

Jacobin's "Utopian" Geoengineering Leads to Dystopian Sun-blocking Technologies

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by Pat Mooney

In Jacobin Magazine (["The Need for Carbon Removal,"](#) July 24, 2018), Holly Jean Buck set out to convince readers that the left should develop a "utopian" political strategy favourable to Carbon Dioxide Removal (CDR) technology. While I appreciate the scope and substance of Buck's overview of the pros and cons of CDR, her article is a disturbing distraction from both the climate change issue and her own involvement in other geoengineering technologies – and collaboration with other geoengineering proponents.

Why does Buck make no reference to the other leading climate engineering technology being debated in science policy circles – Solar Radiation Management (SRM)? Only a month before the Jacobin article appeared, Buck co-authored an article with David Keith, a leading SRM proponent and part owner of a Direct Air Capture startup, which would significantly profit with the realization of some of Buck's proposals. The article, which appeared in *Global Environmental Politics*, argues forcefully for the establishment of a governance system for the possible deployment of SRM. Buck is arguing for "left" support of Carbon Dioxide Removal in Jacobin but asking science policy wonks to support Solar Radiation Management elsewhere. Why is there no mention of her advocacy for SRM in her Jacobin article?

For readers unfamiliar with SRM, Solar Radiation Management represents that suite of stratospheric interventions such as blowing sulfates or other particles into the stratosphere to block sunlight or to blow salt spray into ocean clouds to reflect more sunlight. Most scientists summarize SRM as a kind of artificial volcano that – like Mount Pinatubo in the Philippines in 1991 – could very faintly reduce sunlight and lower temperatures. To most Jacobin readers, this will sound like playing God with the planetary thermostat. It is.

But in recent years, SRM's presumed technological effectiveness (volcanic eruptions do temporarily lower temperatures); SRM's theoretical low cost (not considering its collateral or downwind damages); and its potential for quick global deployment (within a couple of years) makes the technology extremely attractive to governments that don't want to pay the political price of addressing climate change now.

Equally attractive is that SRM could be deployed by a single country or a new "coalition of the willing" that might separately or collectively include Russia, China and/or the USA without United Nations consideration. Jacobin readers will be shocked to know that SRM is on the negotiating table already and being seriously discussed by the IPCC (International Panel on Climate Change) where it is regarded with a mixture of horror and fascination. Alarmed countries in the global South have, since 2008 laid down a series of UN resolutions in different fora opposing geoengineering as a response to climate change.

Nevertheless, in the next few months, UN climate negotiators, in fact, will be reviewing IPCC studies that lay out CDR options but also mention SRM as potential options in the future. Why invest in high-risk speculative technofixes instead of using our imagination and social resources to develop and support real, socially just and

ecologically sustainable alternatives?

Buck acknowledges some of the problems with CDR. The technology involves chemical processes for removing carbon from air or exhaust. It has mainly attracted the interest and investment of fossil fuel companies, which have used it to market “clean coal” and attempts at greenwashing, and to accumulate carbon that can be pumped into oil wells to extract hard-to-access pockets of fuel.

Buck also addresses the issue of land grabs, rightly noting that schemes like Bio-Energy with Carbon Capture and Storage (BECCS) would require continent-sized plantations of trees, inevitably driving land speculation and driving people off of their lands.

For many reason that Buck notes – and others besides – CDR is not up to the task of drawing down carbon dioxide levels on a global scale. It’s very expensive, and most informed observers agree that it will take decades to develop effective versions.

CDR is, however, very effective at one thing: providing an excuse not to take immediate action on emissions reduction and mitigation. The IPCC has already adopted scenarios that involve massive use of CDR. The result is that precious climate funds are going into investment in an unproven technology instead of immediate action to reduce emissions and mitigate the worst of the climate crisis.

As Buck notes, “We aren’t even making much progress towards these Paris targets, which if achieved would still produce 3°C of warming — an amount widely agreed to lead to massive disruptions.” But what goes unmentioned is that the illusory promise of CDR is the keystone of the intellectual infrastructure that is being used to justify a lack of action.

If Buck’s desire for CDR comes true, by 2030 or so, the major powers (governments and corporations) who are benefiting by this diversion and delay, will be in a position to call for a climate “quick fix” insisting the world has no choice but to unleash massive stratospheric interventions that only they will control.

I doubt very much that Buck wants to surrender the thermostat to either Trump or Exxon but by not addressing both CDR and SRM in Jacobin – and by only addressing SRM in her science policy article, Buck is setting the Left on a wild goose chase and making space for the Right to lay its golden egg.