

## Why the generation that caused the climate crisis is not acting

In the previous sections, I noted that climate crisis was principally brought about in a single lifetime, mine. Today, I would like to address the question of why we're not acting. As it turns out, this is arguably a generational issue.

First, allow me to quickly recap what I noted during the last section:

Three quarters of all the CO<sub>2</sub> (that's carbon dioxide, the principal greenhouse gas causing the climate crisis) was put into our planet's atmosphere in the 60 years of my lifetime. Most of it was put there by wealthy countries. In contrast, the poorest half of humanity had virtually nothing to do with bringing the climate crisis about – though they will suffer the most.

An unusual time delay is partly responsible here. For decades, massive amounts of greenhouse gases were released into the atmosphere, seemingly without significantly impacting the global climate. Many people, ignoring the warnings of scientists, simply didn't believe that doing this was a problem, as the consequences of our actions had not yet caught up with us. Now that they are quickly arriving, coming to grips with what we have done is...well...difficult. It really is mind-boggling.

Mind-boggling for everyone, but, in a certain way, especially for my generation in the developed world: those most responsible for this crisis. How can we even begin to come to grips with what we have done?

Is it surprising that many of us are in a state of denial? Deep, deep denial.

We hear a lot about denial of the climate crisis nowadays. Usually this refers to theories that are advanced, often by or for fossil fuel interests, that in some way deny that the climate crisis is happening, or deny its severity, or that it is human-caused, or something of the sort.

To many people, these attempts at denial sound pretty outlandish, as they fly in the face of reason and the facts. However, to some individuals, those who are themselves in a state of denial, often deep denial, they provide a way out: a way to not face up to what we have done, as what we have done borders on the unthinkable.

Is it at all surprising that those in denial would question the truth?

Of course, since before I was born, scientists have been alerting both the public and policy makers to the problem. Perhaps not surprisingly, those in denial often lash out at these messengers. You may have heard some of them. They can sound something like this:

“After all, I have lived all my life without seeing any significant consequences from the burning of fossil fuels. Sure, there have been some pretty bad storms and crazy weather lately, but there have always been bad storms and wild weather. Who's to say that they were caused by human

action? Scientists? Who's to say they're right? Maybe their instruments are wrong. Maybe their theories are wrong. Maybe their computer models are wrong. Maybe this hasn't been caused by human beings at all. Maybe it's just the natural cycles of climate. Maybe it's sunspot active. Maybe, maybe the scientists are corrupt. Maybe they're part of some insidious global plot to undermine democracy.”

I know, this can sound pretty silly. However, all of these theories denying the climate crisis have not only been advanced, they have all gotten significant traction with certain sections of the public: often, those in denial. Incidentally, and perhaps not surprisingly, denial of the climate crisis is most common in wealthy countries – which, perhaps not surprisingly, largely brought about the crisis.

Even if individuals in my generation move past denial, there is the real danger of delay, climate delay. In other words, if we come to grips with the fact that the climate crisis is upon us and that we have caused it – and hey, that's a lot to come to grips with – then how should we proceed? Slowly, with caution? Or decisively, as time is of the utmost essence?

Simple answer? My lifetime was the time to have acted. The six decades that I have lived was the time to have acted. The time for successful climate intervention is now receding quickly; we simply cannot delay any longer. As we shall see throughout this series, we need to fundamentally rethink and change the way that our species relates to this planet – and we need to do it now.

Although different in a variety of ways, climate denial and climate delay can result in the same thing: Nothing. Inaction.

There are three groups that should be particularly and profoundly upset about all this.

First, the half of the world's population that had a minimal impact on CO<sub>2</sub> rise, yet will suffer its consequences the most.

Second, let's not forget all non-human life on earth, who hold no responsibility for CO<sub>2</sub> rise. They will never know why this is all happening, yet are suffering and dying en masse already.

The third group is the children of the people who did this. In speaking to my students, I am for the most part speaking to this group (although, as they hail from all over the world, some of my students come from places that did little to bring about this crisis). While many of this group may have benefited from the fossil fuel economy, they largely had no choice in the matter. After all, parents do not generally decide whether or not they are going to buy a McMansion or gas-guzzling SUV based on the input of their children.

This last group is also in many ways currently leading the worldwide revolt against the climate crisis.

Because my generation has not acted, I am speaking to this younger generation. Not only in the classroom, but here, as I imagine you as the principal audience for this prerecorded talk.

The problem is that my generation is still largely in power across the planet.

Consider the US. federal government. The average age of Congress is around my age, 60. The Supreme Court is nearly ten years older, pushing 70. And, of course, Donald Trump was the first person ever elected President of the United States in his seventies. We could continue with state and local governments (the average age of a Governor is early sixties), but the story is much the same, as it is in the corporate world. The average age of a CEO of a major corporation is 56.

Of course, it does not necessarily follow from this that my generation cares little about the climate crisis. Unfortunately, polls reveal that this is in fact often the case.

A poll by Yale and George Mason Universities asked voters what would be the most important issues for them in the 2020 presidential election. Among my generation, so-called “baby boomers,” global warming ranked number 18 out of 29 as an area of concern. Instead, the leading issues were the economy, healthcare, and Social Security. Other concerns ranked ahead of global warming included terrorism, immigration reform, and border security. The generation after mine (so-called Gen X – basically people who are now in their forties through mid-fifties) did not rank global warming much higher as an issue of concern: for them it is 15 out of 29. Finally, the generation before mine, people the age of Donald Trump and older, ranked it lowest of all: 23 out of 29.

It’s not that these folks necessarily deny that anthropogenic climate change is taking place. According to this poll, 70% of registered voters in the US. now believe that the climate is changing because of human action, which is up from what it has been in recent years. While this might seem heartening, the problem is that the climate crisis, although now increasingly acknowledged as real, is just not much of a priority for many people. Sadly, as this poll reveals, this is a generational issue: the older you are, the less urgent you will likely find the climate crisis. People forty and above just don’t see this as very important, at all.

In many respects, this is hardly surprising, as these older generations lived their lives largely without seeing the consequences of their actions because of that strange time delay – which lasted for decades – that we took up in the previous section.

But perhaps polls aren’t all that revealing, perhaps the generation in power has been acting, has been lowering CO2 emissions. After all, isn’t that what the Paris Accord signed at COP21 is all about? Didn’t the nations of the world agree to limit global temperature rise to a reasonable 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit)? In fact, they did agree to this.

The problem is that global temperatures have already risen by two-thirds this amount, by 1.8 degrees Fahrenheit. When did all this happen? You guessed it: principally during the six decades of my lifetime.

Not only are CO2 emissions on the rise, but they are – astonishingly – rising far more quickly now than when the Paris Accord was signed. At that time (2015), CO2 emissions were rising at less than half a percent per year. In 2018, global CO2 emissions rose by a staggering 2.7%. That’s five times as much as when the Paris Accord was signed. In case you’re wondering,

even though there had been a lowering trend in the US, 2018 was well above the world average with a 3.4% increase.

Simply put, during my lifetime we (and by “we” I principally mean wealthy countries) have been dumping vast amounts of CO<sub>2</sub> other greenhouse gases into the atmosphere each and every year – and every year we have on average been dumping significantly more than the year before. As last year proved, we have by no means been slowing down since the Paris Accord was signed.

How far off are we from the target of the Paris Accord? The goal is to reduce emissions to between 80-95% of the levels that we had thirty years ago, back in 1990, back when I was thirty.

So, no, the people in power are not sufficiently addressing this issue – not by a long shot.

What, then, do we need to do to keep this crisis from becoming even worse? In the next section, I will be taking up this question – and offering a radical answer.