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'With great power comes great responsibility': climate change and the politics of simulation of the oil industry

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ABSTRACT

Research on how oil companies have misled the public and deflected responsibility for climate change suggests that, since the mid-2000s, the oil industry has shifted from traditional to new denialism regimes, including greenwashing and framing climate change as consumer-driven. I argue that a more profound transformation is underway: the oil industry is embedding itself within climate leadership not merely to circumvent the barriers posed by climate change to fossil capital accumulation but to remove them by reshaping reality through simulation. Drawing on Baudrillard, I show how this simulation reframes climate change as a techno-capitalist challenge and socio-economic opportunity, recasting the oil industry from main culprit to ultimate saviour. Prompted by Al Jaber's controversial appointment as COP28 president, I examine how, in this neoliberal simulated reality, the existential question of climate change is 'dissolved' and 'resurrected' within a market-driven logic that advances fossil capitalism no longer *despite* but *through* climate change.

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KEYWORDS Oil industry; climate change; reality and simulation; neoliberalism; Baudrillard and Blühdorn; traditional and new denialism

Introduction

In January 2023, the appointment of Sultan Al Jaber as head of COP28, the 2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference, raised widespread criticism. How could the most important climate summit, and the first to focus on the impact of climate change on public health, take place in the United Arab Emirates, one of the world's top ten oil producers, and be led by the CEO of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC)? How could the CEO of an oil company help to solve a problem that the company itself and

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the industry it belongs to have contributed to creating? Al Jaber's pre-summit declarations that to 'phase-out' fossil fuels would mean to 'take the world back into caves' and that 'there is no science' showing that phasing out fossil fuel will achieve 1.5°C (The Guardian 2023) heightened concerns on the 'paradox' and 'hypocrisy' of his appointment.

In recent years, statements like Al Jaber's have faced growing scrutiny, driven by a surge in research on the communication strategies that the oil industry uses to mislead the public and shift responsibility for climate change. Drawing on this scholarship, I contend that the industry has progressively moved from outright climate change denialism to a threefold strategy:

(1) Advancing a 'new denialism' that acknowledges climate change yet 'advocates technological and market-based fixes that leave corporate power intact while creating new profit-making opportunities' (Carroll 2021, p. 19; Carroll et al. 2022);
(2) 'Greenwashing', that is, misleadingly portraying its products and processes as environmentally sustainable (Bowen 2014, Gunderson 2020, Megura and Gunderson 2022); and
(3) Shifting responsibility to consumers by reframing the climate crisis as demand-driven (Oreskes and Conway 2011, Supran and Oreskes 2017, 2021a, 2021b, Grasso 2019, 2022, Bonneuil . 2021, Franta 2021, Supran 2021, Munoz 2023, Staub 2023).

Al Jaber's statements align with this threefold trajectory. In response to accusations of 'climate denialism', he has acknowledged climate change and voiced support for climate science as a basis for renewables and 'lower carbon oil and gas'. Yet he has insisted that 'demand' will 'dictate what sort of energy source will help meet the growing global energy requirements' (Harvey 2023a), omitting that oil companies are responsible for two-thirds of global industrial greenhouse gas emissions (Grasso 2019, p. 106) and have long engaged in public deception and legislative obstruction – leaving 80% of global energy dependent on fossil fuels. Blaming consumers obscures the industry's responsibility, its minimal 3% investment in clean energy (McGlade . 2023), the scientific consensus that 'there is no such thing as "low carbon" oil and gas' (Otto, cited in The Guardian 2023), and the $3 trillion in new extraction plans by BP, Chevron, Exxon, Shell, and TotalEnergies – fundamentally incompatible with the Paris Agreement's 1.5°C target, Al Jaber's self-declared 'North Star' (Global Witness 2023).

In this article, I argue that Al Jaber's statements reflect a broader pattern within the oil industry, which is consistent with the trajectory from denialism to 'new denialism', greenwashing, and the individualization of responsibility. Yet I also contend that his appointment as head of COP28 signals a new

strategy of deception and deflection of responsibility that has yet to be fully investigated. This emerging strategy frames climate change as a techno-capitalist challenge and socio-economic opportunity that the oil industry is uniquely positioned to address.[1]

This view has been vigorously and repeatedly expressed by Al Jaber (2023a, 2023b, 2023c, p. 49):

> 'The oil and gas industry has a special responsibility for addressing climate change' because ' ,' and therefore 'we need the oil and gas giants of today to invest in the energy systems of tomorrow, leveraging their vast networks, experience, resources, and reach in the process' (emphasis mine).

BP's former CEO has advanced a similar argument: '[W]ith the thousands of engineers and the thousands of scientists and one of the world's largest trading organizations and decades of experience in the energy markets … [w]e have both an opportunity and a responsibility to help the world transition [to green energy].' (Looney 2021). For the CEO of ExxonMobil 'world-scale problems like climate change, need world-scale companies to help solve them like ExxonMobil' (Woods 2023).

These commitments to address climate change are more than 'paradoxical' or 'hypocritical'. They are reflective of a late-modern condition that French philosopher Baudrillard (1994) has described as 'simulation'. Simulation denotes a fundamental crisis of the referentials that underpin reality to the effect that reality is not solely misrepresented but constantly 'resurrected' and re-enacted in a simulated environment. For the oil industry, this means that its strategies of deception and deflection of responsibility are no longer confined to reality by questioning anthropogenic climate change or the absence of its commitment to address the climate crisis through new forms of denialism that 'greenwash' its products and shift responsibility onto consumers. The oil industry simulates a commitment to solving the climate crisis by recasting itself as the ultimate climate saviour rather than one of the primary culprits. Its goal is to establish a simulated reality in which it metamorphosizes 'into its opposite to perpetuate itself in its expurgated form' (Baudrillard 1994, p. 19).

In advancing this argument, I am not interested in criticizing Al Jaber per se. My aim is to show how the vision he and other oil CEOs outline, and his appointment as COP28 president, are emblematic of a momentous transformation in the oil industry's strategy: embedding itself within climate leadership to no longer merely circumvent the barriers posed by climate change to fossil capital accumulation, but to eliminate these barriers by reshaping 'through simulation' the oil industry's ontological reality – from culprit to saviour – and the ontological reality of climate change itself – from existential threat to techno-capitalist challenge and economic opportunity.

Hence, I argue that

despite through

. This means, following Baudrillard (1994, p. 2), that the existential question of climate change preserving biodiversity, securing access to resources, minimizing its impact on poverty and inequality, protecting the planet for future generations, and ultimately ensuring the perpetuation of life on Earth has been 'liquidated' and 'artificially resurrected' in the 'systems of signs' of the market that is, recast into an unprecedented economic opportunity that demands a 'business mindset', as Al Jaber and other oil leaders have frequently stated.

This article contributes to the growing literature on the communication strategies of the oil industry and the theoretical analysis of 'sustained unsustainability' (Blühdorn 2011, p. 45) by drawing on the largely underappreciated resource of the politics of simulation. The discussion proceeds in three main steps. First, I provide a brief overview of the literature, mapping the evolution from traditional to new denialism. Second, I introduce the concepts of and to account for the oil industry's evolving strategy. , focusing on recent speeches and interviews of Al Jaber and the CEOs of BP and ExxonMobil, I discuss how the oil industry's quest for leadership in the fight against climate change is the expression of a politics of simulation.

From traditional denialism to 'new denialism'

The 1990 IPCC First Assessment Report and the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio marked pivotal moments in communicating the scientific consensus on greenhouse gases (GHGs), particularly carbon dioxide from fossil fuels, to the public. Evidence shows that major oil companies understood climate science and its potential impacts as early as the late 1950s (Grasso 2019, p. 107). By the late 1960s, they initiated organized disinformation campaigns to cast doubt on the human causes of climate change. Scholars have highlighted the contrast between oil companies' internal awareness of fossil fuels' role in global warming and their external communication, which 'overwhelmingly communicated doubt' (Supran and Oreskes 2017). This strategy, akin to tobacco companies' approach to smoking risks, has been variously described as 'denialism', 'agnotology' (the strategic use of ignorance), and 'manufacturing doubt'. The oil industry has deployed this strategy both directly and indirectly.

Directly – through public statements, CEO interviews, adverts, and paid advertorials – oil companies have shifted their messaging over time: first casting doubt on climate change's very existence, then on its anthropogenic nature (attributing it to natural causes), and eventually on the role of carbon dioxide emissions from fossil fuels (acknowledging human influence but

attributing it to other GHGs). This involved emphasizing the complexity of climate dynamics and climate science's limitations, and how economically damaging, socially costly, and technically unsustainable it would be for societies to switch to allegedly 'greener' sources of energy. For instance, in a 2007 advertorial, ExxonMobil highlighted the 'daunting task' of 'selecting policies that balance economic growth and human development with the risks of climate change', and in 2013 its CEO maintained that 'uncertainties around the climate, … why it is changing, what the principal drivers of climate change are' still remain (Supran and Oreskes 2017, p. 8, 11).

Indirectly, the oil industry has fostered doubt by funding lobbying groups like the Global Climate Coalition, trade associations such as the American Petroleum Institute, think tanks like the George C. Marshall Institute and the Heartland Institute, and academic research – what Franta and Supran (2017) describe as the fossil fuel industry's 'colonization of academia' – often supported by powerful funders such as the Koch brothers. Research shows that 'between 2000 and 2016 the fossil fuel industry spent over $2 billion to influence climate legislation in the United States Congress' (Grasso 2019, p. 112) and that 'America's five largest oil and gas companies spent $3.6bn on corporate reputation advertising between 1986 and 2015' (Supran and Oreskes 2021b) to promote climate change doubts.

In the early 2000s, rising climate awareness made it harder for oil companies to sustain this doubt-mongering strategy. While they reduced (but did not stop) funding for anti-climate lobby groups, their communications evolved from denying climate change to rebranding themselves as environmentally conscious actors helping to solve the crisis. This shift was gradual and uneven: European oil companies took a more proactive stance, partially accepting responsibility, while U.S. companies remained largely reactive, denying accountability, with ExxonMobil only acknowledging climate change in 2014 (Grasso 2022, p. 27). A decade later, this rebranding strategy remains largely misleading. The concept of 'new denialism' effectively captures this deception.

Advanced by the Corporate Mapping Project, a research and community-engagement partnership co-directed by Shannon Daub and William Carroll, new denialism is 'both a discursive strategy and a substantive policy agenda' of the oil industry that accepts climate science but downplays its implications, sowing confusion on the need for significant public policy changes and societal transformations to avert climate disaster (Daub et al. 2021, p. 226). New denialism promotes 'market-based "solutions"' that do not harm big carbon', and the continued necessity of fossil fuel production (Daub et al. 2021, p. 226). Its proposed policies 'greater efficiency in carbon extraction and consumption, new technology, and incremental change' may appear 'credible responses to the scientific consensus' but are ultimately 'inadequate to the scale and urgency of the problem' (Carroll et al. 2021, p. 172). Through

'new denialism', oil companies have rebranded themselves as climate-conscious actors which are part of the solution and transitioned from a traditional regime of denialism to a 'regime of obstruction' (Carroll et al. 2021; Carroll et al. 2022) that hinders effective climate action by endorsing measures that appear proactive but ultimately reinforce the status quo.

In the remainder of this section, I develop a complementary and expanded understanding of new denialism to argue that its 'regime of obstruction' includes two prominent strategies adopted by the oil industry in its post-traditional denial phase: greenwashing and the individualization of responsibility. My contention is that new denialism – like traditional denialism – rests on a strategy of . This analysis will set the stage for the next section, where I discuss how has been complemented by the more insidious strategy of , that is, creating an altogether new reality for climate change and the oil industry itself.

Greenwashing is the strategy of making unsustainable practices appear environmentally sound, which the oil industry has pursued by overstating the effectiveness of its offsetting schemes, 'low-carbon' solutions, and cleaner energy technologies. The individualization of responsibility, on the other hand, frames climate change as a problem of individual consumption, diverting attention from the oil industry's denial, misinformation, lobbying, and obstruction of climate policy (Grasso 2022, p. 27). For example, ExxonMobil's 2021 noted that '[t]he Paris Agreement does not … require individual companies to decrease production to align with the goal of maintaining global temperature rise to below 2°C', instead framing the energy transition as 'related to society's demand for energy ' (emphasis added) (Li . 2022, p. 12). The oil industry thus presents itself 'as a kind of neutral innocent, buffeted by the forces of consumer demand' (Proctor 2012, p. 128).

Existing scholarship has treated greenwashing and the individualization of responsibility as governed by different logics. Greenwashing has been approached as a 'corporate practice of "deception" or "posturing"' (Gunderson 2020, p. 263) that through vague, omissive, partial, or outright false 'positive environmental communications' 'misleads consumers about companies' environmental performance or the environmental benefits of a product or service' (Bowen 2014, p. 2). Greenwashing is the oil industry's deliberate misalignment of 'discourse' and 'action' (Li . 2022) aimed at creating an 'advantage to the firm while imposing costs on society' (Bowen 2014, p. 2). It is a 'subtle form of climate change denialism that acknowledges climate change as a problem without diagnosing the root cause of the problem' and 'conceals environmentally harmful actions with the rhetoric of environmental friendliness' (Megura and Gunderson 2022, p. 1). Greenwashing is therefore a key component of new denialism's 'regime of obstruction'.

Conversely, the individualization of responsibility has been approached by Supran and Oreskes (2021a, p. 696), leading scholars of climate disinformation, as the expression of a and paradigm shift that 'mimic[s] the tobacco industry's documented strategy of shifting responsibility away from corporations – which knowingly sold a deadly product while denying its harms – and onto consumers'. Individualizing responsibility works through a logic of framing that resonates with dominant neoliberal dynamics: the individualization of risk, security, and economic decision-making, and the transformation of citizens into consumers. Its persuasive narrative overemphasizes the role of individual actions at the expense of structural forces and corporate power, thus 'narrowing, in dangerous ways, our "environmental imagination" and undermining our capacity to react effectively to environmental threats to human well-being' (Maniates 2001, p. 34). At best, individualized responsibility frames climate change as a crisis that can be addressed by individual acts of consumption. At worst, it encourages passivity and resignation because 'if climate protection becomes everyone's responsibility, [it does] end up being no-one's' (Kent 2009).

While agreeing with this analysis, I want to propose a complementary perspective focused on two key points. First, rather than constituting a separate paradigm, the individualization of responsibility operates within the same framework as greenwashing. Together, they are manifestations of a new denialism that 'camouflages its objectives' (Daub et al., 2021, p. 238) – not only by promoting a limited action agenda that protects fossil fuel profits through misleading policies and products, but also by shifting the burden of climate action from the industry onto individuals. Hence, as I will elaborate in the next section, whereas traditional denialism by questioning anthropogenic climate change, new denialism of the oil's industry commitment to address the climate crisis by 'greenwashing' its policies and products and deflecting responsibility onto consumers.

Consider BP's early 2000s campaign, which popularized the notion of 'carbon footprint' as part of its rebranding from British Petroleum to 'Beyond Petroleum'. The campaign included ads asking people about their carbon footprint and ways to reduce it, alongside billboards showcasing BP's renewable energy efforts. In a similar vein, Shell's 2020 Twitter poll asked followers 'What are you willing to change to help reduce emissions?' with options like 'stop flying' and 'buy electric vehicle', reinforcing the idea that climate change is a shared responsibility while suggesting that Shell is helping address the climate crisis. Likewise, in 2019, ExxonMobil's 'Thoughtful Driving Manifesto' encouraged public actions like using public transport while promoting its 'Esso Renewable Diesel' an allegedly 'greener' fuel that, in reality, offers only a modest 15% emissions reduction and is available at just a few selected stations.

In all these cases, oil companies paired the individualization of climate responsibility with greenwashing to exaggerate their environmental commitment in order to mask their unwillingness to address climate change. This strategy reflects the key tenets of new denialism's 'regime of obstruction': a discursive and policy-driven approach designed not to confront the root causes of the climate crisis but to the oil industry's role in sustaining it, while allowing its rebranding as part of the solution and ensuring that its fossil fuel profit-driven agenda remains unchallenged.

My second point, which forms the central argument of this article, is that new denialism and, specifically, the individualization of responsibility component does not represent the latest stage in the oil industry's strategies for deflecting accountability. Instead, I argue that a new strategy is emerging – one that frames climate change not merely as an issue of consumer demand, with the oil industry positioned as a potential part of the solution, but as a techno-capitalist challenge and socio-economic opportunity that the oil industry is primarily equipped to tackle. Following Baudrillard, this means an ontological transformation of the reality of climate change and of the oil industry, prompted by a shift from a strategy of to one of (see Figure 1 for a heuristic illustration of this evolution). To explore this argument, in the next section, I introduce the concepts of symbolic politics and politics of simulation.

Symbolic politics and politics of simulation

The concept of simulation has received limited attention in environmental politics for several reasons, including its apparent complexity, alleged lack of empirical grounding, supposedly limited applicability, and not least Baudrillard's often baroque prose. While acknowledging the relevance of some of these critiques, which are beyond this article's scope, I argue that the politics of simulation offers an underappreciated resource for examining the politics of climate change. A rare and notable contribution in this regard is Blühdorn's article in this journal (2007; see also Blühdorn 2011, 2013), which approaches simulation as a form of ecological self-deception. Here, I briefly outline Blühdorn's argument, focusing on his distinction between and , and explore how it resonates with Baudrillard's differentiation between and . I then use this framework to examine how traditional and new denialism can be approached as manifestations of misrepresentation/symbolic politics, and introduce my understanding of politics of simulation.

For Blühdorn, the politics of simulation succeeds symbolic politics and defines 'late-modern eco-politics'. Symbolic politics is the ensemble of logics, discourses, and practices that, at best, provide limited and provisional responses to pressing socio-political questions and, at worst, aim to deceive

<table>
<tr><th></th><th>Misrepresentation I
'Masking a presence'

Masking the reality of climate change</th><th>Misrepresentation II
'Masking an absence'

Masking the reality of the oil industry's unwillingness to address climate change</th><th>Simulation
'Establishing a new reality'

Establishing a simulated reality for climate change and the oil industry</th></tr>
<tr><td>Strategy of communication</td><td>Traditional denialism
Regime of denialism
Casting doubt on climate change
Casting doubt on anthropogenic climate change
Casting doubt on the impact of fossil fuel carbon dioxide emissions on climate change</td><td>New denialism
Regime of obstruction
Proposing 'green' market-based policies
Greenwashing
Individualizing responsibility</td><td>Politics of simulation
'With great power comes great responsibility'
Climate change as a techno-capitalist challenge and socio-economic opportunity
The oil industry as the ultimate climate change saviour</td></tr>
<tr><td>Aim of the strategy of communication</td><td colspan="2">Circumventing the barrier of climate change to fossil capital accumulation</td><td>Eliminating the barrier of climate change to fossil capital accumulation by changing the ontological reality of climate change and the oil industry</td></tr>
<tr><td>Approach to political power</td><td colspan="2">Influence legislation</td><td>Seizing control</td></tr>
<tr><td>Ontological reality of the environment</td><td>Only partially known</td><td>'What science says it is'</td><td>'What science says it is' as part of a fluid simulation</td></tr>
<tr><td>Ontological reality of climate change</td><td>Only partially known</td><td>Risk, possibly threat</td><td>Techno-capitalist challenge and socio-economic opportunity</td></tr>
<tr><td>Responsibility of the oil industry in relation to climate change</td><td>'We are not responsible for a problem that might not even exist'</td><td>'We have a social responsibility to collaborate with other key actors (states, IOs, consumers) to solve a problem that exists, yet the solutions should not undermine social growth and development'</td><td>'Climate change is a collective responsibility and we are the only ones who can lead the fight against the climate crisis.
We are not climate villains but climate saviours'</td></tr>
<tr><td>Type of neoliberalism</td><td colspan="2">Neoliberalism as commodification</td><td>Neoliberalism as economization</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td>'Consume fossil fuels'</td><td>'Consume fossil fuel responsibly'
Individualizing responsibility: Drive less, Fly less, Buy electric vehicle
Greenwashing: Buy 'low carbon' fuel, Use 'cleaner' oil
Extending commodification beyond the domain of the real: Carbon credits/ permits/ derivatives</td><td>Climate change is an unprecedented economic opportunity that demands a 'business mindset'
The 'best thing' people 'can do for climate is to invest in a carbon-intensive company like BP and back them going green'
The only way to address the climate crisis is to 'leverage the power of competitive markets' and 'harness the industry's capabilities for change'</td></tr>
<tr><td>Neoliberal rationality</td><td colspan="2">Advancing fossil capital accumulation despite climate change</td><td>Advancing fossil capital accumulation through climate change</td></tr>
</table>

The oil industry's strategy: from misrepresentation to simulation.

the public. In either case, symbolic politics is a strategy of concealing and masking reality performed by political (and corporate) elites whether due to incapacity, the pursuit of a secret agenda, or both at the public's expense. For Blühdorn (2007, p. 252), however, the increasing complexity of political issues, the shift of discourse to mass media, and the legitimacy crisis in

contemporary politics have made symbolic politics partially obsolete and no longer able to capture the late-modern 'post-ecologist turn'.

With this term, Blühdorn (2007, p. 261) describes a 'complex cultural transformation' marked by three dynamics: first, a growing 'positive identification with the established system of democratic consumer capitalism' as the optimal framework for realizing the 'consumer-Self'; second, increasing disillusionment with institutional politics and social movements to drive meaningful change; and third, heightened awareness of the environmental crisis and of the 'social unsustainability of democratic consumer capitalism'. While the third dynamic calls for urgent action, the first resists it, because such action would challenge the very framework of consumer capitalism causing the crisis. The second dynamic, meanwhile, implies that action is ultimately futile. How, then, can these conflicting tendencies be reconciled?

For Blühdorn, the solution is the subsumption of symbolic politics into the politics of simulation. The politics of simulation is no longer the deceiving response of political elites to the ecological demands of citizens the hallmark of symbolic politics but a 'societal response' and collective act of deception (Durant 2015, pp. 446–447) of citizens political elites as
'
' (Blühdorn 2007, p. 261, emphasis mine). In the politics of simulation, the distance between citizens and political elites collapses because signs, symbols, and images the protests, petitions, demonstrations, and manifestations of active citizenship demanding an environmentally sustainable future are fundamentally empty. They do not represent authentic and instances. These illusory signs/symbols of protest 'produce or perform a reality' that is an illusion. The politics of simulation thus understood is a condition of 'societal self-deception' that normalizes the environmental crisis by endorsing what it apparently criticizes and making possible to 'sustain the ecologically unsustainable' (Blühdorn 2007, p. 268).

Blühdorn's argument offers a compelling critique of contemporary environmental stances and an insightful application of Baudrillard's theory of simulation to the climate crisis. Baudrillard (1994) describes simulation as a late-modern condition where images and symbols, once reflections of reality, eventually detach from it entirely, existing in a realm of pure simulation. For Baudrillard, simulation is the 'fourth stage' of an evolution that begins with the 'utopian axiom' of ideal representation – the initial phase where images strive to reflect a 'profound reality', embodying early modernity's optimistic belief in representation as a conduit for truth. The shift from this stage has been gradual, progressing through stages two and three, which belong to the domain of , where the image 'masks and denatures a profound reality' (stage 2) or its 'absence' (stage 3) (Baudrillard 1994, p. 6). These intermediate stages parallel Blühdorn's concept of symbolic politics, where performative environmentalism by political elites obscures the

inadequacy of their actions with superficial displays of commitment to sustainability. Here, images do not wholly depart from reality but rather conceal or distort it, thus resulting in limited and deceptive responses to the climate crisis.

To illustrate Baudrillard's concept of misrepresentation and Blühdorn's understanding of symbolic politics, and how they apply to traditional and new denialism, let me briefly consider three examples: Plato's !
, Descartes' idea of the 'evil demon', and The Wachowskis' cult film
" #. In Plato's allegory, prisoners are chained in a dark cave from birth, perceiving reality only through the shadows cast by captors who control the images projected by a fire behind them. These shadows misrepresent reality, with perception manipulated to obscure the truth. For Plato, philosophy's role is to free the prisoners, enabling them to escape the cave and finally perceive the true nature of reality beyond illusory and deceptive symbols.

Descartes explores the problem of misrepresentation by focusing on the fallaciousness of the senses in the quest for knowledge. 'How often, asleep at night', he writes, 'am I convinced … that I am here in my dressing-gown, sitting by the fire – when in fact I am lying undressed in bed!' (Descartes 1996 [1641], p. 13) Descartes argues that reality cannot be trusted to the senses, which may be deceived by a 'malicious demon'. Instead, the understanding of reality should be grounded in the mind, beginning with the undeniable truth: 'I think, therefore I am' (Descartes 1996 [1641], pp. 15, 17).

The 1999 film " # confronts us with Plato's and Descartes' questions in a dystopic and futuristic setting. It tells the story of a computer programmer, known as Neo, who discovers that the world he inhabits is a false reality controlled by sentient Machines. These Machines have trapped him and humanity at large in pods, using their bodies to generate energy, while their minds are imprisoned within a complex computer simulation. The pod is akin to Plato's cave, whereas the Machine-generated reality evokes the deceptions of Descartes' 'evil demon'.

From Baudrillard's perspective, Plato's prisoners, Descartes' subject, and Neo in " # all inhabit worlds of misrepresentation, where powerful forces – captors, demons, and Machines – deceive them by concealing reality. Similarly, for Blühdorn (2007, p. 256) symbolic politics is the 'cunning and sinister strategic instrument used by power elites to deceive the public into believing that its [ecological] concerns are being heard and addressed, whilst the elites are secretly pursuing their own interests which probably conflict with those of the public'. From this perspective, traditional and new denialism belong to the domain of misrepresentation/symbolic politics. Specifically, denialism reality by questioning anthropogenic climate change, whereas new denialism the oil industry's lack of commitment to addressing the climate crisis by promoting seemingly credible but environmentally feeble market-based policies, greenwashing, and offloading

responsibility onto consumers. Resisting these strategies requires denouncing them as 'false representations', as critiques of traditional and new denialism do.

However, for Baudrillard and Blühdorn, we are long past symbolic politics' misrepresentations, where deception operates with reference to a baseline reality. For Baudrillard, simulation denotes a condition in which simulation 'swallows' reality, ultimately becoming the only 'reality' available. In simulation, escaping false representations – whether from Plato's cave, Descartes' demon, or " #'s Machines – becomes increasingly difficult because reality itself is transformed into a simulacrum. This is most evident in the final instalment of the original " # trilogy, released in 2003, where it is revealed that the human rebellion against the Machines, led by those who supposedly escaped the false representations of the computer simulation in which they were trapped, is ultimately part of the Machines' own simulation. It is a controlled opposition permitted to exist solely to maintain system stability by channelling dissent within acceptable limits.

For Blühdorn, the detachment from reality translates into a condition where environmental concerns have become simulacra: although not 'consciously' and 'deliberately' (Blühdorn 2007, p. 271), citizens voice demands they do not genuinely wish to see implemented, while political and corporate elites propose solutions designed not to enact real change but to perpetuate the illusion of action. This environmental simulation, Blühdorn (2007, p. 265) maintains, stems from the 'irresolvable' ecological and democratic paradoxes of a 'schizophrenic condition' trapping us in an environmental crisis of unsustainability that 'cannot be resolved, but neither can it not be resolved'. Simulative politics arises from the human quest for meaning and a structural drive for self-stabilization. Accordingly, it 'shifts the emphasis away from the power differential between so-called producers and so-called recipients of symbolic politics', rests on 'a tacit strategic community between the public and its political elites', and 'supplements the idea of immoral deception of certain sections of society by other sections by the idea of a practice of societal self-deception' (Blühdorn 2007, p. 268).

If we apply Baudrillard's and Blühdorn's analyses to oil companies, two considerations follow. First, when oil companies deny climate change, propose ineffective environmental policies, blame consumers, and greenwash their products, they are still operating with reference to a baseline reality – the catastrophic impact of carbon emission on climate change and life on earth – which they attempt to either conceal or deflect responsibility for by shifting blame or promoting supposedly carbon-neutral products. Second, when oil companies present climate change as 'a profound opportunity with immense economic, environmental, and social benefits' (Al Jaber 2023c, p. 46) and themselves as climate change champions at the forefront of the fight against global warming – invoking the mantra that 'with great power comes great

responsibility' while chairing the world's most important UN climate conference they are actively fostering 'a tacit strategic community between the public and its political and [corporate] elites' by rewriting the very ontological reality of climate change.

In this politics of simulation, climate change is no longer the loss of biodiversity, the uneven use and access to resources, protecting the planet for future generations, and ultimately ensuring the continuation of life on Earth, but a hugely profitable investment: its reality has been 'liquidated' and 'resurrected' (Baudrillard 1994, p. 2) in the logic of the market. Even more, as I shall discuss in the next section, when oil companies claim that they are

because, if oil companies do not transition 'the world won't transition' (Looney 2021), they are outlining a reality that evokes the third " # film: a world trapped in the matrix of oil companies–Machines.

However, these considerations also underscore a limitation in Blühdorn's account of simulation. The shift away from an authentic reality of the climate crisis – resulting in 'a tacit strategic community between the public and its political [and corporate] elites' (Blühdorn 2007, p. 268) – cannot simply be reduced to structural drives and psychological inconsistencies. Rather, it is fundamentally shaped by 'the power differential' between corporate elites framing the climate narrative and the public receiving it. This critique has been more forcefully advanced by Durant (2015), who argues that in dismissing neo-Marxist views that position neoliberal elites as the primary drivers of the crisis, Blühdorn ultimately portrays citizens as the (un)conscious authors of their own demise, overlooking the role of political and corporate elites in shaping simulative politics. Durant (2015, pp. 446–447) argues that Blühdorn misreads Baudrillard by drawing on Bauman in a way that sidelines elite agency. He suggests that Bauman's understanding of power as fluidity can enable Baudrillard's simulation to account for the strategic actions of political and corporate power. In the next section, I advance a parallel argument. Instead of turning to Bauman to recover elite agency, I re-engage Baudrillard directly. My aim is to show that even within Baudrillard's more totalizing conception of simulation, the strategic actions of neoliberal corporate elites remain central – particularly in their ability to dissolve and reconstruct reality through simulation in ways that advance fossil capital.

With great power comes great responsibility

Baudrillard's late work has been criticized for presenting a 'totalizing logic of the sign', where he appears to drift away from 'critical political economy' and Marx's materialist critique (McWhinney 2021). According to this interpretation, Baudrillard no longer viewed societal reproduction as focused on maintaining the capitalist mode of production but rather on perpetuating the 'code [of simulation] itself' (McWhinney 2021). This focus on the

implosion and destruction of meaning may suggest a conception of simulation as a systemic-structural condition lacking underlying agency – an interpretation arguably influencing Blühdorn's analysis, as the latter diverts attention from the power and strategic actions of neoliberal corporate elites shaping simulation. However, read through his earlier Marxist lens, Baudrillard's idea of simulation still retains an awareness of power, even in his later work. The 'source code' of simulation, he argues, is the power of capital and its capacity to feed 'on destructuration of every referential, of every human objective' and shatter 'every ideal distinction between true and false, good and evil, in order to establish a radical law of equivalence and exchange' (Baudrillard 1994, p. 22).

From this perspective, I propose an understanding of simulation as a condition of totalizing economization advanced by neoliberal elites, in which democratic principles and practices, 'public goods', 'education', 'popular sovereignty' – and, as I discuss shortly, climate change and the environment – are framed and enacted from the perspective of the market (Brown 2015, p. 10). Hence, the 'question of substituting the signs of the real for the real', which for Baudrillard (1994, p. 2) is simulation's defining feature, can be read as .

In the framework of this article, simulation thus stands for the . To develop this argument further, let me connect it to Luigi Pellizzoni's (2016) idea of 'neoliberal ontological politics', which maintains that neoliberal corporate power does not merely interpret or frame nature's ontological reality but actively creates it.

Pellizzoni (2011, p. 795) argues that neoliberalism 'governs through disorder', rather than merely 'despite' it, by turning environmental crises into market opportunities, crafting commodities, and therefore profit mechanisms, from the very instabilities it produces and claims to reduce. Through market-oriented arrangements, neoliberal corporate elites create new ontological realities in which what is 'real' becomes inseparable from its commodified form, allowing virtual constructs (such as carbon credits, weather derivatives, and biotech patents) to dictate real-world actions and policies. Through biotechnology patenting, for instance, genetic materials are commodified, allowing companies to claim ownership over life forms, thus reshaping ecosystems into assets (Pellizzoni 2011, 2016). Similarly, the financialization of climate – via weather derivatives and carbon markets – creates speculative instruments from climate instability. The 'neoliberalization of nature', Pellizzoni (2011, p. 798) argues, 'works … at an ontological level', through 'the actual crafting of entities that did not exist beforehand, like the patented gene with its organic-informational ambivalence … There is nothing fictitious in these commodities: they are commodities, their "reality" is nothing else than this'.

The argument I advance in this article – that the neoliberal politics of simulation of the oil industry establishes a new simulated reality of climate change – resonates with Pellizzoni's perspective. However, Pellizzoni grounds this power dynamic in an understanding of that extends commodification beyond the domain of the real, thus establishing new discreet realities. This means that oil companies shape the reality of climate change through new commodities such as carbon credits, carbon permits, and carbon derivatives, as well as 'low carbon' fuel and 'cleaner' oil. These market-based 'solutions', typical of new denialism, enable oil companies to continue fossil fuel production while presenting themselves as environmentally responsible in relation to a baseline reality – the threat of climate change – through a virtual reduction in emissions.

In contrast, my Baudrillardian-inspired account rests on an understanding of . Here, neoliberalism not only turns life into virtual entities 'whose reality is totally absorbed by [their] commodity status' (Pellizzoni 2016, p. 18), but also reshapes the entire social and cultural fabric through market logic, thereby establishing a simulated reality in which all understandings, interactions, and values are refracted through economic rationality. Through the totalizing economization of this neoliberal simulation, oil companies reshape the reality of climate change – from a source of inequality and existential threat exacerbated by the profit-driven logics of corporate power – into both a problem that can be addressed solely by the oil industry and a profit opportunity that can be managed exclusively through their own market-based solutions.

This view has been a defining feature of Al Jaber's rhetoric. He has repeatedly remarked that 'the world needs a "business mindset" to tackle the climate crisis', which in turn should be regarded as a 'a multi-trillion-dollar opportunity' as 'the global energy transition … will create new jobs, new firms and entirely new industries' (cited in Harvey 2023b). These statements follow those of the CEOs of BP and ExxonMobil, two of the five largest private oil firms. In a 2021 interview, the newly appointed BP's CEO, Bernard Looney (2021), stated that climate change is 'an enormous business opportunity for us, because trillions of dollars are going to get spent rewiring and replacing the Earth's energy system' and the 'best thing' people 'can do for climate is to invest in a carbon-intensive company like BP and back them going green'. In the simulated reality laid out by Looney, climate action is no longer resisting, restraining, and making accountable carbon-intensive oil companies, but supporting them financially as this will turn out to be both an environmentally friendly and business-sound investment.

In feeding the illusion of a self-interested neoliberal environmentalism that promises to reconcile the pursuit of profit with care for the environment, Looney is courting the self-deceiving consumer-citizen so aptly described by Blühdorn. Yet he is also outlining a scenario where there is no horizon of

meaning and possibilities beyond those decreed by the oil industry – hence, no reality beyond Plato's cave, Descartes' demon, and " #'s pods. BP is not just 'part of the solution': because 'if BP doesn't transition, the world won't transition', Looney (2021) argues. BP the real world and there is no fight against climate change beyond BP. BP defines the meaning of climate change, sets the terms of the environmental transition, and 'will continue very clearly to sanction and develop new oilfields' as the world will need oil and gas 'for decades to come' (Looney 2021) much like the Machines in " #, who maintain control over the world, allowing only token acts of resistance.

A similar view has been expressed by Darren Woods (2023), the CEO of ExxonMobil:

> 'Oil and gas companies reliably provide affordable products essential to modern life'; the only way to address the climate crisis is to 'leverage the power of competitive markets' and 'harness the industry's capabilities for change' as it has 'the skills, the size, and the intellectual and financial resources to bend the curve on emissions'.

Al Jaber has turned this view into the centrepiece of his COP28 presidency against accusations that his appointment was inappropriate and expression of a conflict of interest. While emphasizing collective responsibility for climate change 'we are united by our common goal and our common humanity' Al Jaber (2023a, p. 49) has stressed that 'energy companies and other high emitters' must have 'a seat at the table' in global climate discussions, as they 'will have an impact on the speed and trajectory of the transition'.

Consider the institutional translation of Al Jaber's argument in the brief span of 3 years. In 2021, oil companies were banned from sponsoring and actively participating in COP26 in Glasgow on the grounds that they would use the opportunity for shifting the narrative to deflect their responsibility for the climate crisis. In 2022, at COP27 in Sharm El-Sheikh, there were over 600 fossil lobbyists (25% more than the year before) and 18 out 20 of the sponsors of the conference had connections with oil and gas companies (Michaelson 2022). In 2023, with COP28 chaired by Al Jaber, the number of fossil fuel industry lobbyists skyrocketed to a staggering 2,456 – an increase of 386% from the previous year (Lakhani 2023).

In late 2024, COP29 took place in Azerbaijan, where oil and gas make more than 90% of national exports. The conference was led by Mukhtar Babayev, Minister of Ecology and Natural Resources and former CEO of Azerbaijan's state-owned oil and gas company SOCAR. Babayev described the 1.5°C Paris goal as COP29′s 'moral compass', yet also announced plans to boost Azerbaijan's gas production by a third over the next decade to meet heightened EU demand following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This

stance was reinforced by Azerbaijan's president, who framed fossil fuels as essential to funding the ecological transition and described oil as 'a gift from God'. Days before the summit, the CEO of COP29 was filmed appearing to support fossil fuel deals, remarking that SOCAR will continue to produce 'a certain amount of oil and natural gas …, perhaps forever'.

The claim that an ecological transition – and thus the future – depends on the oil industry, with oil and gas continuing to flow 'perhaps forever', echoes the classic 'there is no alternative' (T.I.N.A.) argument of neoliberalism, made famous by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. However, the oil industry's framing transcends the negative constraints of T.I.N.A. and its logic of misrepresentation, which aims to by denying the existence of alternatives. Oil companies are no longer stating that 'there is no alternative' to oil, whose need is officially presented as temporary albeit temporarily undetermined, and with a 'certain amount' possibly required indefinitely but that 'there is no alternative' to them if we really want to successfully pursue and succeed in the fight against climate change.

Conclusion

As the CEO of ExxonMobil recently stated, making oil companies 'into villains' that is, treating them like Descartes' demon is futile and self-defeating because 'it does nothing absolutely nothing to accomplish the goal of reducing emissions' (Woods 2023). In the politics of simulation of oil executives turned climate leaders there is no reality beyond themselves just as there is none beyond the Machines in " # – because : it is no longer about justice, equality, and the right to life, but about chasing an unprecedented business opportunity. In this new simulated reality, the oil industry is no longer solely pursuing fossil capital accumulation climate change by deploying the misrepresentations of traditional and new denialism's symbolic politics; it is now pursuing fossil capital accumulation climate change by changing the latter's ontological reality.

This argument, to be sure, does not suggest that traditional and new denialism are obsolete; rather, they are now part of a broader and more insidious strategy a simulation codified through the logic of totalizing economization aimed at redefining the very meaning of climate change. What does this mean for the future of societal handling of climate change? Is there no escape from simulation, as Baudrillard suggests? Are we trapped in a state of 'societal self-deception' that normalizes the environmental crisis, as Blühdorn argues? Is the simulation power of the oil industry so " #-like that there is no way beyond it? Perhaps an alternative reading of Blühdorn's 'tacit strategic community between the public and its political [and

corporate elites]' – one that moves beyond 'societal self-deception' towards a sense of shared agency and acknowledges that the public, rather than being a mere spectator, plays an active role in the articulation of power – can illuminate a potential path of resistance.

From this perspective, Blühdorn's 'tacit strategic community' echoes Foucault's (1980, p. 98) insight that individuals are not merely subjects of power but 'vehicles of power' and 'elements of its articulation'. Likewise, Blühdorn's (2007, p. 268) shifting away 'the emphasis away from the power differential between so-called producers and so-called recipients of symbolic politics' evokes Foucault's (1980, p. 98) view that power is not that which 'makes the difference between those who exclusively possess and retain it, and those who do not have it and submit to it'. However, whereas for Blühdorn this condition leads to the paradox of 'sustaining the unsustainable' from which there seems to be no way out, Foucault (1997, p. 292) offers a more hopeful view: the presence of a 'relation' with (neoliberal) power necessarily implies 'the possibility of resistance because if there were no possibility of resistance …, there would be no power relations at all'. This article has argued that, as the oil industry evolves from the deceptions of misrepresentation to simulation, any viable resistance must reclaim the meaning of climate change itself.

The battle over meaning is central to Baudrillard's analysis of simulation and is vividly illustrated in one of the most iconic scenes of " #, where Neo discovers that the world he inhabited and believed to be real 'exists now only as part of a neural interactive simulation'. After this revelation, he is shown the world as it really is: a wasteland ruled by ruthless Machines, stripped of life and shrouded in darkness. 'You've been living in a dream world', Neo is told, 'welcome to the desert of the real'. " # strikingly portrays one of Baudrillard's (1994, p. 1) most powerful lines from , while also extending its significance and implications. In the film, the 'desert' is a physically devastated world concealed by simulation; Baudrillard's 'desert of the real' is the devastation of meaning in a world of simulation.

In the framework of this article, " #'s 'desert of the real' is the world that awaits us if the oil industry succeeds, through simulation, in transforming the fight against climate change into a desert of meaning. For the future societal handling of climate change, this means that the struggle is not solely for policy reform, but for the very – and, therefore, the – of climate change. The struggle is freeing the meaning of climate change and the reality of the fight against climate change from the simulation of neoliberal economization and grounding them in a post-simulation commitment to sustainability, environmental justice, effective climate action, and the protection of the planet for future generations.

Note

1. With the term 'oil industry', I refer to both National and International Oil Companies (NOCs, like ADNOC, and IOCs, like BP and ExxonMobil), which are engaged in extracting, producing, and distributing oil and gas, shaping economic, political, and environmental outcomes, and perpetuating climate change through fossil fuel promotion. For a discussion of how the boundaries between NOCs and IOCs have become increasingly blurred, see Grasso (2019, 2022).

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