

THE FUTURE'S A GAS: HOW “CORPORATE REALISM” UNDERMINES DECARBONIZATION

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ABSTRACT

As demand for climate action continues to grow, the fossil fuel sector is increasingly under pressure to justify its continuation. In this paper, we argue that there has been a shift in some parts of the sector from outright denial, or even delay, to claims of being an active part of a clean and green future. Using qualitative interviews conducted by the research team, alongside publicly accessible documentation from the Australian gas industry, our analysis shows how the industry employs a threefold strategy to navigate the tension between the necessity of climate action and its continued expansion. First, there is a shift away from substantive climate debates to discrediting activist's moral and intellectual credibility. Second, the industry presents itself as the rational and pragmatic actor, advocating for a “technologically neutral” approach that prioritizes economic stability. Finally, it constructs a vision of the future in which gas remains central to the economy, technological progress, and global development. Drawing on Mark Fisher's (2009) notion of “capitalist realism,” we develop the concept of corporate realism to draw together these responses. We

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suggest that corporate realism contributes to management and organization studies by illustrating the political and ideological maneuvering within the process of future-making. We also develop countermeasures to resist the corporate colonization of the future and support meaningful action on climate change.

Keywords: Climate change; organization studies; capitalist realism; fossil fuels; future-making

INTRODUCTION

Despite attempts to curb global carbon emissions, fossil fuel consumption is steadily increasing (Hale et al., 2022; Wright et al., 2021). There are several reasons for this. Oil, gas, and coal producers have long been aware that plans to halt climate change – by reducing greenhouse gas emissions – pose a fundamental threat to their industries (Oreskes & Conway, 2010; Wright & Nyberg, 2015). In response, they have sought to obstruct climate action by denying the science of anthropogenic climate disruption and, more recently, delaying regulatory responses through appeals to future change (Fleming & Jones, 2012; Wright & Nyberg, 2017). Moreover, greenwashing and tokenistic gestures toward sustainability remain rife in these industries (Wright et al., 2024). Thus, notwithstanding widespread public alarm about the issue, a formidable gridlock of vested corporate-political interests has stalled the decarbonization process.

The cultural critic Mark Fisher (2009) termed the ideological legitimization of this gridlock “capitalist realism.” It involves arguing that there are no alternatives to the current political economy and that any future-to-come will essentially be more of the same, for better or worse. Following its dissemination by right-wing think tanks, politicians and corporate elites, Fisher (2009) explains that this ideology has seeped into everyday life, truncating the capacity to imagine alternative future conditions. Indeed (echoing Fredric Jameson), he observes that it is easier to imagine the end of the world – the annihilation of all life on earth – than a pressing modification in the mode of production.

Future-oriented social sciences have, more recently, highlighted that the very notion of “the future” is contested terrain in the contemporary global economy (Beckert, 2017; Berg Johansen & De Cock, 2017). Particularly noteworthy is the *void* that now appears where the future once was. Earlier renditions of capitalism frequently celebrated industrialism as a stepping-stone toward utopian visions and imagined spaces of liberation. A rich tapestry of foreign new worlds was replete in the symbolic representations of futures provided by “the ideology of efficiency” and technological change (Berg Johansen & De Cock, 2017). The Anthropocene – the argument that the planet has moved to a new geological age as a direct result of human activity (Crutzen, 2002) – threatens to disrupt such assumptions. As the impacts of climate change advance, and governments commit to emission reductions, the fossil fuel sector in particular is facing increasing pressure to justify its continued existence (Wright & Nyberg, 2024). When it comes to climate change, then, the politics of narrating the future appears crucial

to both how the status quo is perpetuated and how we might crack the gridlock of capitalist realism and “imagine new worlds” (Jasanoff, 2020; Wright et al., 2013).

We argue that many fossil fuel companies are already one step ahead and have shifted ideological tact when depicting “the future” and their roles in it. Reporting on an empirical study of the Australian gas industry, we suggest that capitalist realism – the ideological insistence that there are no alternatives and all we can hope for is an extension of the present – no longer accurately describes how these institutions frame their (and our) future vis-à-vis decarbonization. For instance, executives and lobbyists in this industry recognize climate change and the need for a response. They are not denialists. Moreover, many of these firms have committed to net-zero carbon emissions targets (Australian Energy Producers (AEP), 2025). Yet in its evocation of a clean green future, the Australian gas industry (a major producer of carbon emissions) depicts itself as alive and well ... thriving even. The objective of this paper is to understand how this tension is reconciled. Our core research question is thus: how can fundamentally unsustainable organizations (in this case, the gas industry) both acknowledge climate change *and* insist on the industry's growth and expansion in the years ahead?

The answer lies, we propose, not necessarily in shutting down the future (à la capitalist realism) but its careful curation whereby gas corporations position themselves as major agents in the transition process. We term this approach *corporate realism*. Unlike capitalist realism, these powerful firms embrace a progressive and different future but only in a manner that furthers their prerogatives. Corporate realism endeavors to accomplish this by presenting a narrative that gas corporations offer more reasonable, pragmatic and realistic solutions to the climate crisis compared to the suggestions forwarded by environmentalists and critics, who are cast as unreasonable, idealistic and unrealistic. We argue that corporate realism is more dangerous than capitalist realism (or even climate change denial) because it utilizes acknowledgment of the Anthropocene to undermine system-level change.

This paper is organized as follows: First, we discuss the growing social science and organization studies literature on future narratives and social imaginaries. We suggest that capitalist realism offers several useful insights but fails to capture an emergent dynamic that we identified in the Australian gas industry. Having explained our research question, the empirical study is then introduced, after which we set out the research method and data analysis process. We then develop the concept of corporate realism: the ideological claim that the gas industry's chosen path to future net-zero emissions is significantly more realistic and reasonable than those who criticize the industry. Finally, we explore the implications of corporate realism for scholars studying fossil fuel organizations and possible avenues for future research.

CLIMATE FUTURES IN ORGANIZATION STUDIES

What the future means – how it is experienced, constructed and used to inform social behavior – has long been a topic of interest in the social sciences. This is

especially so in regard to climate change (see, e.g., [Yusoff & Gabrys, 2011](#)). Before we can act, we must be able to imagine a desirable and different alternative to carbon-centric capitalism. As [Milkoreit \(2017, p. 1\)](#) maintains:

Transformations require the capacity to collectively envision and meaningfully debate realistic and desirable futures. Without such a collective imagination capacity and active deliberation processes, societies lack both the motivation for change and guidance for decision-making in a certain direction of change.

In terms of “future studies” (and more recently “Critical Future Studies”; see [Goode & Godhe, 2017](#)), a significant body of scholarship has emerged in the social sciences. This stream of research has investigated “future-making practices” ([Mische & Mart, 2025](#); [Wenzel et al., 2020](#)) in relation to numerous topics, including strategy ([Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013](#)), organizational spaces and change ([Pettit et al., 2023](#)), organizational routines ([Hernes & Schultz, 2020](#)) and entrepreneurship ([Thompson & Byrne, 2022](#)) among other subjects. In what follows, we limit our discussion to scholarship that examines the intersection of future narratives and climate change in organizations. In this respect, we share [Lê’s \(2013\)](#) argument that understanding the relationship between future narratives and anticipated organizational responses to climate change is crucial for grasping why “dirty capitalism” appears to continue unabated despite the serious socio-ecological problems this enables.

Contested Climate Futures?

Companies and industries have been pivotal from the start of what has become a contested debate about climate change ([Wright & Nyberg, 2024](#)). Following early international agreements on the science of climate change in the 1980s, fossil fuel industries mobilized denial and seeded doubt about the science of climate change ([Oreskes & Conway, 2010](#)) in what became the “carbon wars” of the 1990s ([Levy & Spicer, 2013](#)). For instance, between 1989 and 2004, ExxonMobil funded activities and organizations that publicly questioned the science of human-induced climate disruption ([Livesey, 2002](#); [Supran & Oreskes, 2017](#)), and the oil industry in the United States built coalitions with other emissions heavy industries to contest policies curbing carbon emissions ([Levy & Egan, 2003](#)). By undermining the scientific consensus of the impact of fossil fuels on climate, these industries implied that an alternative future was not necessary. Rather, they projected a future imaginary of “fossil fuels forever,” with an abundance of cheap fossil energy bringing progress and prosperity to all ([Levy & Spicer, 2013](#)). The future was constructed as a continuation of fossil fuel expansion and a projection of the past.

Following an increase in climate protests and public demands for action into the 2010s, the debate became less about whether climate change was “real” and more about what to do and when ([Wissman et al., 2024](#)). In response, emission-intensive industries shifted tactics, from denial to delay ([Ferns & Amaeshi, 2021](#); [Wittneben et al., 2012](#)). However, again no alternative future was seen as necessary, since innovations in markets and technology were presented as sufficient for the system to autocorrect. [Levy and Spicer \(2013\)](#) refer to this future as a

“techno-market” imaginary, with clean energy technologies and carbon storage alongside carbon trading and other market solutions addressing climate change. This aspirational future-making also meant that big oil companies started to invest in renewable energy, with BP even rebranding the company to Beyond Petroleum (Christensen et al., 2021). More recently, the recognition of the need for action among companies and industries, including oil, gas and coal companies, is evident by the large uptake of a commitment to a net-zero future by 2050 (Wright et al., 2024). Even so, the lack of clear milestones of progress and significant emission reductions suggest that these commitments work as a form of delay – a just-not-yet.

While capitalist realism suggests that there is no alternative, the present will go on, catastrophic climate impacts and the continuation of environmental activism have challenged the stability of the status quo. Severe weather events in the form of heatwaves, wildfires, flooding and droughts have created apocalyptic images of the future. Environmental movements, one aptly named Fridays for Future, portray a future of societal climate collapse (Delmestri & Schuessler, 2025) if nothing is done to dramatically reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The future, and more specifically, the future of fossil fuel industries, has become increasingly contested.

How organizations respond to climate change is dependent on how the future is constructed (Lê, 2013). Organizations take part in this struggle over alternative futures (Wenzel et al., 2020) in creating what can be seen as stepping-stones toward a particular, industry friendly, future (Nyberg et al., 2020). Future-making is performative in bringing the present to bear on what is seen as a plausible and “realistic” future (Nyberg & Wright, 2016). As such, organizations take part in legitimizing, de-legitimizing and re-legitimizing alternative futures (Wenzel et al., 2020; Wright et al., 2013). In this paper, we are interested in how organizations produce and enact the future in response to climate change.

Empty Climate Futures?

It remains obvious that when firms in fossil fuel industries create future narratives regarding climate change, few of them will tell a story that sees themselves and their interests *absent* or *redundant*. So, a contradiction is evident in the future stories that oil, gas and coal companies tell their consumers, investors and shareholders. A useful starting point to understand the concealment of this contradiction is Berg Johansen and De Cock’s (2017) analysis of how elite chief executive officers (CEOs) depict the future of their firms. Berg Johansen and De Cock (2017) describe how these actors engage in a kind of phantasmagorical “presentism” in which the speculative future appears only as a short-term mirror image of the status quo. In these capitalist imaginaries, the current socio-economic order turns the long-term future into a zone of emptiness that forecloses the otherwise radical openness that the future might entail. Berg Johansen and De Cock (2017) refer to this as the ideological colonization of the future. It shuts down future narratives and instantiates a business-as-usual short-termism, even in industries that are patently unsustainable. Ultimately, this “ideological dimension offers a common

sense frame that is structured around a perceived inevitability of capitalism, a market economy as the basic organizational structure of the social and economic order, and an assumption of confident access to the future” (Berg Johansen & De Cock, 2017, p. 186).

To develop a theory of “business-as-usual” temporality, Berg Johansen and De Cock (2017) draw on two key thinkers. The first is Fredric Jameson (2015) and his argument that a crucial facet of the cultural logic of late capitalism entails the *contemporary imprisonment in the present*. Accordingly, it becomes nearly impossible to imagine any future that is not some variant of the capitalist condition. By ideology, Jameson (1988, 1989) means the “cognitive maps” that suffuse everyday life in modern society, scripted and perpetuated by powerful actors in the global economy. This eternalization of the status quo ultimately contracts the imaginative ability to think beyond corporate hegemony and its reliance upon fossil energy. Any attempt to do so is swiftly labeled and dismissed as “science-fiction” and hopelessly fantastical (Jameson, 2005).

The second theoretical precept that forms an important aspect of Berg Johansen and De Cock (2017) “business-as-usual” temporality is Mark Fisher’s (2009) notion of *capitalist realism*. For Fisher (2009), “the relationship between capitalism and eco-disaster is neither coincidental nor accidental: capital’s ‘need of a constantly expanding market’, its ‘growth fetish’, means that capitalism is by its very nature opposed to any notion of sustainability” (p. 19). This self-destructive constellation of power relations is further supported in the cultural sphere through the negation and dissolution of imaginative energies when it comes to envisaging progressive alternatives to late capitalism – indeed, Fisher (2018) emphasizes our current dearth of socio-political projects by comparing it to the 1960s when a rich plethora of utopian plans abounded in almost every corner of life. Such capitalist realism operates as a “pervasive atmosphere ... acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action” (Fisher, 2009; see also Srnicek & Williams, 2015; Streeck, 2016).

Yet the maintenance of this barrier is not passive. As a number of future-oriented scholars highlight (Beckert, 2021; Mische & Mart, 2025), capitalist futures may be dominant, but they are also unstable. In outlining the role of fictionality within capitalist logics, Beckert (2017) emphasizes the ways in which institutions – and in particular markets and corporations – are required to respond to crises and uncertainty through the stabilization of the future:

Fictional expectations in the economy take narrative form as stories, theories, and discourses Underlying the imagination of a certain future state is a story of how the present will be transformed through several causally linked steps into the depicted future state Stories provide causal links that show how the gap between the present state of the world and the predicted future state is actually closed. (Beckert, 2013, pp. 220–227)

As Mische and Mart (2025) identify, stories about the future are key to problem identification, including the application of blame, and the potential credit for solutions. Beckert’s concept of fictional expectations, then, offers a means of understanding the political and social processes that actively maintain Fisher’s account of capitalist realism.

As growing social movements and the impacts of climate change come to the fore, the future of corporations responsible for the highest amount of greenhouse gas emissions is increasingly uncertain. Understanding how the Australian gas industry is responding to this existential threat by managing the tensions between being a major contributor to growing carbon emissions while constructing itself as a dominant energy producer into the future is a key objective of this paper.

RESEARCH CONTEXT: THE AUSTRALIAN GAS INDUSTRY

Growing international commitments to future “net-zero” emission targets have led fossil fuel companies and their industry associations to promote new messages to maintain their social license and continue government support for their development (Wright et al., 2024). In Australia, the recent expansion of gas as an export industry has brought it under intense scrutiny from both environment groups and the broader community (Baer & Singer, 2021).

Unlike the coal industry, gas is not a long-term political incumbent in Australia. While the extraction and use of conventional methane gas has been in existence since the 1960s, the use of hydraulic fracturing and the exploitation of unconventional coal-seam gas only began in the last 20 years (Espig & de Rijke, 2016; Towler et al., 2016). The opening up of new expansive offshore gas fields and the acceleration of coal-seam gas has led to a rapid growth in overall gas production of over 300% over the last two decades, with the majority of this targeted for export markets as liquified natural gas (LNG) (Geoscience Australia, 2022). This expansion has not been without opposition. Prominent protest campaigns against projects have led to some state governments freezing licenses and implementing exclusion zones and others implementing, mostly temporarily, moratoriums on development and exploration in certain areas (Tranter et al., 2017).

Despite this, the gas industry has continued to expand. Further, following the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2020, the then conservative federal government announced a “gas-led recovery” and named a director and major shareholder of oil and gas company, Strike Energy, as the chair of the National COVID-19 Commission Advisory Board, with several other members having deep links to the industry (O'Malley, 2020). Facing rising cost-of-living pressures, the Labor government, elected in 2022, has implemented a number of policies to attempt to reduce emissions, yet has maintained that the gas industry will be needed beyond 2050 (Australian Government, 2024).

METHOD AND ANALYSIS

Our paper draws on a broader qualitative project investigating the role of the Australian gas industry in the political and policy debate over climate change and energy. We examine data from a specific time period dating from the announcement of a “gas-led recovery” by the conservative government in response to the

COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 up to the launch of the “Future Gas Strategy” by the Labor government in 2024.

Gas industry data (Table 1) included media releases from the peak industry association, AEP (formerly the Australian Petroleum Production and Exploration Association – APPEA) and the two largest gas companies in Australia, Santos Ltd. and Woodside Energy Group Ltd. We also included selected government and industry reports for a broader contextual understanding of the policy and politics of gas development over this period.

While this publicly available documentation provided valuable insights into how the businesses and governments debated policy and justified the expansion of gas extraction and export, we further supplemented these data with interviews with key industry informants. This involved 24 interviews (Table 2)

Table 1. Industry Documents.

Organization/s	Document Type	No.
AEP (formerly the APPEA)	Media releases	81
Industry and Government Reports	Reports	10
Santos	Media releases	86
Woodside	Media releases	108
	Total	285

Table 2. Interview Participants.

Pseudonym	Role	Industry Type
Alicia	Team leader – government relations	Energy retail
Ben	Program manager	Energy retail
Jack	Program manager	Energy retail
Liam	Managing director and CEO	Energy retail
Amanda	CEO	Exploration and production
David	Technical director	Exploration and production
Elliot	General manager – government relations	Exploration and production
Kane	CEO	Exploration and production
James	Manager – government relations	Exploration and production
Jason	Vice president	Exploration and production
Rory	General manager – government relations	Exploration and production
Stan	Director	Exploration and production
Victor	Executive general manager	Exploration and production
Will	Chief executive	Exploration and production
John	CEO	Industry association
Nathan	Branch president	Industry association
Patrick	Senior advisor	Industry association
Ryan	Director	Industry association
Scott	Senior advisor	Industry association
Thomas	Director	Industry association
Tony	CEO	Industry association
Edward	Director	Lobbyist
George	Senior advisor	Lobbyist
Harry	Director	Lobbyist

with gas industry executives and managers, industry association representatives, lobbyists and energy retail providers carried out over the period from 2020 to 2024 (Human Research Ethics Approval No. H-2018-2040). Participants were identified as spokespeople or representatives of the industry in Australia through media coverage and their participation in the Australian gas industry's national conference, which one of the authors attended in 2023 and 2024. Interviews were semi-structured and covered broad topics including gas industry policy, political debate over gas expansion, environmental opposition, energy and climate change concerns, technology and generational/rural/city divisions over resource extraction and use. The interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes, and the resulting recordings were fully transcribed. Participants have been given pseudonyms and the data were de-identified as per the ethics guidelines and in order to encourage participants to speak freely.

The combined documents and interview transcripts were then analyzed through a staged process of reflexive thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involved a three-stage process of abductive coding of our data using the qualitative data analysis software *QSR NVivo*. In the first stage of the data analysis, we began to code the data through a process of open coding by reading through the public documentation and interview transcripts and descriptively coding combined segments of text which reflected similar wording, events, actors and themes. This resulted in several hundred codes of varying frequency. In a second stage of analysis, we then began to interpretively group these first-order codes into higher-level categories such as actors (e.g., “politicians,” “business leaders,” “lobbyists,” “activists”), discourses (e.g., “energy security,” “social license,” “transition fuel,” “government inaction”), and practices (e.g., “advocacy,” “alliances,” “research,” “protests”). The third stage of analysis further developed our coding by using an abductive approach that moved between the initial coding and higher-level theorizing (Sætre & Van de Ven, 2021; Van Maanen et al., 2007). This resulted in the three themes which explain how the industry projects the need for it to continue into the future: first, dismissing opponents; second, opening up the discussion on solutions to climate change to include gas, and third, depicting two opposing choices for the future (see Appendix for illustrative quotes).

FINDINGS

In answering our core research question, we identified three themes in the data. The first theme concerns the gas industry deriding its opponents as extreme, emotional, idealistic and unrealistic. By comparison, this is intended to imply that the gas industry offers more reasonable, pragmatic and realistic solutions to the climate change crisis. In the second theme, the gas industry claims that it adheres to neutrality on this issue, especially in relation to available technologies that it is developing to achieve net zero, whereas opponents to gas are politically charged and blind to the objective facts. The third theme focuses on the future narratives espoused in these assertions, which is meant to resolve the tension that is at the

heart of our research question. Combining these themes, two stories about the future are posited. The first imagines a world without gas energy providers. It represents an economic, social and ecological disaster – it is considered highly irrational as a result. The second is a gas-led future. It is one of net-zero emissions, full employment and regenerated eco-systems. Gas corporations thus portray themselves as the epitome of rationality and realism – on the “right side of history” as one CEO put it – while those demanding a gasless future are dismissed as ignorant, extreme and unreasonable.

Theme 1: Casting Opponents to Gas as Extremists and Irrational

While previously the fossil fuel sector has questioned the science and, by default, potential impacts of climate change, our research suggests that the gas industry is following the broader trend of agreeing that they understand the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. However, this recognition is carefully narrated to dismiss suggestions from environmentalists that reducing greenhouse gas emissions requires a withdrawal from the use of fossil fuels. In responding to the tensions around concern for the environment and the desire of the gas industry to grow, industry discourse draws on familiar claims that environmentalists are irrational, emotional and manipulative in their responses to climate change. In contrast, industry responses are depicted not only as objective, rational and factual but of catering to the needs of the general populace, which environmentalists have failed to consider.

A common refrain is that environmentalists exaggerate the potential impacts of climate change. On the milder side of this argument, this is a result of activists perhaps not understanding the impacts themselves – they are doing it “for the right reasons” but ultimately end up worsening the cause. As the government relations general manager of one company argues:

There's a perceived hysteria about what's going on in terms of rising sea levels and the fact it's the drought, or we have another hot day and people say “this is climate change” undermines the long-term scientific evidence about what's actually been going on ... and this is where I go back in terms of I suppose the environmental protests; the extent to which people try, for the right reasons, to raise awareness of it, sometimes it's taken to a level that undermines that very argument itself. (Elliot, General Manager – Government Relations, Exploration and Production)

On the more antagonistic end, some participants accuse activists of outright lying:

One thing that you notice is that a lot of the language used by the activists around fossil fuels is very emotive language, right? It's, you know, it's “climate disaster.” It's “killing children.” It's, you know, blah, blah, blah, the whole thing just goes on and on and on. And not only that, a lot of the information is just patently false, right? There's no fact checking. There's no burden of proof. (Kane, CEO, Exploration and Production)

Thus, industry participants suggest that either for the “right reasons” or to support their cause regardless of the facts, those who oppose the gas industry are overly emotional and manipulative in the debates.

This is taken a step further when it comes to responding to protest. When four activists were arrested for attempting to paint bomb and attach themselves to the

home of Woodside Energy CEO Meg O'Neill, the industry response was to suggest the planned action was a personal threat:

The private homes and families of business leaders should clearly be out of bounds. This is a deplorable escalation of the intimidation and tactics used by activist groups to stifle informed public debate on the energy transition. ... APPEA and its members are united in calling out the menacing and threatening behaviour of activists who targeted Ms O'Neill, her partner and daughter. (APPEA CEO Samantha McCulloch; [AEP, 2023c](#))

Similar to the notion that there might be “right” and “wrong” reasons to be concerned about climate change, the press release here clearly makes use of language which itself “escalates” the action to claim that protestors were using “intimidation” and “menacing and threatening” behavior. This strong response is indicative of a broader shift within these debates aimed at labeling environmentalists as extremists and criminalizing activism.

Beyond the dangers and emotional arguments of environmentalists, industry advocates argue that activists are out of touch with “ordinary” citizens. As the CEO of Santos argued in a speech to the West Australian Energy Club, this includes any politicians who might be inclined to support environmentalists demands:

[...] the shrill voices of climate activists – including the politicians who represent the wealthiest voters in Australia – continue to call for no new oil and gas projects. They have no regard for the cost-of-living pressures facing ordinary Australians in the outer suburbs of our cities and in rural and regional Australia. In fact, they want to make things harder for them by diverting taxpayer money away from essential services like health, into subsidies for uneconomic energy technologies and the Teslas garaged in the wealthiest electorates in the country. (Kevin Gallagher, Santos Managing Director and CEO, speech at the Western Australia Energy Club November 2023; [Santos, 2023b](#))

The differentiation between those facing cost-of-living concerns, on the one hand, and politicians, wealthy communities and climate activists, on the other hand, is unambiguous in its attempt to classify those who are concerned with climate change as privileged elites who care little for the public. By evoking the wrath of “ordinary Australians,” the gas industry depicts itself as standing up (and speaking) for those facing economic pressure, claiming that it has a stronger allegiance to communities than those concerned about the environment.

Although activists are seen to be problematic, many interviewees argued that they have had undue – and unfair – influence on the debate, to the point where governments have taken their side. To return to “Kane,” who accused environmentalists of making up facts, he notes that:

We operate in crisis mode because, you know, APPEA, you know, every time it thinks it's getting on the front foot, it has to go on the back foot ... either the politician's narrative, or, some activist narrative, or whatever it is ... we're on that back foot all the time ... there's a constant barrage against industry, you know, you're fighting on a whole bunch of different fronts. And you know the government, and I'm talking at all levels, they tend to say one thing and do another, so they confuse the narrative. (Kane, CEO, Exploration and Production)

Industry commentary then links government intervention to environmentalists, with the implication being the industry is situated in limbo – or “crisis mode” – because it never knows whether the government will support it as a transition

source or impose regulations. Thus, the industry has to “battle” and fight “on a whole bunch of different fronts” against both an unreliable government and the aforementioned activist narrative.

Theme 2: “Neutral” and “Sensible” Technological Solutions

A second key theme in the gas industry’s claims to its environmental sustainability hinged on its argument that the response to the climate crisis should be “technology neutral” and that its product was the best way to both ensure energy security and reduce Australia’s carbon emissions. In claiming their industry was agnostic regarding appropriate energy technologies, the gas industry sought to push back against the taint of being a fossil fuel and the advocacy for renewable energy. This also enabled participants to point toward other – gas adjacent – technologies which could reinforce a “gas-led” future. This included promoting carbon capture and storage (CCS) which had failed to deliver in practice to date, and the development of a new hydrogen sector, both of which offered the gas industry a path away from the “fossil fuel” label and toward a future in which it could thrive.

A key part of the discussion around technology and energy futures was the idea that gas was often closely associated with coal, a narrative which interviewees and the changing focus of APPEA/AEP sought to dispel. Just as the national organization reoriented its focus on the role of gas in energy transitions, participants noted the need to differentiate gas from the coal industry. As one senior advisor for a gas industry association put it:

A lot of what we have to say is about the need to use the gas to replace coal. But I think a lot [of people] in the community see us in a similar light [to coal]; “Fossil fuels are as bad as each other.” So – there is a bit of that perception that we’ve got to battle. So that’s part of our role to try and explain that. (Patrick, Senior Advisor, Industry Association)

One means of doing this has been to position gas as the low emissions alternative to coal:

Australia’s natural gas is critical to reaching net zero in Australia and the region, supporting the transition away from coal and providing reliable backup for renewables while powering Australian manufacturing. (AEP, 2023b)

By separating itself from coal and suggesting that it can be part of the solution to climate change, the gas industry takes one step toward being able to participate in what it claims is a more diverse strategy in response to climate change than what its opponents propose.

Central to this strategy is the industry catch phrase of the need for climate and energy policy to be “technology neutral.” This was framed within the context of a complex energy system which requires multiple sources of energy:

A portfolio of technologies will be needed to reach net zero while ensuring secure, affordable energy to Australia and the region – No single technology or fuel will be able to deliver the energy and industrial inputs needed in Australia and the region. Australia’s energy policy should ideally adopt a technology-neutral approach to mapping a responsive pathway to net zero. (APPEA/AEP Report “The future role of natural gas in Australia and the region”; Ernst & Young for AEP, 2023)

Implied in the emphasis on a “technology neutral” framework, of course, is the idea that the current considerations unfairly excluded some sources of energy, that is, gas.

However, even though gas industry advocates aligned the utility of gas as working with renewable energy, the technology-neutral framing commonly sat alongside familiar critiques of the limitations of renewable energy. As one interviewee argued:

[gas] essentially provides economic stability and growth to Australia, and it does it in a way that it also ensures that it complements with renewables. ... gas supports renewables, the big resources sector that we have in Australia, and at the same time, keeps the lights on when the winds not blowing and the sun's not shining, right? (Jason, Vice President, Exploration and Production)

The motif of keeping “the lights on” was reiterated in advertising from the AEP which featured solar panels covered in cloud and rain, with the light of a gas flame rescuing the energy supply (AEP, 2024a).

Alongside this pivot has been the maintenance of a long-held argument from the fossil fuel sector that CCS should be considered as a crucial part of the energy transition:

We know CCS technology works. There are 27 operational facilities around the world today. The world cannot achieve net zero emissions without CCS, so it's time to stop allowing ideology focussed on blocking CCS projects getting in the way of more CCS developments. (Kevin Gallagher, Santos Managing Director and CEO, at the South East Asia Australia Offshore and Onshore Conference Speech 2022; Santos, 2022)

Such comments not only persistently linked CCS to a future in which gas use is part of a “net-zero” economy, but the insistence that it “works” suggested a currently untapped resource when it comes to creating a net-zero economy. The strong emphasis on the inclusion of CCS was somewhat surprising given that it has been central to the coal industry's defense for more than two decades despite failing to deliver, with only four coal-fired power CCS projects operational globally (Global CCS Institute, 2024, p. 36).

Finally, the potential for hydrogen to offer a “lifeline” to the industry brought a new element to the technological landscape that was much lauded and, as one CEO noted, an important element in the transition of the industry's leading advocacy group:

they [APPEA] changed their name on Thursday to AEP: Australian Energy Producers. So if you go to the APPEA website, now it flicks it to a new website So it's a 60 year old organization. So it's a big deal to change your name after 60 years. But because there's a lot more happening on hydrogen on carbon capture storage. You know, there's a model here where, one day perhaps an LNG ship goes to Japan or Korea and discharges, and then loads up with CO₂ that they've generated by burning the gas or whatever, brings it back, and we inject that CO₂ into an oil reservoir. (Stan, Director, Exploration and Production)

Stan's description here gives a clear vision of what the industry hopes would be the future potential for its expansion; if only the technological bias against it were removed, a host of nascent technologies, some of which have been in development for decades, could come to the fore.

The assumption then, in the claims for the need of a technology-neutral approach, was that if a less ideological and “neutral” stance was taken, gas would be recognized as having an important part to play in future energy solutions. For the gas industry this framing of the debate worked to counter the apparent demonization of the industry as a fossil fuel because gas could work alongside renewables “when the wind’s not blowing and the sun’s not shining” and support the transition to net zero. With “new” technologies such as CCS and hydrogen, gas could then be viewed as a solution for the future.

Theme 3: Good (Gas) Futures and Bad (Gasless) Futures

In response to climate change, the industry discourse presented the possibility of two distinct futures. One in which the economy fails because of the ideological obsession of environmentalists with the fossil fuel sector; the other in which economic growth continues with a paced transition away from the most intensive greenhouse gas polluting industries (coal) and toward gas. In attempting to align its own growth to the needs of the community, the industry created a narrative of a high-tech future in which the national economy thrives, living standards improve, poorer nations are uplifted and even species are better off. This, the industry argued, sits in contrast to the ideological and emotional demands of environmentalists.

In presenting themselves as a more “realist” and practical provider of climate solutions, the industry’s “technology-neutral” approach was framed as allowing a “sensible” and “least cost” scenario – one which stood in contrast to the “naming and shaming” approach they claimed environmentalists had adopted:

there’s got to be a transition out of these things into something sensible ... and now we’re in this kind of naming and shaming politics that says if you’re not for it, then you must be against it The additional problem is because that, as government policies, and very few of them are technology neutral, all of them are now saying, “well, we want, we want out of fossil energy. We don’t really care whether it’s coal or gas.” (Thomas, Director, Industry Association)

Here, the argument is that hostility to fossil fuels was a flawed approach and ignored the advantages that gas could provide in a future of reducing carbon emissions while maintaining energy security. The industry advocates argued for a future in which the industry was central to the Australian economy:

Gas means jobs. Gas means reliability. Gas means a bright future Gas has showed how reliable it is throughout the pandemic and with the breakdown of other energy sources, the industry has continued to do the heavy lifting to ensure the lights are kept on, factories kept running and that there is no gas shortfall in the domestic market. (AEP, 2021b)

Importantly, this logic allowed industry proponents to state that gas was needed *alongside* renewable energy, suggesting it was complimentary, rather than in competition with the latter:

There’s an ideological view that we can do renewables without natural gas. I’m not sure how you make the aluminium and the nickel and cobalt and all that. I’m not sure how you get all the metals, like a lot of the metal, people that make metals. Aluminium refineries use piles of gas. I’m not sure how you make solar farms without gas, or – there’s 220 tons of metallurgical coal, in a megawatt of wind turbine. I’m not sure how you make wind turbines ... I think people think these

things are just going to arrive on a boat from somewhere and you plug them in. (Stan, Director, Exploration and Production)

Gas was thus presented as essential for the energy transition toward renewables and net zero. As part of the solution to climate change, then, the industry argued that it provides a stepping-stone to a “bright future,” with reliable energy sources and jobs, the potential for expanding trade and technology, providing cheaper electricity and in which the growth of consumption could continue. People who did not recognize this were seen as ideological and failing to understand basic facts about energy supply.

Beyond contributing to the nation's future, industry proponents argued that the gas export industry in particular was assisting in lifting other countries out of poverty. This is a familiar fossil fuel argument (see [Wright et al., 2022](#)): fossil energy helps to reduce global inequality:

the challenge we've got isn't [just] the energy transition to a low emissions world. It's energy transition to a low emissions world, *while* not keeping anybody poor *and* allowing developing countries to develop, and particularly those two things If you live in West End [Brisbane, Australia], you think the problem of CO₂ emissions can be solved with money; if you live in outskirts of Mombasa, you don't, right? (Ryan, Director, Industry Association)

Framed within a critique of environmentalists as not understanding the needs of poorer communities, Ryan argues that economic priorities need to be taken into account just as much as concerns about climate change. More specifically, others argued that Australia's gas is central to decarbonization in Asian countries which were seen as unable to accommodate renewable energy sources:

essentially, I mean if Asia is going to decarbonize, it's gonna be on the back of a lot of gas use. Because the opportunity for renewables in Asia is just less in terms for practical reasons And these countries, you know they're not. They're not rich. The developing countries. If they're gonna decarbonize, they can only do it if gas is at a price where it's roughly competitive with coal. (Patrick, Senior Advisor, Industry Association)

Thus, there is a choice between a growth economy in which gas is allowed to support the broader concerns of social justice or one in which ongoing development is halted.

In addition to the potential to support development, one participant argued that a future with gas at the center of the economy would allow the continued protection of habitat for animals. As Stan argued, the complaints about environmental impacts of climate change failed to consider the benefits of the industry to different animal species:

There's three animals now that are not extinct, because of oil and gas, that might have been – whales, elephants and turtles. Because we hunted whales for oil We hunted turtles and whales for ivory and pearl shell and we did all the things we make plastics for now. So we've got oil and gas for energy, and we've got oil and gas that make plastics and lots of lots of things that we used to use animal bits for. And so when people complain about a seismic survey, and say “I think it disturbs the whales” – without oil and gas, they might well have been extinct because we were hunting these things to extinction. And people will argue about it, but we used to kill elephants, we used to kill turtles, fish, and we don't need to now because everything they provided for us, we've got through oil and gas. (Stan, Director, Exploration and Production)

Here, interviewees argued that the irrationality of environmentalists' focus on climate change ignored other environmental issues; without the development of gas, more animals would be extinct, something the environmentalists surely did not want to happen.

Thus, the gas industry response to the tensions between acting on climate change and the desire for the industry to continue to grow is threefold; the first move is to discredit and dismiss the concerns of activists. It is notable that concerns about the substantive argument of how to respond to climate change were not discussed here – rather, discussion focused on the moral and intellectual character of activists. This allowed for the argument that it is the industry which offers the factual, economic and “sensible” response to climate change – a “technologically neutral” approach that would benefit the broader, working community. Finally, the industry discourse presents a future in which the industry is central to Australia's economy, the ability to develop new technologies and to raise global living standards. In this narrative, there is no future without gas. As the CEO of Santos stated:

ultimately [we will] find ourselves on the right side of history. I hope that encourages all of you to keep pursuing your careers in this future-facing industry which will continue to underpin our modern way of life and without which, net zero by 2050 will simply not be possible. (Kevin Gallagher, Santos Managing Director and CEO, speech to APPEA conference 2023; Santos, 2023a)

DISCUSSION: “CORPORATE REALISM” IN CONTEMPORARY FOSSIL FUEL ORGANIZATIONS

We identify three key themes which seek to differentiate the industry and its opponents by claiming that (i) gas corporations are rational and pragmatic, while opponents are emotional and idealistic; (ii) the industry is technology neutral in working toward net zero, while opponents propagate an ideological and subjective understanding of the requirements for reaching this target; and (iii) the industry's future plan will create a sustainable society in which workers and the population thrive, whereas opponents calling for a gasless future risk steering Australia toward social, economic and ecological catastrophe.

Taken together these three narratives underscore what we call *corporate realism*. We suggest that this is a fruitful concept to address our key research question: how can fundamentally unsustainable organizations both acknowledge climate change *and* insist on the industry's growth and expansion in the years ahead? In the discussion that follows, we answer this question by developing the concept of corporate realism. First, we distinguish it from “capitalist realism” (Fisher, 2009; also see Berg Johansen & De Cock, 2017) and then demonstrate its explanatory value. This contributes to recent debates on future-making in organization theory and extant understandings of climate inaction. Following this, we reflect on possible avenues for future research and, more importantly, how we might counter the ideological sway of corporate realism in fossil fuel organizations and beyond.

Corporate Realism

What Fisher (2009) termed “capitalist realism” aims to ideologically justify the socio-economic status quo by arguing that it is the only viable system, epitomized in the Thatcherite motto “There Is No Alternative” (or TINA). This consists of a *business ontology* that argues that even if the world implodes under the weight of the capital accumulation process, the capitalist enterprise and its profit motive will be there to the end. Furthermore, Fisher suggests that this ideology wed us to an eternal present. This has important affective elements that discourage resistance. As Fisher (2009, p. 5) remarks, “the ‘realism’ here is analogous to the deflationary perspective of a depressive who believes that any positive state, any hope, is a dangerous illusion.” In short, the future – as an open and endless set of possibilities and alternatives – is dead (also see Berg Johansen & De Cock, 2017).

Fisher’s argument poignantly captured a historical moment – neoliberal triumphalism – and the ideological qualities it needed to legitimate an otherwise rapacious economic paradigm. And while this ideology largely still holds true, we suggest that – in light of the data presented above – it has significantly evolved. This is evident in how gas executives and industry spokespeople rely on a robust future narrative (including a commitment to net-zero targets) to justify their continued expansion. But why abandon capitalist realism for this riskier strategy of flirting with sustainability and decarbonization to consolidate their profit imperative?

In the last 15 years, it has become clear to many that global capitalism (as we know it) is not the inevitable order of things. This new take on the situation includes management and organizational scholarship and the call to rethink the future in substantive ways (e.g., Gümüşay & Reinecke, 2022, 2024; Wright et al., 2013). The conclusion is this: there are alternatives, much better ones in fact. Thus, the future appears to have been recovered in the political field of discursive struggle against late capitalism.

Building on our data, we suggest that corporate realism – as opposed to capitalist realism – means that fossil fuel organizations do not deny climate change or the need for a greener, more sustainable future. On the contrary, corporate realism aims to *occupy the future for itself* by partially agreeing with activists and scientists that climate change represents a real problem. But this speculative occupation is strategic. It is animated by the desire to overcome opposition and grow the industry. This version of the future has only one hero; gas.

Three Dimensions of Corporate Realism

We define corporate realism as the ideological attempt to colonize this ongoing future narrative by asserting itself as the most rational, reasonable and realistic agent for meeting the challenge of climate change. It does this by insisting that firms are more objective and pragmatic for decarbonization, while castigating opponents calling for a gasless future as emotional, unrealistic and reckless. We label this ideological, perhaps even in the traditional sense of “false thinking,” because clearly gas production is a major contributor to climate disruption.

Indeed, some have suggested that once consideration is given to the entire gas supply chain, the gas industry produces more carbon emissions than coal (Howarth, 2024). Thus, the bright and sustainable future it narrates – giving itself a major role in the transition process – is mendacious. Nevertheless, this discourse has often been successful. We suggest that corporate realism has at least three discernible qualities when it weaves together this narrative.

First is the production and maintenance of a *realist/unrealist dualism*, a reactionist response to the successes of the climate movement and exposure to activism. To make its plans and policies seem more reasonable an “other” is required, typically opponents to the gas industry, but sometimes even moderate politicians who have the audacity to recommend the industry be regulated. This dualism – between reasonable gas executives, on the one hand, and crazy protestors, on the other hand – invariably caricatures climate change activists by using exaggerated imagery that is typically demeaning and aimed at casting them as unworthy of engagement. Following Mische and Mart (2025), it is apparent here that the activists themselves are blamed as being part of the problem, while the industry is suggested as providing the solution.

This brings us to the second aspect of corporate realism. Rather paradoxically, we term this as the *unreasonable use of reason*. Unlike climate change denialists, corporate realism trades in a carefully constructed argument to propagate its narrative. We noted this when the industry promotes itself as “technological neutral.” Indeed, technology is a key facet of corporate realism as an ideological form. Advocates do not argue that they favor gas because they reap super-profits from the resource, but because gas relies upon a “technological neutral” infrastructure that is essential for reducing poverty, transitioning to a green economy and most importantly, “keeping the lights on.” This provides the industry with a continuity story. By contrast, the alternative is collapse; darkness and ideologically motivated societal ruin. Within these stories, the very notion of reason is subverted to shore up an otherwise unreasonable constellation of power relationships (Mische & Mart, 2025). In a continuation of obstruction tactics from the industry, what might be termed the weaponization of rationality is used as a subtle tactic for undermining what is in fact a reasonable proposition for all but the gas industry: the phasing out of fossil fuel production. Thus, not only science but *reason itself* is the bounty at stake for these industry actors. Yet to borrow a phrase from Wright Mills (1959), this is “crackpot realism” since it cannot see beyond its own (extreme) prerogative and eschews all debate.

The third characteristic of corporate realism concerns the future or “future-making” (Nyberg et al., 2020; Wenzel et al., 2020). We term this *future rigging* – using fictional narratives (Beckert, 2017) to rig future preferences to maintain industry dominance. Recognizing the science of climate change, the industry suggests the necessity of gas to reach net zero by 2050. Here, the industry argues that the government and people just need to get onboard to bring about this “bright future.” The future is not shut down or emptied of aspirational content (Berg Johansen & De Cock, 2017) in line with capitalist realism. Instead, corporate realism creates two fictional scenarios of the future regarding our response to climate change and the Anthropocene. The first envisages a world

without gas energy providers. In this narrative, climate tensions escalate, the economy collapses and the lights are turned off. Complete darkness. The second narrative – the one that's portrayed as more sensible and realistic for all stakeholders concerned – foresees the opposite. Net-zero emissions, a vibrant and sustainable economy, industry growth and the lights working perfectly well. A bright future, full of hope and opportunity.

Key Contributions

We contribute to the recent discussions in management and organization studies on future-making – how actors produce and enact the future (Comi & Whyte, 2018; Pettit et al., 2023; Wenzel et al., 2020) – by politicizing how futures become realizable. With different actors, such as social movements and firms, competing over their favored future (Hungnes et al., 2024), we show the ideological attempts to colonize the future. This extends current discussion of future-making by identifying the strategies employed in undermining alternatives and strengthening a narrow, and in this case, detrimental fossil-fueled future. Studies have theorized how actors are imagining potentially realizable fictional future states (Augustine et al., 2019; Beckett, 2021; Comi & Whyte, 2018), but not how these futures become realistic. This shifts the understanding of future-making from the artifacts (Comi & Whyte, 2018) and representations (Pettit et al., 2023), to how these future representations and scenarios are seen as reasonable.

This entails undermining alternative and competing futures by making them seem unrealistic and ideological (Mische & Mart, 2025). Enacting a path toward the future (Feuls et al., 2024) is about making all other possible trajectories risky or even frightening by attacking those actors who promote alternatives and dismissing competing future states. This is combined with creating a visible (e.g., imagery of green futures) and recognizable (e.g., using language such as “net-zero”) transition toward a desirable (e.g., “sustainable”) future (Nyberg et al., 2020). For industries defending their dominance, the future is constructed in the present by projecting desirable aspects in a distant future while, simultaneously, castigating alternative futures. In our case, addressing climate change by consuming more fossil fuels is put forward as the only realistic and plausible future.

Second, we contribute to the discussion in management and organization studies on climate inaction (Ferns & Amaeshi, 2021; Nyberg & Wright, 2020; Walker & Vasi, 2024) by explaining how fossil fuel companies manage the tension between the climate emergency and future firm growth. Part of addressing this tension is managing the critique of environmental movements and activists (Walker & Vasi, 2024). In our case, the gas industry was facing protests from groups against further exploration and expansion, as well as being linked to escalating greenhouse gas emissions. As such, we extend existing studies investigating the strategies (Ferns & Amaeshi, 2021) and repertoires (Walker & Vasi, 2022) of fossil fuel companies countering environmental protests.

Similar to previous studies, we found that the Australian gas industry constructed gas as “clean” and addressed concerns around climate change (Walker & Vasi, 2022). Thus, rather than denying the science of climate change (Dunlap

& McCright, 2011) or even trying to delay action through stalling legislation (Brulle, 2018), which might be seen as overly transgressive (Walker & Vasi, 2024), the industry actively promoted fossil energy as the future. Just as in denial and delay, the result is the continuation of fossil fuel expansion and a delay of a much-needed legislation with a clear cap on emissions. However, rather than simply delaying, the deferment is qualitatively different in that it comes with a future plan that is depicted as objective and technology neutral and with great benefits to the larger community.

The classic negative strategies of lobbying and revolving doors in the political sphere (Brulle, 2018) and attack on opponents in the public arena (Nyberg & Murray, 2020) are complemented with the positive promotion of the industry and the future it will bring (Walker & Vasi, 2024). The gas industry depicts itself as leading the solution to reach net zero and a green future. With the politics being an existential threat, the protestor's demands cannot be nullified (Waldron et al., 2013). The previous main strategy of defense (Levy & Egan, 2003) by information warfare (MacKay & Munro, 2012) or incorporating critique (Ferns & Amaeshi, 2021) does not work as well when there are existing alternatives in the form of renewable energy. Under these circumstances, the fossil fuel industry attempts a forward-looking colonization of the future: corporate realism.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper was initially motivated by a strange tension we noticed in our empirical study of the Australian gas industry. Executives and lobbyists waxed lyrical about the need for deep change concerning climate change, ardently endorsing net-zero carbon emissions targets. Yet in its evocation of a clean green future, the Australian gas industry sees itself as playing a crucial role in the decarbonization process. The objective of this paper is to understand how this tension is reconciled in this worldview – that is, both by acknowledging climate change *and* insisting on the gas industry's growth and expansion in the years ahead. Corporate realism explains how this is achieved. The three core ideological mechanisms – the production of a realist/unrealist dualism, the unreasonable use of reason and future rigging – aim to plaster over the otherwise insurmountable contradiction. In this manner, the gas industry can have its cake and eat it too.

We have used Fisher's (2009) capitalist realism as a theoretical backdrop because we think that this corporate foray into future-making – corporate realism – has evolved from this ideological standpoint following the legitimacy crisis that capitalism has suffered during the last two decades. Capitalist realism's negation of the possibility of alternatives is problematic when future telling returns as an important aspect of critical dialogue in the public imagination. In that context, corporate realism is an inevitable response to both the growing scientific consensus about climate change, widespread concern among environmentalists (and the general public) and the reclamation of future telling by anti-corporate thinkers and the decarbonization movement. Only a brazen corporation would

deny the problem or disagree that significant changes to energy production are required. So, firms aim to build their own future narratives as our empirical study vividly demonstrates. Capitalist realism is thus supplemented by corporate realism because, in effect, the outcome is the same: climate change inaction and the continuing use of fossil fuels as a core emergency resource.

There are clear boundary conditions around our study developing the concept of corporate realism. Climate change is a particularly formidable threat to the very existence of fossil fuel industries and companies, and environmental movements target them. There are indications that similar strategies to colonize futures have been employed in promoting coal (Wright et al., 2022) and geo-engineering (Augustine et al., 2019) as responses to climate change. Future research would benefit from investigating the permutation of corporate realism as a dynamic ideological strategy in other industries, especially when challenged with alternative futures or options. Close to hand is how the Occupy movement challenged the finance industry after the global financial crisis and how the insurance industry, moving out of many areas due to climate catastrophes, is “selling” premiums that are future directed. This would strengthen the robustness of the concept and its usefulness in understanding how futures are created and enacted.

To resist corporate realism, however, we require different discursive tactics than those seeking to undermine capitalist realism. Fisher (2009, p. 80) argued that we need to have hope and posit alternatives:

the very oppressive pervasiveness of capitalist realism means that even glimmers of alternative political and economic possibilities can have a disproportionately great effect ... from a situation in which nothing can happen, suddenly anything is possible.

We agree with this sentiment. But what if carbon capitalism has gotten there first and proffered a ready-made “green” future narrative awaiting general endorsement? Simply positing our better future in response risks encouraging an insipid and stasis-inducing pluralism (where each future building project is neither right nor wrong, only “different”).

With this in mind, we recommend three countermeasures to challenge corporate realism. First, we must constantly emphasize the fundamental contradiction in the arguments emanating from the fossil fuel industry concerning its alleged commitment to decarbonization. There is no such thing as “clean coal” (to quote Donald Trump), nor does eco-friendly gas exist; the greenhouse gas emissions produced by both cannot be ameliorated with current technologies (Clarke et al., 2022). Second, the ultimate unreasonableness of the putative realism peddled by the fossil fuel industry requires relentless vigilance. No matter how many sound bites and press releases the industry makes about gas being the only “reasonable” answer to the Anthropocene, that stance must be outed as extreme, self-serving and profoundly irrational in light of the coming eco-collapse. Third, when building our decarbonized future narrative, it must not be pitched as one possible alternative among a “marketplace” of options. No, it’s the *only* alternative. Indeed, in an ironic twist, climate activists and scholars could easily appropriate the TINA

strategy for their own purposes, turning it back on carbon capitalism. We have *no other option* but to fundamentally rethink energy production in the decades and centuries to come. And if the future is not decarbonized ... then there is no future at all.

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APPENDIX: FINDINGS – ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTES

Theme	Description	Example
<i>Casting Opponents to Gas as Extreme and Irrational</i>	Environmental arguments are overly emotional and manipulative	“While approval requirements need to consider the views of the community and risks inherent to projects, they are not well suited to managing the sheer influx of activist opposition which can be marshalled using social media” (Report “Australia’s oil and gas industry: kickstarting recovery from COVID-19”; Ernst & Young for APPEA, 2020). “while getting to net zero should be all about emissions reductions, our opponents are only about killing oil and gas. Which is why they now seek to discredit carbon capture and storage as well” (Speech to AEP conference 2023; Santos, 2023a).
	Protest is an abuse of the law and dangerous	“Reform of the offshore approvals system is urgently needed to put an end to the lawfare as activists seek to exploit the ambiguities in the regulations” (AEP, 2024c). “you know ‘all fossil fuels to close by 2025’ I mean for god sake that’s just fantasy” (Edward, Director, Lobbyist).
	Opponents are ignorant – not using facts	“A Parliamentary committee led by the Greens has ignored good science in an effort to further ostracise the gas industry for political gain ... Australian politicians need to use science, data and evidence to drive policy making, not ideology” (AEP, 2021e). “‘fossil gas threatening future communities’ from extreme heat floods, fires to toxic pollution, like, where has there ever been toxic pollution in Australia from the little gas industry? Not one event! But anyway, let’s again, let’s not confuse reality with that. But that’s what – they don’t have to be accurate. They don’t have to, you know, tell the truth” (Kane, CEO, Exploration and Production).
	Opponents are out of touch with “ordinary” citizens – emphasize the industry’s role in development	“I’m sure if you did a poll, what you would see is that the modern cities, you know, students, that particular demographic, will have an issue broadly with the fossil fuel industry. But as you move away from the cities into some of the communities that actually have been involved in the production of fossil fuels for generations, you find a very different narrative” (Kane, CEO, Exploration and Production). “The figures don’t lie, it is our industry and the broader resources sector that is doing the heavy lifting at a time of great economic uncertainty” (AEP, 2021a).

(Continued)

Appendix (Continued)

Theme	Description	Example
<i>“Neutral” and “Sensible” Technological Solutions</i>	Position gas as the low emissions alternative to coal	“As Queensland transitions to a low emissions future, natural gas will reduce emissions by replacing coal and providing reliable energy to support renewable technologies” (AEP, 2021c). “Coal won’t get you to the goal and this plan details how gas will step up and take over from coal and also be a cleaner source of energy in the grid” (AEP, 2022a).
	Suggest the term “technological neutral” as an alternative approach	“I think there’s a big differentiation between ‘we’ve got to get out of fossil energy’, you know, as an ideological kind of argument [and] in my mind, as an economist being kind of technology agnostic, ‘I don’t really care whether it’s renewables, a beta gas, a beta column, you know, carbon capture and storage” (Thomas, Director, Industry Association). “low carbon technologies should be incentivised on a technology-neutral basis so that we can find the lowest-cost path to net zero” (Kevin Gallagher, Managing Director and CEO, Santos Speech to APPEA conference 2023; Santos, 2023a).
	Argue that gas can be a back up to renewable energy	“What industry needs is an expedited approvals system, similar to the recent announcement for green energy, so that sufficient natural gas supplies are available to support the future growth of renewable energy” (Claire Wilkinson, APPEA Director – Western Australia; AEP, 2022b). “gas is a natural ally for renewables. It has the flexibility and ability to come online quickly when renewable sources are not available” (APPEA CEO Samantha McCulloch; AEP, 2022c).
	Link gas to a high-tech future (CCS and hydrogen)	“CCS has got a very important role. I mean, not just in the gas sector, but in any hard to abate sector” (Patrick, Senior Advisor, Industry Association). “Hydrogen is an immense opportunity for Australia to fast-track its transition to a lower carbon economy. Natural gas is the pathway to developing a home-grown hydrogen industry” (AEP, 2021d).

Appendix (Continued)

Theme	Description	Example
<i>Good (Gas) Futures and Bad (Gasless) Futures</i>	Argue for a future in which the gas industry is critical to the Australian economy	“The Australian Government’s Future Gas Strategy recognises the critical role of natural gas for Australia’s energy security in a net zero economy to 2050 and beyond, and that continued investment in new gas supply is needed” (AEP, 2024b). “the values in this day we’re about, we’re really aligned around state development, particularly regional jobs” (Ryan, Director, Industry Association).
	Argue the need for the role of gas in alleviating global inequality and meeting global energy demand	“We’re going through very different issues, you know, on their own little scale. ... if you then move to, places where they just don’t have access to a consistent, relatively cheap source of energy, the narrative will be different again” (Kane, CEO, Exploration and Production). “Many of Australia’s major LNG customers, such as Taiwan, South Korea and Japan, have recently pledged to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050 in line with Paris Agreement targets. In these counties, Australian natural gas can be expected to support manufacturing and industry” (Australian Energy Producers Report “The future role of natural gas in Australia and the region”; Ernst & Young for AEP, 2023, p. 12).
	Renewables are unable to do the job	“Australia would need to uplift ... its current day renewables output by some absurd amount, like, you know, 660 times over or something like that, instantly, like, by tomorrow, we would need to be able to deliver 60 times more renewable energy than we currently do today. And that’s just not going to happen” (Amanda, CEO, Exploration and Production). “And, you know, 100% focus on renewables, doesn’t get you to where you need to go” (Thomas, Director, Industry Association).
	A future without gas will be a disaster	“If we removed gas-related products, so much of what we rely on everyday would disappear: beer bottles, the bricks that build our homes, glass in buildings, packaging and paper as well as fertilisers for agriculture” (AEP, 2023a). “The more expensive electricity gets – because funding dries up, which means we can’t replace what we’re selling or expand what we’re selling, because – you know again, market economics, right? It’s supply and demand” (Kane, CEO, Exploration and Production).