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What the ‘New York Times’ Climate Blockbuster Missed

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Are we doomed? Is it our fault? Our rapidly warming climate strongly suggests the answer is yes. But we had a chance to fix it, Nathaniel Rich argues in “[Losing Earth](#),” his epic *New York Times Magazine* feature released on Wednesday.

Rich argues that when climate change first entered the American political imagination some 40 years ago, politicians in the United States were keen to confront the problem head-on. Obviously, they did no such thing.

Rich narrates the period that led up to that failure from 1979 through 1989 through the trajectories of climate scientist James Hansen and environmental lobbyist Rafe Pomerance, who went to great lengths to convince politicians and the public that the threat of global warming needed to be acted upon immediately to prevent civilizational collapse. Al Gore, then a young congressman, features prominently, too.

Rich’s story is a dogged, important, and nuanced piece of political journalism. Like much reporting on the subject, his piece attempts to understand a phenomenon feminist scholar Donna Haraway has termed the Great Dithering: our apparent inability and lack of will to curb emissions. Rich covers a lot of ground in the story’s 30,000 words, which is no easy task given how much is at stake.

Still, his account still falls short in one important way: It’s still not clear that it succeeds in showing how “we” as a species are to blame for failing to stop a threat fueled mainly by American corporations.

Rich begins by summarizing a decade of meetings, hearings, summits, and backroom deals between scientists, politicians, and lobbyists. The upshot? We blew it, and failed in “breaking our suicide pact with fossil fuels.” Our only hope now rests in an “irrational optimism” that something—or someone—will change the course of nature. “It will be too late to avoid some catastrophes, but perhaps not others,” he submits.

In the story, global warming is presented as a problem that humans aren't fully equipped or prepared to confront. "We have trained ourselves, whether culturally or evolutionarily, to obsess over the present," Rich writes. We "worry about the medium term and cast the long term out of our minds, as we might spit out a poison." At a private event unveiling the piece Tuesday night, Rich put it more bluntly. "We haven't reckoned, at the level of civilization, with what we've done to ourselves," he explained.

But who's done what to whom exactly? Who is the "we"?

The fact remains that other nations—197 of them—haven't been quite as profligate on climate action as the United States, which accounts for around 15 percent of emissions worldwide. The kind of outright climate denial that helped arrest our participation in the Kyoto Protocol 21 years ago and, more recently, the Paris Agreement, isn't widespread outside of the United States, either. It's not that the global community has a fool-proof mitigation plan; it does not. But America's particular failure to address climate change isn't a failure of all of humanity. The Paris Agreement is "nonbinding, unenforceable and unheeded," as Rich correctly writes, for a number of reasons—many of them having to do with industry influence. What's more, the world's commitment to climate action has not rested solely with the small cadre Rich profiles.

There's some crucial context Rich's piece leaves out. Some countries contribute more to climate change than others. Polluters tend to cluster in the Global North. Climate impacts, meanwhile, have tended to batter the Global South most brutally with droughts and floods and extreme heat, climate impacts profiled—to the *Times*' credit—in the photos accompanying the story.

There are stark distinctions within all countries between haves and have-nots, between polluters and those who live relatively low-carbon lives by simply consuming less than their wealthier brethren. This happens even within nations: People of color in the United States are far more likely to live near coal-fired power plants and suffer the associated health effects, and live in places where heavy weather hits hardest, thanks to years of targeted disinvestment in things like housing and infrastructure.

And despite contributing relatively little to climate change, small island nations and Native communities are facing existential threats because of sea-level rise and catastrophic weather.

Rich's piece "fails to underscore the fossil fuel companies responsible for the climate destruction we're experiencing," Fenton Lutunatabua, Pacific regional coordinator for the climate advocacy group 350.org, said in an e-mail. Instead, it "attempts to spread the blame to all of us. In Fiji, we have no fossil fuel extraction, yet our communities and our lands bear the cost of this industry's greed."

The numbers on this point are fairly clear: Just 100 companies have been responsible for 71 percent of emissions since 1988. According to a 2015 study from Oxfam, the poorest half of the world's population accounts for just 10 percent of emissions; around half stem from the richest 10 percent. That should inculcate the world's most carbon-hungry citizens—those who fly often, for instance—but suggests a more nuanced picture than the old Pogo cartoon: "We have met the enemy, and he is Us."

Rich isn't unaware of this: In fact, the congressional hearings he detailed clearly pinpoint the fossil-fuel industry as the main source of the problem. But his story's analysis stops there.

There are generational differences, too, in how people view the climate problem. That the window for effective climate action closed in 1989 is a sobering thought for millennials, who were either children (or zygotes) at the time and who overwhelmingly see the urgent need for climate action across party lines. According to 25-year-old climate organizer Varshini Prakash, "It feels like a certain sense of fatalism that to me feels like closing the book before our generation has even had a chance to live out our chapters."

Prakash represents a different generation of climate advocate than the heroes of Rich's story. As a student, she successfully pushed the University of Massachusetts–Amherst to divest from the fossil-fuel industry. She then helped form the millennial-led Sunrise Movement, which has spent the last several months getting politicians to swear off donations from fossil-fuel companies—and campaigning for some of the politicians who do. "Our generation is incredibly clear that fossil-fuel companies are a problem and that burning fossil fuels is directly incompatible with a livable planet and that our society and economy is rigged," Prakash said by phone. "It's too easy to just say that there's something innate in human nature that causes us to not make choices about our long-term future. Our generation gets it."

She noted that there is an urgency gap among large parts of the public on climate change, and that many people really are more stirred by talk of jobs and health care. But there's a reason for that that has more to do with the structure of the economy than the human condition.

"So much of the country is worrying about their next paycheck, or whether they're safe walking down the street because of their skin color. A lot of those fears are created by the sickening wealth inequality that we have in this country, that gives some people so much and leaves other people fighting for scraps such that they can't even get their head above the water to think about longer-term issues," Prakash explained.

Put differently: Systemic social and economic inequalities contribute to the problem, because they make it virtually impossible for most people to care—and organize—around forces not affecting them in the immediate present.

Rich doesn't give much airtime to that bigger picture, and that's an important omission, especially given the changes in policy that occurred during the precise period he outlines. Public awareness about climate change grew at a time when the kinds of policies that seem to be the most obvious solutions to the problem—strong regulations and massive public investments—fell out of favor with politicians on both sides of the Atlantic. We can blame politicians like John Sununu, as Rich's article does, for questioning solid climate science for his personal political gain. But we can't ignore that free-market ideologies and capitalism itself played a role, too—and that virtually everyone in government was responsible.

Ronald Reagan's election, for starters, represented a major victory in the political right's 30-year push to dismantle strong welfare states and tightly regulated industries. And several of the libertarian institutions birthed during that period by free-marketeers—like the Cato Institute and

the Heritage Foundation—would become some of the loudest vehicles for climate denial. With backing from Wall Street and major manufacturers, the Republican president swore during his 1980 campaign that his administration would advocate strongly for business interests and not “interfere with the private sector.”

Starting in 1976, a series of Supreme Court decisions also began loosening the spigot for industry donations to politicians, which brings us back to corporate power. The number of registered corporate PACs in the United States grew from 89 in 1974 to 1,467 by 1982. Pro-business ideas flourished through the 1970s accordingly, exploding after Reagan took office. “During the 1970s, the political wing of the nation’s corporate sector staged one of the most remarkable campaigns in the pursuit of power in recent memory,” wrote Thomas Edsall, then a Beltway reporter, adding that by the early 1980s corporations wielded “a level of influence leverage approaching that of the boom days of the 1920s.”

Prakash takes issue with Rich’s benign characterization of the fossil-fuel industry, and his assertion that its full-fledged denial campaigns only started picking up and gaining steam among Republicans later on. “This is the story that the industry wants you to believe,” she says. In fact, “it exempts us from taking responsibility for the crisis at hand.”

Climate scientist Michael Mann was blunter, noting that “to pretend that this massive PR campaign by polluting interests has nothing to do with the current impasse we face in the US on climate policy is to be naive at best and disingenuous at worst.”

Beyond the question of industry’s role in American climate politics is a bigger one about how power works. Much of the second part of “Losing Earth,” for instance, hinges on a key question: If 1987 delivered the Montreal Protocol—an international treaty to rapidly phase out CFCs, a chemical used in hairspray and refrigerators, and prone to rot holes in the ozone layer—why couldn’t a similar compact be reached on carbon dioxide?

The story Rich tells of this effort is one of an inspiring, global collaboration, where even right-wing leaders like Margaret Thatcher united with their political foes for the common good; a model for what climate politics could look like if we simply stripped away all the partisan bickering. But the answer for why the energy of the Montreal Protocol didn’t translate to a deal on carbon could perhaps be summed up more simply: The economy as we know it wasn’t built around CFCs. It was built on fossil fuels, and the executives who produce them aren’t eager to give up the money and power they provide.

Climate advocates have long labored under the notion that if you simply get the right information in front of the right people in the right place, change will happen. The editor’s note to “Losing Earth” repeats this flawed logic: “If they had only known then what we know now—they could have just seen these photographs—perhaps things would have turned out different.”

As Hansen and Pomerance learned, the strategy failed then, and has yielded few victories since. As Republicans embrace full-on climate denial, Democrats and large parts of the environmental movement have chased industry-driven, backroom compromises on climate, like 2010’s ill-fated and watered-down Waxman-Markey cap-and-trade bill.

Rich's description of a raucous 1987 night after an oil- and gas-sponsored convening called "Preparing for Climate Change" sums up the approach: "Oil-and-gas men joked with the environmentalists, the trade groups representatives chatted up the regulators and the academics got merrily drunk. . . . It all seemed like the start of a grand bargain, a uniting of factions—a solution." Needless to say, it was not.

Optimistically, Rich's investigation can be read as a eulogy not for the planet or humanity's capacity to save it but for a particular way of doing politics that many of today's climate organizers—confronting the fossil-fuel industry head-on, and looking to change up who holds the keys to the economy—seem to have bid goodbye to.

Critically, we should remember that it's not too late to change course. As Mann writes in the most recent edition of his book *Return to the Madhouse*, co-authored with Tom Toles:

It's late in the game, but not too late. We may have permanently warmed the planet, but so far only to a limited extent. We still have the opportunity to slow down and end carbon release in time to avoid the worst, truly terrifying levels of disruption.