exaktum: Den tekniska utmaningen* (Stockholm: Aldus/Bonnier, 1972).

[39] Larsson Heidenblad, *Den gröna vändningen*, 183–8.

[40] Since 2001, SAF exists under the name Confederation of Swedish Enterprise (*Svenskt Näringsliv*), which is a result of a merger between SAF and the Federation of Swedish Industries (*Svenska industriförbundet*).

[41] Rickard Westerberg, 'Socialists at the Gate: Swedish Business and the Defense of Free Enterprise, 1940–1985', PhD thesis, Stockholm School of Economics, 2020, 218, 229. Sture Eskilsson, *Från folkhem till nytt klassamhälle: Ett högerspöke berättar* (Rimbo: Fischer & Co, 2005), 185, 211.

[42] Timbro was first launched in 1968 but was re-structured in 1978.

[43] Kristoffer Ekberg and Martin Hultman, 'A Question of Utter Importance: The Early History of Climate Change and Energy Policy in Sweden 1974–1983', *Environment and History* (2021). https://doi.org/10.3197/096734021X16245313030028

[44] Parliamentary proposal. Motion 1978/79:1719. *Om skattebefrielse för metanol*, available at http://data.riksdagen.se/dokument/G2021719 (last visited 24 Aug. 2021).

[45] Described in Lars Bern, *Uthålligt ledarskap: En bok om etik och miljöansvar vid ledning av företag* (Stockholm: Ekerlid. Det naturliga steget och Veckans affärer, 1993).

[46] Anshelm and Hultman, *Discourses.*

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Responding to the welfare policies and public opinion of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the launch of the think tank Timbro represented a concerted effort to break free from the corporativist model that had structured industrial and political cooperation since the late 1930s. The path was instead thought to be one of neoliberal reform and shaping public opinion.[47] This shift was even more pronounced during the late 1980s and was strengthened by the decision of the Swedish Employers' Confederation to withdraw all representatives from the boards of government agencies in 1991. This put an end to one of the most important parts of the Swedish model.[48] Further, the launch of Timbro provided a breeding ground for neoliberal policies and politicians, and by the early 1990s, several individuals in the 1991–4 liberal-conservative government had previously worked at the think tank.[49] Coupled with previous research showing the existence of climate scepticism in neoliberal think tanks, the shift toward public opinion justifies our choice to focus on printed opinion material.[50] The focus on specific actors has also made us expand our sources from our initial focus on Timbro publications to include books from other publishers linked to SAF, such as SNS, as well as debates in the Swedish press.[51] This choice is motivated by the highly centralised character of business interest organisations in Sweden, which means that all our actors were active in the same arena. As a result, our paper offers an in-depth qualitative study on neoliberal climate policy and obstruction.[52]

While the 1980s saw the rise of the sustainable development paradigm and the adjacent concept of ecomodernism,[53] this decade was also characterised by political conflict regarding the environment.[54] Environmental issues came to the fore in the Swedish political debate, and the 1988 election – when the Green Party (*Miljöpartiet*; MP) entered parliament – has been called the 'environmental election'. The fact that this year also marks the beginning of the IPCC motivates using it as a starting point of our analysis.

In the 1980s the rise of a strong environmental movement as well as the perspective of environmental justice led to the industrial sector construing environmentalism as their main adversary.[55] This shift in enmity, where environmentalism and not socialism became the *bête noir* of industry interests, has

[47] Timbro is affiliated with the Atlas Network, funded by the Foundation for Free Enterprise, a part of SAF. Sigurd Allern and Ester Pollack, 'The Role of Think Tanks in the Swedish Political Landscape', *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 43, 3 (2020).

[48] Stefan Svallfors, 'Politics as Organised Combat – New Players and New Rules of the Game in Sweden', *New Political Economy*, 21, 6 (2016).

[49] Timbro, 'Vår historia', available at https://timbro.se/om-oss/var-historia/ (last visited 24 Nov. 2021).

[50] Ruth McKie, 'Rebranding the Climate Change Counter Movement through a Criminological and Political Economic Lens', PhD thesis, Northumbria University, 2018; Dieter Plehwe, 'Think Tank Networks and the Knowledge–Interest Nexus: The Case of Climate Change', *Critical Policy Studies*, 8, 1 (2014); Peter J. Jacques, Riley E. Dunlap and Mark Freeman, 'The Organisation of Denial: Conservative Think Tanks and Environmental Scepticism', *Environmental Politics*, 17, 3 (2008).

[51] The source material consists of all Swedish language publications from Timbro addressing the environment during the period as well as some publications from SNS, in total twenty-six publications. These have been supplemented by 146 articles from Swedish daily newspapers, sourced by Retriever.

[52] Eric Bonds, 'Beyond Denialism: Think Tank Approaches to Climate Change', *Sociology Compass*, 10, 4 (2016); McKie, 'Climate Change'.

[53] Peder J. Anker, 'A Pioneer Country? A History of Norwegian Climate Politics', *Climatic Change*, 151, 1 (2018); Buns, 'Green Internationalists'; Maarten A. Hajer, 'The Politics of Environmental Discourse: Ecological Modernization and the Policy Process' (1995).

[54] Magnus Linderström, 'Industrimoderniteten och miljöfrågans utmaningar: En analys av LO, SAF, Industriförbundet och miljöpolitiken 1965–2000', PhD thesis, Linköping University, 2001; Martin Hultman, Ann-Sofie Kall and Jonas Anshelm, *Att ställa frågan – att våga omställning: Birgitta Hambraeus och Birgitta Dahl i den svenska energi- och miljöpolitiken 1971–1991* (Lund: Arkiv förlag, 2021); Johan Hedrén, *Naturen som brytpunkt: Om miljöfrågans mystifieringar, konflikter och motsägelser* (Eslöv: B. Östling. Symposion, 2002).

[55] Robert J. Antonio and Robert J. Brulle, 'The Unbearable Lightness of Politics: Climate Change Denial and Political Polarization', *The Sociological Quarterly*, 52, 2 (2011). Also evident in Oreskes and Conway, *Merchants*; Malm, *White Skin*.

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also been noticed in the Nordic countries during the same period.[56] The previous red scare was replaced by a green one.

The environmental movement, however, was hardly enamoured with the Soviet Union (for its poor democratic and environmental record) and shed few tears after its collapse in 1991.[57] This rupture, and the general shift towards an anti-state discourse, opened a window of opportunity for neoliberal policies.[58] The environment thus became a highly contested political issue, both through its growing popularity during the 1980s but also due to the uncertainty regarding its political position on a traditional left/right spectrum. This paved the way for the 1990s as a period of flux in terms of which policies should be adopted for environmental protection.[59]

Our analysis ends in the early 2000s based on two reasons. The first is that our aim is in line with Leah Aronowsky's call to study the 'conditions of possibility of climate change denialism'.[60] Hence, we end at the moment when the climate change counter-movement ascends in the United States[61] but before the rise of a well-documented organised counter-movement in Europe, during the mid-2000s.[62] The second reason is that the early 2000s marks the peak of neoliberal influence in environmental debates, when market-based policies were more or less unchallenged within the formal political sphere.

Climate Change as Opportunity

In the late 1980s, a polarised debate broke out in Sweden on the phase-out of the country's nuclear power plants.[63] At this time the environmental ministry was combined with energy, which meant that the nuclear phase-out was directly linked to the government's management of environmental issues. Swedish business interests feared that a nuclear phase-out would reduce the competitiveness of heavy industry and used the argument of climate change to support their position.[64] As an alternative, Social Democratic (*Socialdemokratiska Arbetarepartiet*; SAP) government and leading economists proposed a carbon tax. This, according to political scientist Åsa Knaggård, was rushed through the governmental study apparatus so it could be included in the 1990 tax reform.[65] The work justifying the carbon tax was that of the Environmental Tariff Study (*Miljöavgiftsutredningen*), commissioned in 1988 with the task of studying the 'conditions for an increased use of economic instruments in environmental policy'.[66] The report was part of a re-regulation of environmental policy with the aim to create a comprehensive environmental legislation in the form of an environmental code.[67]

The implementation of government-constructed price mechanisms and market instruments also represented key suggestions (based on neoliberal epistemology) in the edited volume *Value the Environment* (*Värdera miljön)*, published in 1989 by SNS and partially funded by energy utility

[56] Westerberg, 'Socialists'; Maiju Wuokko, 'Business in the Battle of Ideas, 1945–1991: Conclusions from the Finnish Case', *Scandinavian Economic History Review*, 65, 3 (2017).

[57] Olaf Corry, 'The Green Legacy of 1989: Revolutions, Environmentalism and the Global Age', *Political Studies*, 62, 2 (2014).

[58] Adrian Parr, *The Wrath of Capital: Neoliberalism and Climate Change Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

[59] Ciplet and Roberts, 'Climate Change'.

[60] Aronowsky, 'Gas Guzzling Gaia', 307.

[61] Brulle, 'Networks'.

[62] See, for example, Núria Almiron and Jordi Xifra, *Climate Change Denial and Public Relations: Strategic Communication and Interest Groups in Climate Inaction* (London: Routledge, 2019); McKie, 'Climate Change'; Anshelm and Hultman, *Discourses*; Bernhard Forchtner, Andreas Kroneder and David Wetzel, 'Being Skeptical? Exploring Far-Right Climate-Change Communication in Germany', *Environmental Communication*, 12, 5 (2018); Plehwe, 'Think Tank Networks'.

[63] Hultman, Kall and Anshelm, *Att ställa frågan*.

[64] Företag och samhälle, *Kärnkraftsavvecklingen, Miljöpolitiken och Näringslivet* (Stockholm: SNS, 1990), 2.

[65] Knaggård, 'Vetenskaplig osäkerhet', 149–50.

[66] 'Sätt värde på miljön! Miljöavgifter och andra ekonomiska styrmedel', SOU 1990:59.

[67] This work commissioned in 1989 resulted in 'Miljöbalk', SOU 1993:27.

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companies, fossil fuel companies and other large industries.[68] This book celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of Erik Dahmén's aforementioned book, *Put a Price on the Environment*, and included a chapter by the newly appointed IPCC chairman, Bert Bolin.[69] However, the most high-profile and innovative element in the restructuring of environmental governance to incorporate economic tools at the time was the publication of *The Citizens Environmental Manifesto* (*Medborgarnas Miljömanifest*). This publication was part of a series of texts by the project and subsequent foundation The New Welfare (*Den nya välfärden*).[70] This book, abbreviated as MOU 1990:2, mimicked the long tradition of Swedish governmental reports in the SOU series – but with a populist touch. The *Manifesto* was published by Timbro and was written by Lars Bern and his co-authors, many of whom hailed from the private sector.[71]

The text presented an evaluation of the policies historically pursued in Sweden – traditionally issuing concessions and quotas to polluting industries – as well as a plan for future environmental legislation. Its main contribution to the environmental debate was the proposal to introduce a system of environmental declarations to ensure the possibility of arbitration in legal instances.[72] The second major contribution, which was linked to the first, was a strong emphasis on consumer citizenship as a way to guide the economy towards polluting less.[73] Market mechanisms such as environmental fees and cap-and-trade policies represented other possible ways of governance that should replace the previous model, which had emphasised state and governmental control and, according to the authors, represented 'a dead end'.[74] Key for the argument regarding consumer citizenship and market mechanisms in environmental protection was the characterisation of environmental problems as stemming from individual consumption and concluded that 'managing a large number of small emissions requires something completely different than managing a small number of big ones'.[75] In short, according to the authors, greenhouse gas emissions had radically changed environmental governance, emphasising that because of the problem's complexity, planning was impossible. Here, actors in this sphere keenly followed the US government's development of a cap-and-trade programme to manage acid rain.[76] Scholars have noted how the concept of complexity has played an important role in making neoliberal policies seem natural by putting their faith in adaptive markets.[77] Uncertainty and complexity thus became a vessel to argue for neoliberal reforms, presupposing that only markets and price mechanisms serve as reliable processors of information in complex systems.[78] In Sweden the focus on uncertainty also had the benefit of drowning out the authoritative voice of Bert Bolin. According to Knaggård, Bolin had almost singlehandedly represented climate science in Sweden and, as such, influenced decisions made by both right and left wing parties since the 1970s. The problem of uncertainty increased the number of voices in the public debate and introduced an element of scientific doubt.[79]

[68] Lars Bergman, *Värdera miljön!* (Stockholm: SNS, 1989), 248. *Värdera miljön* was financed by a range of industry actors, both state-owned and private: ASSI, Hasselfors, Procordia, SKF, STU, Svenska Statoil, Sydkraft, Trelleborg, Vattenfall and Volvo.

[69] Dahmén also was chairman of the scientific board of Timbro's publisher Ratio.

[70] Importantly, The New Welfare was not controlled by the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise but depended on financial contributions from independent businesses; see Allern and Pollack, 'Role of Think Tanks'.

[71] Bern, *Medborgarnas*, 186–8.

[72] See also Ulf Kristersson, Mattias Bengtsson, Ingemar Haraldsson, Jan B. Jörnmark and Carl Gustaf Lundin, 'Miljön och Marknadsekonomin', in *Timbro Uppsats* (Stockholm: Timbro, 1989), 10–11.

[73] Bern, *Medborgarnas*, 89.

[74] Ibid., 155.

[75] Ibid., 36. (This and all subsequent translations are made by the authors.)

[76] Rachel Emma Rothschild, *Poisonous Skies: Acid Rain and the Globalization of Pollution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 179–80; Bergman, *Värdera miljön*, 18.

[77] Vettese, 'Limits', 148; Felli, *Great Adaptation*, 84; Jeremy Walker and Melinda Cooper, 'Genealogies of Resilience: From Systems Ecology to the Political Economy of Crisis Adaptation', *Security Dialogue*, 42, 2 (2011).

[78] As such, uncertainty regarding climate change science became productive for a range of actors since different actors could use the issue to push their preferred policies. Knaggård, 'Vetenskaplig osäkerhet', 289. Felli, *Great Adaptation*.

[79] See Knaggård, 'Vetenskaplig osäkerhet', 33, 99, 116.

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The notion that emissions originate from many small sources of consumption practices rather than from production reinforced a notion of consumer citizenship pioneered by Ludwig von Mises, one of the more central figures in the first generation of the neoliberal movement, which had broken ground already in the 1920s and 1930s.[80] That societal change can come about through the consumer choices made by individuals is perhaps one of the most accepted notions among neoliberals.[81] This idea has also been identified as a strategy for the fossil fuel industry to shift the attention away from fossil fuel production, thereby pinning the blame on the individual consumer.[82] The *Manifesto* states that: 'In a market economy, citizens have substantial power in their capacity as consumers. We shape production through our choice of products.'[83] Importantly, the authors also argued that a price on emissions is not enough to steer consumer demand: 'In order for a price system to function well, the prices should be decided by the market, not by authorities.'[84] This anti-state discourse is a good example of how governing, according to neoliberals, is deemed impossible if it is conducted without the help of knowledge only possible to obtain in a market-like situation. But the emphasis on consumer demands did not exclude competing policies. For example, prominent Swedish economist Assar Lindbeck, an adherent of neoliberal theorists Milton Friedman and James Buchanan, argued that environmental fees would present the market mechanism with sufficient information to address pollution and environmental degradation.

The *Manifesto* went further and argued that a set of systematic environmental declarations would ensure that the correct information is communicated to consumers. The following year the idea of environmental declarations was also present in the governmental report *Count on the Environment* (*Räkna med miljön*). The proposals in the *Manifesto* were criticised in reviews for creating an administrative behemoth of auditing but managed to incorporate environmental issues into economic praxis. The system of declarations would be modelled on the financial audit system and separated from the Environmental Protection Agency.[85] Further, in accordance with a previous report in the MOU series, the authors of the *Manifesto* argued that legislation should be the only basis for governance and that environmental conflicts should not be settled in courts with the government as a possible plaintiff, but rather that individual actors should protect their property and rights through arbitration.[86]

To understand this new economic paradigm, it is essential to trace how Hayek's knowledge problem was modified to incorporate environmental issues. Since only markets were conceived of as having the capacity to manage the complexities of social and natural systems, price signals would provide the corrective. As seen above, the arguments in the *Manifesto* result in two things apart from environmental policies. First, the inability to fully know all possible sources of pollution seemed to favour policies that claimed to solve this problem through price mechanisms and the active participation of consumer citizens. The rendering of climate change as a new and unknowable policy field resulted in market mechanisms being seen as the next obvious step in environmental protection following the system of concessions.[87] This depiction also made it possible to appreciate the results of past policies. Second, the shift towards consumption and morality was consistent with a long-standing, anti-state notion: that the long period of Social Democratic dominance had incapacitated the

[80] Niklas Olsen, *The Sovereign Consumer: A New Intellectual History of Neoliberalism* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

[81] Niklas Olsen, *Sovereign Consumer*.

[82] Geoffrey Supran and Naomi Oreskes, 'Rhetoric and Frame Analysis of Exxonmobil's Climate Change Communications', *One Earth* (2021); Michael E. Mann, *The New Climate War: The Fight to Take Back Our Planet* (London: Scribe, 2021).

[83] Bern, *Medborgarnas*, 90.

[84] Ibid., 120.

[85] Ibid., 81.

[86] This echoes a central argument made by R.H. Coase in R.H. Coase, 'The Problem of Social Cost', *The Journal of Law & Economics*, 3 (1960). An example of this in relation to environmental issues is presented in Javiera Barandiarán, *Science and Environment in Chile: The Politics of Expert Advice in a Neoliberal Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018).

[87] Bern, *Medborgarnas*, 11.

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Swedes.[88] Accordingly, both innovative companies and consumers were discussed as being carriers of a new morality that was more attentive to environmental values.[89]

Spontaneous Determinism

A key in the above framing, according to Bern and his co-authors, was that environmental concerns were something that evolved naturally. This argument echoed Hayek's understanding of optimal solutions to problems as always being the result of spontaneous developments rather than political and governmental planning. Consequently, market mechanisms such as cap-and-trade policies represented the next logical step in environmental protection.[90] A similar notion of history and progress inevitably leading to environmental considerations – albeit with a decisively less rosy view of the environmental movement – was presented by Marian Radetzki. As he focused on copper, he began to see evidence for the notion of resources as always substitutable in the wireless communication technology replacing copper landline telephones during the 1980s and early 1990s. To disarm the environmental movement's calls for justice and limits on economic activity and resource extraction, he published his book *Growth and Environment* (*Tillväxt och miljö*) in 1990. The argument was simple: growth is not in opposition to environmental protection. Instead, according to Radetzki, growth was a prerequisite. To make this claim viable, Radetzki relied on a version of the environmental 'Kuznets curve' – the idea that environmental degradation follows an inverted u-shape in relation to economic growth – and a purely additive and arbitrary view of environmental problems.

> The rich are not only willing to abstain from consumption if this benefits the environment; they are also prepared to spend a growing share of their income to ensure access to environmental services of good quality. The readiness to pay extra for environmentally superior housing, vacations to virgin beaches or to take on rising costs in order to keep the environment clean is much greater among high earners.[91]

Growth, according to Radetzki, was the means needed to accurately steer consumer demand in an environmentally friendly direction. Vital for his argument was the measurement of economic density (not to be confused with economies of density), a measurement reached by dividing GDP by number of square kilometres.[92] In short, growth led to a greater competition for resources, which in Radetzki's ideal setting of protected property rights led to environmental protection due to self-interest. While in accordance with basic neoclassical economics, this completely disregarded the actual damage done to ecological systems, and thus this approach is highly anthropocentric. In a footnote Radetzki thanks physicist Tor Ragnar Gerholm for making him see the important distinction that '[o]nly the latter kind of changes [deterioration of the human environment] could be considered as deterioration in quality'.[93]

Radtzki's book presented an answer to the threat from environmentalists identified in two publications from Timbro during the period. In the first Stig-Björn Ljunggren warned of 'paternalistic' elements and 'forces within the green movement that want to go beyond both what the open society could accept and what the environmental crisis requires'.[94] For Kurt and Viveka Wickman, growth

[88] Ibid., 125. The so-called Lindbeck Report from 1993 is a perfect example of this; see Assar Lindbeck, *Nya villkor för ekonomi och politik: Ekonomikommissionens förslag: Betänkande, Statens Offentliga Utredningar* (Stockholm: Allmänna förlaget, 1993), 86–101.

[89] Bern, *Medborgarnas*, 51.

[90] Ibid., 11, 118–21. Cap-and-trade policies were also the preferred policy choice in Bergman, *Värdera miljön!*, 248–9.

[91] Marian Radetzki, *Tillväxt och miljö* (Stockholm: SNS, 1990), 38. Similar claims were later presented by Nils-Gösta Vannerberg, *Ragnarök inställt* (Stockholm: Timbro, 1997), 129; Gunnar Strömmer, *Kretsloppsstat eller kretsloppssamhälle?* (Stockholm: Timbro, 1998), 104; Jonas Frycklund, *Släng den här boken! Den är snart en äggkartong* (Stockholm: Timbro, 2010), 106–7.

[92] Radetzki, *Tillväxt*, 26.

[93] In the passage referred to, Radetzki thanks Tor Ragnar Gerholm for pointing out that only changes that unequivocally degrade the quality of life for humans could be considered environmental destruction. Radetzki, *Tillväxt*, 23.

[94] Stig-Björn Ljunggren, *Den gröna rörelsen: Från miljöengagemang till hembygdsfascism* (Stockholm: Timbro, 1990), 8.

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in the public sector had also shifted power along gendered lines and created greater claims for resources from groups with intentions other than using them for industrial production, such as recreation.[95] A common theme in both these books was an idea of the industry's interest in the environment as being superior as well as a fear of suppression of individual choice in the name of (collectivistic) environmental protection.[96] The fact that a similar response to the environmental movement was needed was evident in the 'unusually unconditional financial support for this work' that Radetzki, according to himself, received from the Swedish Employers' Confederation.[97]

The confrontational character of these publications relates to the development of the environmental justice perspective in the 1980s, which clearly showed the conflict dimensions of environmental protection mainly along the lines of race and class.[98] Further, the confrontational tone and up-tick in anti-environmental publications could perhaps even more plausibly be explained by the ambitious environmental plans, including a cap on carbon emissions, presented by the unwavering environment and energy minister Birgitta Dahl of the Social Democratic Party in the late 1980s.[99] The efforts from the neoliberal sphere and other actors paid off as Dahl was outmanoeuvred and the proposed cap on carbon emissions from 1988 was binned.[100] In sum, environmentalism seemed to take on the position as the main adversary of the capitalist class, as seen in other Nordic countries over the following decade.[101]

Despite their differences, Radetzki's book, the *Manifesto* and the straightforward anti-environmentalist publications at the time were linked by their faith in environmental protection as something that would arise spontaneously from progress and growth, a notion resonating with the ideas of Hayek. Radetzki, steeped in the debates concerning resources, was clearly inspired by – but did not explicitly refer to – the thinker Julian Simon and the idea that the only relevant resource was human ingenuity.[102] This line of thought was probably introduced to the Swedish audience through Simon's co-author of *The Resourceful Earth*, Herman Kahn, who in 1984 published a short cornucopian pamphlet together with Gerholm titled *A Better Future*.[103]

A crucial aspect for reaching the conclusion that more markets would result in less environmental destruction was the underlying assumption that none other than the directly affected parties (in the guise of property owners) should be allowed to interfere in the process of environmental regulations. The defence of private property is also evident in the transformation of environmental legislation towards arbitration presented in the *Manifesto*.[104] Private property regulation would suffice as environmental protection would ultimately be in the actor's own interest. This line of thought would become more and more pertinent in the years to come.

Limits, Humanity and the Defence of Technological Exceptionalism

In the mid-1990s a conflict among our three main characters developed in relation to the activities of the environmental consulting organisation The Natural Step, of which Bern was a member and where he also served as chair. For Gerholm, The Natural Step promoted 'a form of natural science fundamentalism with roots in 18th-century physiocracy and 19th-century thermodynamics'.[105] A debate followed in which the conservative *Svenska Dagbladet* (SvD) clearly picked the side of Gerholm and Timbro.[106] A decisive

[95] Kurt Wickman and Viveka Wickman, *Det gröna: Varning för miljölarmen!* (Stockholm: Timbro, 1989), 14–35, 122.
[96] See also Strömmer, *Kretsloppsstat*, 28.
[97] Radetzki also thanks Gerholm for his comments. Radetzki, *Tillväxt*, 5.
[98] Malm, *White Skin*, 143–6.
[99] Hultman, Kall and Anshelm, *Att ställa frågan*.
[100] Ibid., 191–3.
[101] Wuokko, 'Business'.
[102] Radetzki, *Tillväxt*, 7.
[103] Tor Ragnar Gerholm and Herman Kahn, *En Bättre Framtid* (Stockholm: SAF, 1984).
[104] See also Ingemar Nordin, *Privat egendom: Om ägande och moral* (Stockholm: Timbro, 1988). Nordin is one of the founders of the climate denialist Stockholm Initiative and the top Swedish signatory of the CLINTEL declaration.
[105] Tor Ragnar Gerholm, *Brev till det naturliga steget* (Stockholm: Timbro, 1996), 11–12.
[106] Thomas Gür, comment to 'Emotionella utbrott ger ingen dialog', *Svenska Dagbladet*, 14 Jan. 1997.

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element in this debate was the topic of limits to growth. Thus, in the eyes of Gerholm and his like, any limitations on economic and technological expansion and development – whether in the form of questioning human exceptionality or imposing regulations – were to be opposed.[107]

Another conflict concerned the centrality of human actors and the possibility of changing capitalism into a less energy intensive system. The division between committedness and interestedness here becomes crucial for understanding the actors. While Bern and The Natural Step were committed to capitalism and enterprise, as Gerholm also acknowledged, they were not interested in the energy system as such. Gerholm and Radetzki, on the other hand, clearly represented the energy sector. While Gerholm argued that the ideas of The Natural Step were 'quite clearly incompatible with free enterprise and with the market economy as a whole',[108] it was more accurate to say that their vision was incompatible with an industrial sector dependent on extensive energy use and resource extraction. This reasoning follows the argument put forth by Gerholm: 'It is within the industry, and only within the industry, that the requisite knowledge and resources can be found. Therefore, the industry also has a responsibility for the environment.'[109] This is clearly inspired by Gerholm's previous co-author Herman Kahn and his vision of technological progress.[110] Public opinion and ecological science could be ignored.

In the debate, The Natural Step became associated with claims similar to the ones originating from the environmental movements at the time and especially natural science being given a privileged position as well as notions of limits to economic growth.[111] The Natural Step was here in some ways presented as opportunist, riding the wave of environmental concern and disregarding human exceptionalism.[112] By portraying both ecology and public opinion as something that could be disregarded, the arguments from Gerholm seem to fit in well with the fear of democracy found in Hayek's thought.[113] In early 1997 Bern's role changed in this debate as he left The Natural Step by referring to organisational issues, and with their foremost advocate gone from the organisation the debate faded away.[114]

However, the attacks on ecocentrism and the privilege of natural science from Gerholm and his peers were not only focused on The Natural Step. Countering a radicalised environmental movement engaged in property destruction and veganism, as well as the ecocentric tendencies in the debate, became a key concern among Timbro actors in the mid-1990s.[115] As Mattias Bengtsson at Timbro argued: 'Today we are convinced that the agenda of the environmental movement threatens the values that Timbro is set to defend.'[116] Radetzki also continued issuing his warnings against the environmental movement, which in his view distorted the debate and fooled politicians. He especially accused the minister of environment Anna Lindh, who in many ways served as the spokesperson for the idea of a Green People's Home (*Det gröna folkhemmet*), of being misled.[117] As others have shown, this Social Democratic plan, with the ambition to recast the party in a green and eco-modern mould with government-led investments coupled with market measures, was met with fierce criticism by the liberal and conservative politicians, including Lars Bern.[118] Responding to a quote on the

[107] Gerholm, *Brev*, 29.
[108] Ibid., 11.
[109] Ibid., 9.
[110] Elodie Vieille Blanchard, 'Modelling the Future: An Overview of the "Limits to Growth" Debate', *Centaurus*, 52, 2 (2010).
[111] Gerholm, *Brev*, 14.
[112] Mattias Bengtsson, 'Debatt: Timbro struntar inte i miljön', *Dagens industri*, 3 Feb. 1997.
[113] Brown, *In the Ruins*.
[114] 'Miljökämpar i storgräl', *Dagens industri*, 1 Feb. 1997.
[115] Ingemar Nordin, *Djur är inte människor: En filosofisk granskning av veganismen* (Stockholm: Timbro, 1997).
[116] Mattias Bengtsson, 'Debatt: Timbro struntar inte i miljön', *Dagens industri*, 3 Feb. 1997. Bengtsson was an editorial writer at SvD during the late 1980s and early 1990s, director of Timbro in the early 2000s as well as CEO of the think tank Centre for the New Europe during 2005–7.
[117] Marian Radetzki, 'Miljörörelsen lurar politiker', *Dagens Nyheter*, 15 May 1996; Jonas Anshelm, 'Det gröna folkhemmet: Striden om den ekologiska moderiniseringen i Sverige', in Johan Hedrén, ed., *Naturen som brytpunkt: Om miljöfrågans mystifieringar, konflikter och motsägelser* (Eslöv: B. Östlings bokförl. Symposion, 2002).
[118] Anshelm, 'Det gröna folkhemmet'. Persson further singled out 'neoliberalism' as one of the forces of the time to be countered. TT, 'Grönt folkhem, Perssons framtidsfråga', 18 Mar. 1997.

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interdependence of species in a speech by Prime Minister Göran Persson in 1997, Stefan Kraft, a researcher at Timbro, stated: 'It is hard not to forebode the idea that humans are nothing more than a parasite that does not know its place.'[119]

The conflict among proponents of market-led environmentalism regarding anthropocentrism was part of a shift in policies regarding the environment and climate. While there appeared a growing consensus in the early 1990s on limits to growth and thresholds based on ecological science (e.g. the Rio Declaration), the debate in Sweden shifted in favour of goals based on feasibility. This framing shifted from scientific arguments concerning mitigation that included considering non-human nature and towards policies stemming from what was politically (and economically) feasible.[120] Gerholm's argument against The Natural Step and the attacks on the idea of a Green People's Home from Timbro constituted ways of insulating the industrial sector from political interference grounded in ideas of ecological limits or biology.[121] As such, the gaps between industry actors and economists, on the one hand, and biologists and other natural scientists, on the other, were just as wide in the 1990s as in the 1970s.[122]

Alarmism and the Impossibility of Predicting the Future

During the 1990s the environmental debate slowly shifted to increasingly focus on the problem of climate change as the science became more robust. Climate change as a political issue ultimately depends on creating scenarios that can assess risks and the possibilities of mitigation. As the reality of anthropogenic climate change was acknowledged in the 1995 IPCC report, uncertainties regarding its effects were highlighted by obstructionists. In Sweden the intensity of the debate also relates to the ratification of the Rio Declaration and the commissioning of the Climate Delegation (*Klimatdelegationen*) in 1993. The ratification and the delegation both signalled that Sweden had to start working to meet its climate obligations.

Tor Ragnar Gerholm rose to be the most influential actor countering the IPCC in Sweden. Like his US counterpart Fred Singer, he was a physicist and engaged in the scientific branch of the Unification Church.[123] He was part of Singer's Science and Environmental Policy Project and one of the original signatories of the Leipzig Document, questioning the conclusions by the IPCC in 1995. In 1994 Gerholm strongly argued against national mitigation policies and any climate policies since the price would be too high in relation to a threat that, according to him, was much too uncertain.[124] Radetzki joined in the chorus with arguments based on neoclassical economics. When reviewing William Cline's book *The Economics of Global Warming* in *Dagens Nyheter* in 1994, Radetzki argued that: 'Even in such a long perspective as 300 years, no measures to stabilise the climate are [economically] defensible.'[125] His column titled 'Don't do anything about emissions' sparked a debate between him and Bert Bolin on the need for regulation, and Radetzki continued to claim that there was simply too much uncertainty in the science to motivate mitigation.[126] The following year, 1995, Radetzki published the short book *20 Years after the Oil Crisis* (*20 år efter oljekrisen*), in which he predicted a continued dependence on oil while at the same time criticising the energy policies of the previous two decades. In a review the book was received with the statement:

[119] Stefan Kraft, *Människoartens herrar: En kritisk granskning av statsminister Göran Perssons miljötal den 11 April 1997*, Rapport/Timbro, 1997:10 (Stockholm: Timbro, 1997), 7.

[120] Knaggård, 'Vetenskaplig osäkerhet', 210–15.

[121] Cf. Vettese, 'Limits', 148. See also Mikael Peterson, *Nytt ljus över miljöfrågan: Efter partismen* (Stockholm: Timbro, 1997), 18; Marian Radetzki, *Den gröna myten: Ekonomisk tillväxt och miljöns kvalite* (Stockholm: SNS, 2001), 19.

[122] Friman, 'Domedagsprofeter'.

[123] Editorial, 'Gerholm tackar Moon-sekten', *Aftonbladet*, 18 Dec. 1997. Gerholm served as conference chair for ICUS in 1992, 1995, 1997 and 2000; see https://icus.org/about-2/history/ (last visited 29 July 2021).

[124] TT, 'Sveriges koldioxidutsläpp små', 8 Mar. 1994; Tor Ragnar Gerholm, 'Fel begränsa utsläppen: Vi kan vänta med koldioxidbekämpningen', *Dagens Nyheter*, 1 June 1994.

[125] Marian Radetzki, 'Gör ingenting åt utsläppen!', *Dagens Nyheter*, 13 Aug. 1994.

[126] Bert Bolin, 'Allvarliga effekter försummas', *Dagens Nyheter*, 19 Sept. 1994; Marian Radetzki, 'Omotiverat minska utsläpp', *Dagens Nyheter*, 24 Oct. 1994.

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> The anonymous forces of the global economy are not only more powerful, but also more rational. . . . In other words: forget the planned tax reform. Forget international taxes on carbon. And, above all, forget investments in alternative energy sources. They are nothing more than costly fads without any measurable environmental effect.[127]

The market was thus characterised as a site of truth and, therefore, interfering in this supreme mechanism was counterproductive. Actors such as Radetzki thus managed to have an impact on how the debate on climate was framed, as directed government action was seen as something unnecessary. So, while the actors constantly relativised the threat of climate change, arguing for the ultimate unknowability of the future, they simultaneously made claims about the future with the aid of neoclassical cost benefit analysis.[128]

As we have seen, unknowability and uncertainty constituted one argument for implementing market-based environmental policies. On the other hand, uncertainty could be used to criticise 'alarmists' speculating in future trends to justify certain policies and regulations, such as a Green People's Home.[129] Apart from being out of touch with reality, as Radetzki, Ljunggren and the Wickmans argued, such alarmism was also being used to create unfair competition according to industry leaders.[130]

As evident in earlier publications from these actors, the use of a historical narrative was crucial in the attack on environmental organisations and in the discussion on future threats.[131] Radetzki forcefully argued against 'world prophets', who time and again had been wrong in their predictions. Crucially, the possibility of disregarding previous alarms was found in the definition of the same as predictions and not scenarios, as well as in ignoring the policies enforced to steer clear of the dire futures predicated in the past. In an article in *Dagens Nyheter*, Radetzki argues that alarmism comes in cycles, and the failure to correctly predict developments ultimately makes alarming scenarios useless.[132] In turn, all progress made regarding the environment was again portrayed as spontaneous developments based on human ingenuity.

The attack on alarmism and doomsday prophets is evident in the publications from Timbro, such as in Nils Gösta Vannerberg's *Ragnarök Cancelled* (*Ragnarök inställt*) from 1997, where he paints the future world in a rosy hue, arguing that there is no need for alarm because of humanity's entrepreneurial spirit: 'I hereby declare that the next century will be the best one in the history of humanity.'[133] This call not only foreshadowed the concept of the 'good Anthropocene', but would later be echoed in Timbro publications and in Bern's self-published books.[134]

Gerholm's antipathy towards climate models was manifest in his 1998 collection *Climate Policy after Kyoto* (*Klimatpolitik efter Kyoto*), to which prominent climate change sceptic Richard Lindzen contributed.[135] Here Gerholm stated that:

> Regardless of whether or not the climate models from IPCC add up, the truth is that today, lacking credible scenarios for emissions, we don't know and can't know what will happen with the

[127] Editorial, 'Världsbilder som krockar', *Expressen*, 13 Feb. 1995.

[128] See Franta, 'Weaponizing'.

[129] Anshelm, 'Det Gröna Folkhemmet'.

[130] Jan Erik Larsson, 'Massmedias katastroflarm har tveklöst ett övertag i dag', *Svenska Dagbladet*, 13 Sept. 1996. The head of Kinnevik in the 1990s, Jan Stenbeck, was an active proponent of neoliberal ideas.

[131] The historical narrative in these and similar anti-environmental or cornucopian books deserves more scholarly attention. See Wickman and Wickman, *Det gröna*, 8; Vannerberg, *Ragnarök*, 152.

[132] Marian Radetzki, 'Konsten att vara en världsprofet', *Svenska Dagbladet*, 25 Aug. 1996.

[133] Vannerberg, *Ragnarök*, 9.

[134] Bern, *Antropocen*; Lars Bern, *Antropocen II* (Sandared: Recito, 2015); Niklas Elert, *Människoapans utmaning: Miljö, tillväxt och vår planets framtid* (Stockholm: Timbro, 2014).

[135] Tor Ragnar Gerholm, ed., *Klimatpolitik efter Kyotomötet* (Stockholm: SNS, 1998). This book was also translated into English, published in 2004. In 1998 Gerholm became engaged in the now defunct anti-environmental science group European Science and Environment Forum (ESEF).

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> climate in a hundred years. However, what we do know is that we can definitely wait when it comes to implementing costly measures until there is an acceptable basis for decisions.[136]

From the debate we can deduce that the aim of the publication was to influence Swedish climate policies in light of the Kyoto agreement. This is also seen in the fact that several of the authors in this volume met with the newly appointed Climate Committee in 1998, resulting in a heated debate with Bolin. However, according to Knaggård, their efforts resulted in no actual effects on climate policy.[137] Bolin's authority seems to have withstood the challenge.

The critique against climate models culminated with a new edition of Gerholm's 1972 book *Futurum Exaktum* in 1999, where he argued he had been right all along. As one reviewer stated: 'As always, mankind will, thanks to his ingenuity and adaptivity, overcome the threats and find solutions.'[138] This thought resonated with Gerholm's original work as well as the joint publication with Herman Kahn.

These discussions regarding environmental alarmism and its counterpart cornucopianism are to some extent consistent from the early 1970s up until the turn of the millennium. The argument clearly resonates with two important themes of neoliberal thought: first, the permanent unknowability of the future outside of market relations and, second, the notion that there are no limits that cannot be transcended by human ingenuity.[139] But the issue also highlights the important distinction between interestedness and committedness. On the one hand, alarmism could be a way to steer or follow consumer demand, but on the other hand, it also entailed the risk of state intervention or price signals and markets being distorted.

Kyoto and the Global Economics of Climate Change

While debates on environmental policies had been related to domestic emissions in the early 1990s – as demonstrated by the carbon tax – the discussion transcended the national borders as joint implementation and flexible mechanisms became part of climate policies. Two targets were in the crosshairs of the criticism from our group of actors: first, the Swedish government's ambition to lower carbon emissions more than what was required by the Kyoto Protocol[140] and, second, the environmental policies linked to the Social Democratic Party's above-mentioned programme, 'Green People's Home', from the mid-1990s.[141] Arguments against nation-specific policies emerged from Timbro and SNS.

The notion of Sweden as an environmental forerunner was still strong among a wide spectrum of actors, including writers for Timbro. According to the same people, however, the focus of this forerunner mentality was not on lowering domestic emissions but to lead the negotiations of international agreements.[142] This is exemplified in the paraphrased maxim 'think locally, act globally' proposed in a collaborative project by centre-right politicians published by Timbro in 1997. Domestic policies such as the carbon tax were considered an expression of specific interests wanting to secure a steady source of income, echoing the statements influenced by public choice made by the Wickmans a few years earlier.[143]

The push for international agreements should also be seen in light of the 'Green People's Home', which was attacked in two Timbro essays by Stefan Kraft in 1997. Here Kraft portrayed Prime Minister Persson as a command-and-control economist, and he wrote in relation to Persson's statements that:

[136] Gerholm, *Klimatpolitik*, 81.
[137] Knaggård, 'Vetenskaplig osäkerhet', 207.
[138] Tommy Hammarström, 'Domedag uppskjuten', *Expressen*, 20 Dec. 1999.
[139] See Radetzki, *Den gröna myten*, 75–6.
[140] From a permitted 2 per cent increase in carbon emissions to a proposed 4 per cent decrease. Knaggård, 'Vetenskaplig osäkerhet', 213–15.
[141] Anshelm, 'Det gröna folkhemmet', 46–7.
[142] Peterson, *Nytt ljus*. This idea has a longer history, as shown in Buns, 'Green Internationalists'.
[143] Peterson, *Nytt ljus*, 38, 94.

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'The faith in the ability of the state is almost limitless.'[144] For Kraft and others at Timbro, the faith was instead put firmly in markets.[145] The distrust of state action and national policies is also found in the 2003 SNS publication *Global Climate Politics* (*Global klimatpolitik*), partly funded by utility companies and the fossil fuel industry among others. Free-riding and misguided policies were highlighted as Radetzki and economist Lars Bergman argued against Swedish commitments regarding CO_2 emissions, which were stronger than the ones suggested by the EU.[146] They criticised ambitious national policies for causing 'continued confusion' and scaring off other countries from passing similar climate policies. Importantly, they argued for an alternative to Kyoto in which cap-and-trade became the only regulatory policy, thus aiming to abolish the carbon tax.[147]

As such, the arguments from the neoliberal sphere were clear: political actors should not interfere in market relations other than as creators and protectors of markets.[148] As a result, this made demands raised from outside market relations seem suspicious. Policy perfection in the international arena was highlighted as preferable in Timbro publications in the late 1990s and the policies suggested were goal-oriented.[149] Such notions regarding policy perfection, exemplified by the characterisation of enforced policies as 'confusion' in Bergman and Radetzki's book, could also, as suggested by Lamb and his co-authors, effectively delay climate action.[150] It is also clear that there is a tension between arguing for global treaties to level the playing field or arguing against such treaties, such as the case against a global carbon tax due to the infringements it would lead to in terms of the autonomy of firms.

In this last period, we see how the actors were not only committed to a neoliberal thought style but also how they argued based on interest. What was to be protected was not necessarily capitalism as such, but domestic industries and companies against global competition rendered unfair due to environmental policies.

Epilogue

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, a neoliberal thought style regarding the environment dominated both public discourse and policy. As mentioned above, Gerholm declared that his faith in technological progress and human ingenuity, dating back to 1972, had materialised in the re-issue of his *Futurum Exaktum* in 1999. Radetzki published *The Green Myth* (*Den gröna myten*) in 2001, a sequel to his *Growth and Environment* from 1990, again proclaiming the environmental benefits of wealthy and growth-oriented societies. Concurrently, Bern, Radetzki and Gerholm had since the late 1980s been a part of shifting the discourse and policy away from government-led innovations and regulations to the creation and promotion of markets and market logic as the standard answer to environmental protection. When Sweden took over the presidency of the European Union in 2001, Social Democrat and EU commissioner Margot Wallström praised the proposal on emission trading (ETS).[151] Just months after ETS was adopted in 2003, a Swedish proposition to change the environmental legislation was put forth, arguing:

[144] Kraft, *Människoartens herrar*, 10; Strömmer, *Kretsloppsstat*, 89.

[145] See Kraft, *Människoartens herrar*, 19; Bergman, *Värdera*, 10; Strömmer, *Kretsloppsstat*, 10; Vannerberg, *Ragnarök*, 157; Wickman and Wickman, *Det Gröna*, 157

[146] Lars Bergman and Marian Radetzki, *Global klimatpolitik: Konsekvenser för Sveriges ekonomi och energisektor* (Stockholm: SNS, 2003). This book received financial contributions from several industry actors in the energy sector: ABB, Aros Maizels, Birka Energi, Fortum Kraft, Graninge, Göteborgs Energi, Mällarenergi, Skellefteå Kraft, Svenska Kolinstitutet, Svenska Shell, Svenska Statoil, Söderenergi, Uppsala Energi, Vattenfall and Öresundskraft.

[147] Bergman and Radetzki, *Global klimatpolitik*, 129. Also found in policy discussions later in the 2000s; see Knaggård, 'Vetenskaplig osäkerhet', 225.

[148] Peterson, *Nytt ljus*, 66–8.

[149] Strömmer, *Kretsloppsstat*, 103.

[150] William F. Lamb et al., 'Discourses of Climate Delay', *Global Sustainability*, 3 (2020).

[151] Atle C. Christiansen and Jørgen Wettestad, 'The EU as a Frontrunner on Greenhouse Gas Emissions Trading: How Did It Happen and Will the EU Succeed?', *Climate Policy*, 3, 1 (2003).

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> Furthermore, amendments to the Environmental Code are proposed, which means that conditions on limitation of carbon dioxide emissions or conditions as by regulating the amount of fossil fuel aims to limit carbon dioxide emissions may not be notified for establishments included in the trading system.[152]

Since then, ETS has become the only regulatory policy for legally restricting CO_2 emissions in Swedish law, complying with the wishes of Radetzki in the early 2000s.[153] In a sense, *the actors we have followed won*.

But as the environmental movement and other actors began to question the efficacy of these policies, the efforts from industry actors intensified in the early 2000s.[154] Previous studies have shown how in the period between 2006 and 2015, a more unified obstruction against mitigating climate change emerged in Sweden.[155] The actors we have traced in this paper were at the heart of this obstructionist movement, which started to combine anti-environmentalist and conspiratorial thinking with far-right politics.[156] When Lars Bern published the book *Chill-Out*, arguing that '[c]limate alarms are driven by green fundamentalism', his stance had come full circle as he voiced the same accusations against the climate movement as Gerholm did against him less than fifteen years earlier.[157] While rhetoric has become more intense, we argue that the basic arguments for obstructing climate action still rest on the firm foundation of the neoliberal thought style.

Conclusion

In this paper we have traced the Swedish debate regarding environmental protection among actors linked to a neoliberal thought style. We have shown how neoliberal actors differed in their opinion of how market-friendly regulations could limit environmental degradation. Here we could make a methodological point that the small public arena is what forced different actors to compete for the same space, thus showing the existing nuances and different neoliberal traditions. More importantly, however, we show how a Hayekian epistemology provided all actors with the basic arguments for obstructing climate action. While previous research has crucially shown the links to fossil fuel interests in the form of extractive industries, we have in this paper demonstrated the intersection of both interestedness and committedness in climate politics.

Our findings show *how* the multi-tactical response emerged and changed over time: not as a predefined toolbox managed by a single interest but as competing explanations sharing a common basis in a neoliberal thought style. Further, we demonstrate that in many regards, the same actors proposing neoliberal responses to the issue of climate change in the late 1980s were the same leading the more organised denial movement since the 2000s.[158] Therefore, we argue that the neoliberal response to calls for environmental protection has mainly been radicalised in terms of intensity and that the organisational form of climate policy obstruction during the period from the early 2000s to 2020 is what differentiates it from previous periods of anti-environmental ideas. Thus, the existence of a neoliberal thought style in current denialist networks is not a clean break from centrist or pragmatic neoliberalism but a development into an authoritarian form where both arguments and actors remain.

[152] Prop. 2003/04:132, 'Handel med utsläppsrätter 1', 15 Apr. 2004.

[153] Miljöbalk (1998:808) chapter 16, 2 c §, 'Lag (2020: 1173) om vissa utsläpp av växthusgaser'.

[154] Brulle, 'Networks'.

[155] Anshelm and Hultman, *Discourses*; Jonas Anshelm and Martin Hultman, 'A Green Fatwā? Climate Change as a Threat to the Masculinity of Industrial Modernity', *NORMA*, 9, 2 (2014); Daniel Lindvall, Kjell Vowles and Martin Hultman, *Upphettning: Demokratin i klimatkrisens tid* (Stockholm: Fri tanke, 2020), 118–45.

[156] Bernhard Forchtner, *The Far Right and the Environment: Politics, Discourse and Communication* (London: Routledge, 2019); Malm, *White Skin*; Kjell Vowles and Martin Hultman, 'Scare-Quoting Climate: The Rapid Rise of Climate Denial in the Swedish Far-Right Media Ecosystem', *Nordic Journal of Media Studies*, 3, 1 (2021).

[157] Bern and Thauersköld, *Chill-Out*, 14.

[158] See CLINTEL, a Heartland Institute-initiated petition questioning the results of the IPCC, 'There Is No Climate Emergency', available at https://clintel.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/World-Climate-Declaration-Sept-2020.pdf (last visited 16 Oct. 2020).

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We argue that the ramifications of climate change in terms of complexity and uncertainty made neoliberal reforms seem 'natural' for several actors in the late 1980s. This framework also aided the push for consumer citizenship promoted by followers of Mises. At the same time these arguments insulated the industry from direct interference from the state, as well as policy suggestions in that direction. Simultaneously we see a concerted defence of industry and growth in some publications based on a strong sense of technological determinism and cornucopianism in the tradition of Simon, most likely introduced to Swedish actors by Kahn. The dividing line between our actors seems to be the issue of whether the industry needed to be *made* green or if it would *become* green simply by pursuing its own logic. Both positions indicate a mistrust of democratic and public influence on environmental protection in forms other than as consumers. The environmental movement was portrayed as being driven by ulterior motives, special interests or by religious conviction. Here the influence from public choice theory is evident, and the question of whether opinion and knowledge regimes external to the market/industry/economy could be trusted also seems to be a crucial divide among the actors in the mid-1990s.

The idea of limits based on non-anthropocentric terms was hotly contested and probably influenced the abandonment of goals based on thresholds to instead focus on terms of feasibility in Swedish environmental policies. Among the actors, the interests of capital and industry seem to have won the battle in this conflict. Another turning point might be the issue of interestedness and that when environmental and climate policies really started to be implemented, we saw a push to protect national industries through the notion of harmonised and perfected policy in the international arena. This push to insulate national industry further demonstrates the relatively small step needed for certain actors within this sphere to join forces with the rising far right.

Crucial for our understanding of the delay of climate policy today thus seems to be that the fossil fuel industry is definitely the most fervent critic and obstructive force of climate action, but that different domestic industrial interests, even in a country lacking fossil fuel extraction, have played a similar role. This means that even though the actors did not have a vested interest in preserving fossil fuels, they acted as if they did throughout our period. Our analysis thus shows the need to revisit some general assumptions in the field of climate obstruction studies. The US fossil fuel companies played a pivotal role in the spread of climate policy delay and obstruction, but the way environmental policy has been obstructed historically since the 1970s leads us to question if the common ground is not more to be found in the adherence to certain economic and political rationalities than to fossil fuels as such.

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