

CLIMATE CHANGE POLICY AND THE SUPER-HERO SYNDROME

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There is a genre of Hollywood “feel-good” disaster movie, where everything seems nearly hopeless until the end, and then suddenly, many times against all hope, the super-hero (or super-heroes) saves the day. Whether it be human heroes that blow up the Earth-killing asteroid just in the nick of time; good mutants that defeat the bad mutants just in time; bad mutants turned good mutants that destroy the stayed-bad mutants just in time; future humans and non-human allies that save the Galaxy from the Empire. Anyway, you get the general storyline. The bad people/organisms /things win for the first 95% of the movie then the good people/organisms/things win against all the odds in the last 5%.

The United Nations Climate Change bureaucracy, which tends to be full of economists, engineers and enviro-managers rather than actual climate scientists and ecologists, seems to have been watching too many of these feel-good disaster movies. Seems we need to make them watch the “feel bad” disaster movies instead, like the one where the Sun eats up the Earth, or perhaps a steady diet of the unlimited supply of zombie apocalypse movies. They need something a lot darker, where super-heroes don’t save the day. Then again, maybe they should just grow up and accept that super-heroes only exist in movies. Or maybe they should just listen to the scientists and ecologists a lot more.

The United Nation’s main super-hero is called BECCS (Bio-Energy Carbon Capture & Storage). I know, not exactly as catchy as Superman, Thor, Cat Woman, or Wolverine, but what would you expect from a bunch of climate bureaucrats? BECCS is a true super-hero. The Bad Carbon will continue spewing itself into our atmosphere for decades to come, threatening to remove the ecological basis for modern human civilization. BECCS’s friends, Energy Efficiency and Clean Power, will have held back Bad Carbon a bit, but could not stop BC in time! Then at the last minute, just before human civilization melts down, BECCS sucks up BC and deposits it deep in the Earth never to return (well at least for a few thousand years hopefully).

The problem is that BECCS is not real; it’s a bunch of hopes and a religious belief in technology wrapped together. It assumes that we can set aside about a third of the current arable land on the planet to grow energy crops, instead of food. Then we can burn all those energy crops to help power our modern civilization, and can store all of the resulting carbon dioxide (billions of tons of the stuff) underground safely for thousands of years. That’s a lot of carbon dioxide per year, needing an infrastructure equivalent to the current oil & gas industry to transport it and pump it into the ground. What tiny-scale testing of the CCS (Carbon Capture and Storage) part of BECCS that has been carried out so far could most politely be described as “deeply disappointing”.

Ignoring this, the U.N. people assume that BECCS will start riding to the rescue on a major scale within 20 years or less.

What if BECCS isn't up to the task? Other eco-technocrats have an army of super-heroes ready to help. These eco-techies seem to be into super-hero ensemble movies – maybe we should call them “The C-Men”. If EE, CP and BECCS can't beat the deadly BC, there is always – wait for it, drum roll please... DAC!!!! (Direct Air Capture) will save the day! BECCS couldn't suck up enough of the highly concentrated carbon dioxide at the power plant exhaust, but DAC can get enough of it after it has become highly diffuse in the air! If that doesn't work there is EW (Enhanced Weathering: dig up truly colossal amounts of a certain type of rock, turn it into powder and spread it over the Earth), OF (Ocean Fertilization: fertilize carbon capturing organisms in the ocean), and SRaM (Solar Radiation Management: block/reflect the Sun's energy to cool the planet).

Why do we need all these super-heroes? Because without these super-heroes we would have to accept that large-scale government intervention will be required to fundamentally change our societies to use a lot less energy. A lot like a war-style economy. A lot less belief in “free markets”, perhaps no economic growth for a while, a ton of pressure for a more equitable sharing of income and wealth, and a lot less use of fossil fuels. Not a reality that the powers-that-be want to deal with. So we get the mythical super-heroes instead.

Those that consider a Trump presidency to be a disaster do not understand that we are already in the disaster. Trump may speed up the disaster a little and is certainly more “in your face”, but he is just a symptom of a larger problem. In a way, you could say he is being a bit more truthful about his version of reality-denial. The problem is the inability of even the “progressives” among the powerful to accept the reality that the time for small measures is gone, and that drastic action is required now. In the early 1990's, those actions may have been relatively mild. Now, they are much bigger and the longer we wait, the bigger and riskier they get. Only denial, facilitated by mythical technocratic future super-heroes, can keep us from this truth.