



Human Flourishing Or “Living Naturally”: Alex Epstein’s Case For Using More Oil, Coal And Natural Gas

Tilak Doshi

March 31, 2022

Following his first book — a *New York Times* [NYT +0.1%](#) and a *Wall Street Journal* bestseller published in 2014 – that made a compelling [moral case for fossil fuels](#), Alex Epstein’s new book on the same theme hits bookstores next month. It might be said that in sports, as in intellectual debates, the best defence is offence. And that is precisely what Epstein does in this book entitled “[Fossil Future: Why Global Human Flourishing Requires More Oil, Coal, and Natural Gas—Not Less](#)”. The book forcefully argues against the widespread notion held by “designated experts” – especially climate scientists — that fossil fuel use needs to be rapidly eliminated.

Epstein starts off by laying out what he calls a “human flourishing” framework for thinking about energy issues in chapters 1 to 3. He then uses this conceptual framework to marshal and evaluate the data in describing the benefits of fossil fuel use in chapters 4 to 6 and the potentially adverse “side effects” in chapters 7 – 9. In the last two chapters, 10 and 11, he assesses policies and strategies to advance human flourishing. It’s a long book (432 pages excluding footnotes and the index) and covers an enormous amount of relevant material, much of which cannot be covered in the space of a brief review. But let’s cover the highlights.

Man Is The Measure Of All Things

In his [masterful survey](#) of Western civilization from the Middle Ages to modernity, the British art historian Kenneth Clark traces the emergence of the Florentine Renaissance and its humanist architecture and cites the Greek philosopher Protagoras who said “Man is the measure of all things”. To the sensibilities of the modern Western mind, of course, this smacks of human arrogance and its rapacious attitude to nature. The [intelligentsia of the West](#) would feel far more at home with Jean Jacques Rousseau’s worship of nature and the belief in the moral worth of the “noble savage”.

Epstein constructs his “human flourishing framework” with precisely this contrast between world views. The reigning “anti-human” narrative ignores the incalculable benefits of fossil fuels

to global human welfare, sees the earth's climate system in a "delicate balance", "catastrophises" the role of carbon dioxide (the major greenhouse gas emitted by the combustion of fossil fuels) with dire predictions of climate doom, and asserts that the primary moral goal of human society is to quickly and radically eliminate human impacts on a pristine environment. In opposition to this, the author's "human flourishing" views suggest that public policies should recognize the continued and expanding role of fossil fuels in the betterment of human welfare. This holds even more so in the developing countries where "living with nature" means poor or limited access to energy, leading to degrading poverty and deprived, unfulfilled lives.

The Benefits: "Our Unnaturally Liveable Fossil-Fuelled World"

Hundreds of millions of citizens have newly emerged from poverty in recent decades and are beginning to enjoy the fruits of economic growth and technological progress across Asia, Africa and Latin America in recent decades. This constitutes among the greatest achievements in human history. Yet, as Epstein reminds us, there is widespread ignorance of this, especially among those in the developed West who take middle class lifestyles for granted.

He cites a college survey in the UK on awareness of world poverty — defined as living on less than \$2 a day in today's dollars. The survey asked: "In the last 30 years the proportion of the world population living in extreme poverty has . . ." The possible answers were "decreased," "remained more or less the same," and "increased." A full 55% of the respondents thought it got worse, 33% thought it remained more or less the same, and only 12% thought it decreased.

Modern economic growth and humanity's long grind to emerge from widespread poverty is also a story of the increased use of fossil fuels. Epstein illustrates this with "hockey sticks" charts which show the increased use of fossil fuels correlated with increases in population, in GDP per capita and in life expectancy at birth. Humans benefited greatly by going up the energy ladder, from using wood, straw and cow-dung since the dawn of time to the rapid growth in coal mining that accompanied the 19th century Industrial Revolution, and to the widespread use of oil and natural gas the 20th century and beyond.

Fossil fuels represent the best chance for many developing countries to quickly emerge as middle income economies that can devote more resources to fighting environmental problems facing them both now and in the future. As the author points out, fossil fuels provide "low-cost, on-demand, versatile, global energy" which is the basis for machines and improved labour productivity. These in turn have led people to have fulfilling lives, with greater leisure and more options to pursue creative achievements. Oil, gas and coal not only provide electric power and transport fuels but are also the source of the materials of modern life which we take for granted (plastics, fertilizers, pharmaceuticals). They make possible cheap food production, clean running water, housing and sanitation, cooking, and space cooling and heating – all the comforts of middle class living.

Epstein notes that there are still billions of people who live in the "natural world" in the developing countries where households do not have access or have inadequate access to electricity and fuels for cooking. For instance, in households that cook using charcoal, foraged wood and cow-dung, indoor air-pollution is the largest single health risk factor for women and

girls in India. As inimitably described by Epstein, fossil fuels have taken a naturally dirty environment and made it unnaturally clean.

To the oft-repeated claims that alternatives can “replace” fossil fuels, Epstein notes that our standard of assessment must be “the ability to produce, not just the uniquely cost-effective energy we get from fossil fuels today, but the far greater amount that will be needed in the decades to come.” Solar and wind power are dilute (low density) and intermittent sources of energy that will not be able to replace fossil fuels to any great extent for the foreseeable future.

Increasing carbon dioxide levels in the earth’s atmosphere and the associated “greenhouse effect” which could lead to global warming is the one “externality” (or “side-effect” as Epstein calls it) that can possibly justify radical restrictions on fossil fuel use. It is claimed that the greenhouse effect can cause more frequent extreme weather, a rapid increase in sea-levels and ocean acidification among other adverse climate effects. Epstein reviews these claims and finds little basis for the doom-mongering that permeates mass media coverage on these issues. An objective assessment of the historical data, the failure of 50 years of predictions of global climate disaster, the proven benefits of carbon dioxide to plant growth and the greening of the earth, and the poor performance of the extant climate models suggest that claims of an impending climate doom are misleading.

Maximizing Energy Freedom

As emphasized by Epstein, the reigning narrative of the climate industrial complex — championed by “designated experts” like Paul Ehrlich, John Holdren, James Hansen, Al Gore, Bill McKibben, Michael Mann and Amory Lovins and disseminated by the mainstream media for which “if it bleeds, it leads” — needs to be countered effectively. The claims of “climate emergency” and the bid to influence policy makers to rapidly end the use of fossil fuels threatens the very catastrophe that the “designated experts” and their cheerleaders claim to be working against. In this challenge, what does Alex Epstein – who is neither a climate scientist nor an economist – bring to the table?

To be sure, most of Epstein’s arguments have been authoritatively covered by some of the most eminent experts in the field. These include leading climate scientists disagreeing with the “scientific consensus” on global warming such as physicists Steven Koonin, William Happer, Ivan Giaever who won the Nobel Prize in Physics, and Richard Lindzen; economists such as Nobel Prize winner William Nordhaus and Richard Tol who have written extensively on the costs of carbon emissions; and generalists such as Bjorn Lomborg and Michael Shellenberger. These contributors cover many of the same issues that Epstein’s book discusses.

Epstein gained his BA in Philosophy from Duke University in 2002, was a former fellow of the Ayn Rand Institute, founded the Center for Industrial Progress and is an adjunct scholar at the Cato Institute. At a 2016 hearing on climate policies held by the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works in which Epstein testified, Senator Barbara Boxer pointedly asked, knowing full well the answer: “Mr. Epstein, are you a scientist?” “No, I’m a philosopher”, Epstein replied, adding that he helps people think “more clearly”. This was much to the Senator’s evident chagrin.

While Epstein might have sounded presumptuous, this is precisely what is needed in the frontlines of frequently muddled and polemical debates on climate policy. Epstein is the master of debate talking points. He is frequently interviewed on TV and has participated in several panels debating others convinced of the reigning “climate emergency” narrative that passes for “consensus science”. Epstein writes in a style that is easy to read and serves well as the layman’s guide to complex issues on climate change and policy choices. As the regulatory state expands inexorably at the expense of free markets and human liberty, we need more people like Alex Epstein.