Why Exxon Executives Deserve the Ultimate Punishment

28/10/2015

On October 16, 1946, shortly after the conclusion of the Nuremberg Trials, ten prominent members of the political and military leadership of Nazi Germany were marched to the gallows. Some of the former elite Nazis did not die quickly of an intended broken neck but strangled slowly. Since the trapdoor was too small, several of the condemned suffered bloody head injuries when they hit its sides while falling through.

What sort of grisly sentence shall we impose on the masters of the great capitalist carbon-industrial complex for their efforts to exterminate human (and other forms of) life by the turning the planet into a giant Greenhouse Gas chamber? The Nazis, to be sure, to be sure, killed in the tens of million, including six million Jews murdered with explicit genocidal intent. (The Allies and the U.S. also committed monumental war crimes, including the appalling atom-bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki). But anthropogenic – really capitalogenic – global warming threatens to end the human experiment altogether. Exterminist Ecocide is hard to beat when it comes to criminality.

“Oh,” one defense of the corporate Greenhouse Gassers runs, “but nobody really knew about the danger to life posed by the rapacious drilling and burning of fossil fuels until quite recently.”

Wrong. The story of climate change and the oil corporations is very much like the story of lung cancer and the big tobacco firms. Millions of Americans – including both of my parents – grew up convinced that it was okay to smoke cigarettes for years only to learn later that tobacco products were highly lethal. Their understanding of that terrible fact was tragically set back by a tobacco industry that worked for decades to knowingly obstruct the truth with a spurious message of scientific uncertainty and by advertisements that presented cigarettes as a sign and even source of healthy vitality. The tobacco companies made these commercials with full knowledge of the medical research showing that science showed that cigarettes were sending millions to early graves

Inside Climate News (ICN), a Pulitzer Prize-winning nonprofit news agency, has recently showed that the same basic thing has occurred with global warming. In a series of articles based on internal documents from Exxon Mobil going back to the 1970s and on interviews with former company scientists and employees, ICN shows that

Exxon's "own research confirmed fossil fuels' role in global warming decades ago." Yes, decades ago – during the late 1970s to be precise. Here is a key passage from ICN's investigative reporting:

"At a meeting in Exxon Corporation's headquarters, a senior company scientist named James F. Black addressed an audience of powerful oilmen. Speaking without a text as he flipped through detailed slides, Black delivered a sobering message: carbon dioxide from the world's use of fossil fuels would warm the planet and could eventually endanger humanity. 'In the first place, there is general scientific agreement that the most likely manner in which mankind is influencing the global climate is through carbon dioxide release from the burning of fossil fuels,' Black told Exxon's Management Committee, according to a written version he recorded later. It was July 1977 when Exxon's leaders received this blunt assessment, well before most of the world had heard of the looming climate crisis."

"A year later, Black, a top technical expert in Exxon's Research & Engineering division, took an updated version of his presentation to a broader audience. He warned Exxon scientists and managers that independent researchers estimated a doubling of the carbon dioxide (CO2) concentration in the atmosphere would increase average global temperatures by 2 to 3 degrees Celsius (4 to 5 degrees Fahrenheit), and as much as 10 degrees Celsius (18 degrees Fahrenheit) at the poles. Rainfall might get heavier in some regions, and other places might turn to desert. 'Some countries would benefit but others would have their agricultural output reduced or destroyed,' Black said, in the written summary of his 1978 talk…. Still, Black estimated quick action was needed. 'Present thinking,' he wrote in the 1978 summary, 'holds that man has a time window of five to ten years before the need for hard decisions regarding changes in energy strategies might become critical.'"

In the 1980s, Exxon scientists worked with academic and government scientists to construct and interpret advanced climate models. Reviewing the resulting projections, the director of Exxon's Theoretical and Mathematical Sciences Laboratory concluded that it was "distinctly possible" that a warming trend after 2030 "will indeed be catastrophic (at least for a substantial fraction of the earth's population)."

A "time window of five to ten years," Black wrote – in 1978! More than a generation later, the climate change that Black and other scientists warned Exxon officials about during the Carter administration has brought humanity to the cliffs of ecological calamity. A recent report from the prestigious and normally restrained Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) suggest very strongly that the Earth is approaching terrible "tipping points" – the melting of polar ice and Arctic permafrost, the acid-bleaching of global coral reefs, and the drying out of the Amazonian rain forest – at a pace and in ways that had not been anticipated, thanks to anthro-/capitalo-genic global warming.

This did not have to happen. Had Exxon been honest and forthright about the dangers inherent in the mass drilling and burning of fossil fuels, humanity might have started decades ago to develop a less carbon-intensive energy system and thereby to avert the multiple catastrophes that beckon today. Shockingly enough, politicians today are still debating the reality and causes of climate change. And we can thank Exxon for that, to no small extent. By the late 1980s, when global warming (something that academic and government and academic scientists started warning policymakers about in the 1960s) became an observed fact, Exxon falsely claimed that science on the causes of climate change was highly uncertain. Nobody really knew if the climate was really changing or what was causing the change if such change was in fact occurring, Exxon insisted. Never mind that its own internally generated scientific evidence showed otherwise.

Exxon did not merely understand the science that contradicted its propaganda, it contributed to that science. Ever since the waning days of the Reagan administration Exxon has been actively undermining its own findings – this even as the data has mounted on climate change's anthropogenic (capitalogenic) nature and lethality and while the scientific community has started speaking out on the supreme danger with rising urgency and even desperation. Along the way, it has set the climate-denial tone for the rest of the leading oil corporations and portrayed itself as a friend of the environment.

The evil involved in all this is almost beyond belief. As the Harvard science historian Naomi Oreskes recently wrote in The New York Times, the rich and powerful firm Exxon not only denied its own findings but also set the deadly propaganda tone for the broader industry

"Exxon had a choice. As one of the most profitable companies in the world, Exxon could have acted as a corporate leader, helping to explain to political leaders, to shareholders and institutional investors, and to the public what it knew about climate change. It could have begun to shift its business model, investing in renewables and

biofuels or introducing a major research and development initiative in carbon capture. It could have endorsed sensible policies to foster a profitable transition to a 21st-century energy economy….Instead — like the tobacco industry — Exxon chose the path of disinformation, denial and delay. More damagingly, the company set a model for the rest of the industry. More than 30 years ago, Exxon scientists acknowledged in internal company memos that climate change could be catastrophic. Today, scientists who say the exact same thing are ridiculed in the business community and on the editorial page of The Wall Street Journal."

Is there still time to avert the worst consequences of world capitalist Greenhouse Gassing? Perhaps. The ultimate culprit is the accumulation-, "growth"-, "productivity"-mad and imperial profits system. Clearly, though, we have lost precious time, precious species, precious glaciers, precious rain forest, precious coral reef, and precious permafrost thanks to the Orwellian, and eco-cidal machinations of Exxon's executives and other elite managers atop the unelected corporate and financial carbon-industrial-complex. As Oreskes notes, "We have lost …decades during which we could have built a smart electricity grid, fostered efficiency and renewables and generated thousands of jobs in a cleaner, greener economy."

And that's why I cannot completely escape the dream-like image of Exxon CEO Rex Tillerson (a leading force behind Exxon's climate denial efforts since the 1990s) and other top oil executives being marched up to the gallows in the wake of a world Ecocide Trial. Let the ropes be short and the trapdoor narrow. And then let us return to the bigger and technically feasible task at hand: a comprehensive conversion to renewable energy and a sustainable economy and society before it's too late.