

Viewpoint: How to restore public trust and regulatory fairness in the face of aggressive, coordinated disinformation efforts by anti-technology environmental activists

During my lifetime, Western societies have enjoyed innovations that have immensely improved public health and the quality of life as well as economic and social advances, food and energy security as well as technologies that have provided for an affluence far beyond that which our grandparents would ever have dreamt possible. And outside of the West, global trade and technology transfers have brought economic opportunities and social development upon once impoverished nations. And yet the companies and individual risk-takers who have delivered these advances are widely despised by a large number of activist influencers, stakeholders, storytellers and policymakers.

Almost a year ago I started this series on how industry was paying a heavy price in terms of public trust and regulatory fairness at the hands of an aggressive coordinated NGO/activist/political campaign strategy. I called it the Industry Complex because I could not understand why a) industry was not responding to the nonsense and b) that any solutions to their public trust decline were growing more complex by the day.

The Industry Complex had seven chapters where hard questions were asked. Why were industry leaders not responding but just sitting back, like the second slowest zebra, as anti-industry activists applied the same [tobacconisation](#) strategy to each different industry? Why did they tolerate an anti-capitalist [hate industry](#) to control the narrative (that developed into a well-coordinated communications [onslaught](#)) and destroy public trust in the corporate sector? Why did they allow a naive post-industrial ideology to spread through the media, political and regulatory frameworks to the point where industry was vilified and no longer able to [function](#) within the unrealistic boundaries Western governments had created?

Industry is now in a box, well-sealed by a small band of anti-corporate, activist idealists. How do they now get out of that box? After seven chapters of asking questions, this conclusion will try to provide some recommendations.

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Arming your narrative

At its heart, the Industry Complex is a narrative crisis.

Communications campaigns succeed if they follow seamlessly within the main narrative. A narrative is a widely accepted basket of shared values, ideals and beliefs that shape the stories we tell. Narratives often evolve after generations of storytelling but sometimes can change suddenly with an extreme event (a war, market collapse, nuclear meltdown...). Narratives do not have to reflect facts but need to coordinate

values with perceptions. Some of the dominant narratives western societies presently share include catastrophic climate change, collapsing biodiversity and declining public health. The stories told within these narratives all point at industry as the cause of these crises. Public trust is woven into the heroes implicit in these narratives (those wearing the white hats) who battle the villains hiding behind the masks (industry and capitalism).

The activist narratives are fear and crisis-driven – what industry and capitalism have done to humanity and the environment, they argue, is nothing short of catastrophic. The stories supporting these narratives are usually about how industrial pollution and technocratic exploitation is responsible for this degradation of the environment, human health and values. There are, in any societal dialogue, competing narratives but the prevailing ones, over time, dominate policy and consumer decisions. Why do consumers think organic food is better, nuclear energy is dangerous and chemicals are bad? Stories based on a narrative of innovation and technology solving global problems do not resonate with a public who have been made, through villainisation and vilification, to not trust research institutions. Your message falls on deaf ears if it does not align with the values of the dominant narratives.

NGOs and social justice campaigners have put enormous energy into developing and strengthening their narratives while actively disabling competing ones. It is a long, patient process and their intensive coordination has paid off. NGOs are now working with American tort lawyers and a small group of activist scientists to reshape the stories about how research and innovation should be done. I recently showed how a couple tort lawyers [funded a film](#) about how they are the good guys fighting to save humanity from an evil industry.

Narratives, like paradigms, are not logical but create the base fabric (a canvas) upon which our stories can be woven and values accepted. The beliefs shaped by the activists' narratives assure us we can do very well without capitalism, technologies, innovations and international trade. Humanity would have no problem thriving without modern agriculture or fossil fuels. Natural is always good and synthetic is *prima facie* bad ... point! Scientists and industrial stakeholders are the evil forces in this anti-capitalist narrative with unwanted curses leaking from their labs.

Policymakers, journalists and social actors who do not respect these prevailing societal narratives have short careers. And so they ignore promising technological solutions to issues like climate change, opting to reinforce stories of how we need to stop relying on innovations, pull back on growth and development and take precautionary measures.

But narratives evolve with events. After two years of coronavirus lockdown, the promotion of the new mRNA vaccine technologies were widely accepted. The anti-vax narrative was weak for a population that would accept any risk if it meant they could go back to the pub (so vaccination rates were very high). Almost 18 months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, with inflation harming most European countries, the once-affluent Western public has shown to be quite open to increased nuclear and fossil-fuel power generation, taking a more rational position toward a more gradual, cost-effective energy transition.

The communications technology pendulum

I also remain hopeful that the recent communications technology revolutions (the Internet, social media, AI), and the societal upheavals they are delivering, will eventually find a rebalance as people come to realise that pronouncements from their echo-chambers may not be factual or trustworthy. I have written [elsewhere](#) how each communications technology revolution has led to significant stresses on the dominant institutions of the day (from the printing press leading to the Protestant Reformation, cinema and radio enabling political extremism and propaganda in the 1930s to mass consumerism growing out of the 1950s TV age). There has never been such a significant communications technology revolution as the digitalisation and socialisation of all information. At some point these social-media silos of intolerance will stop challenging democratic institutions and fade into the background noise. But we may have to endure a few decades of political extremism as personalised AI chatbots take over the next couple of electoral cycles in democratic countries.

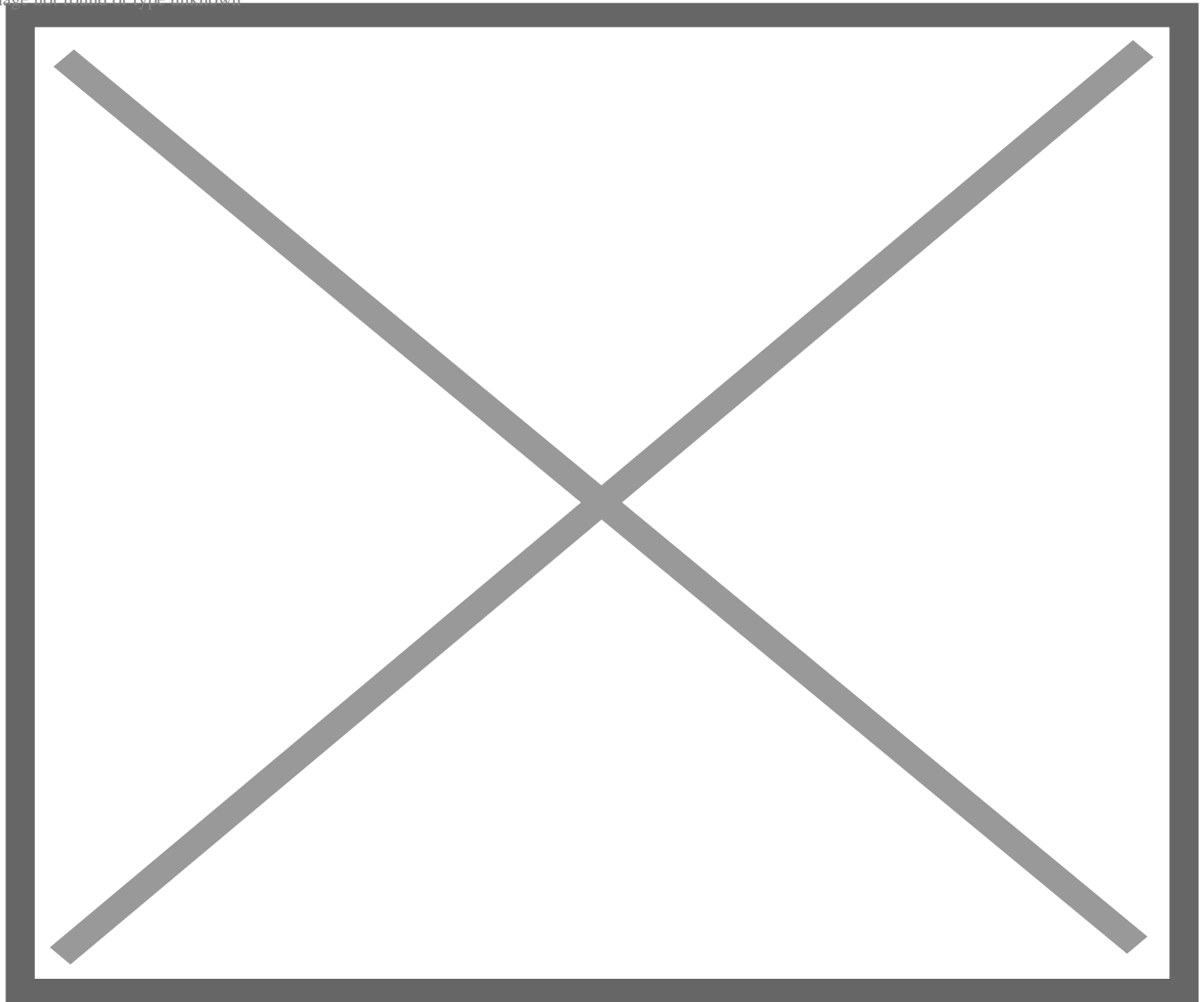
We cannot rely on the fortune of events to save innovators and scientists from the consequences of hostile narratives and extremism destroying public trust. And relying on the negative consequences of fascism, famines and energy crises to (eventually) free humanity from such irrationality is, well, awful. Scientists and innovators need to learn from this activist epoch and play the long game, like the NGOs have, coordinating their messages on multiple fronts to weave a stronger public narrative on what research and technology have done, and will continue to do, for humanity. Trust is value-based so scientists need to articulate their values within their stories.

There are many stories to tell of how science, technology and capitalism have made our world so much better. But if the public narrative does not allow these stories to more widely resonate, then the anti-technology activists will win.

Is it time for a counter-offensive? This rather long Industry Complex series will close with 12 recommendations for industry to take back the narrative, to stop the steady loss of public trust and put innovation and technology back at the heart of what it means to be human. Not all of these points will apply to every industrial predicament but there will hopefully be enough to raise the bar for industries to have that internal debate.

Here are 12 recommendations to stop the Industry Complex.

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1. Keep the herd together

One of the main communications success stories of activist NGO lobbying is to always speak with a single voice. They join in when other groups are running campaigns (even if unrelated to their own goals), never publicly criticise other views (however atrocious) and amplify their numbers to present a perception of a large, strong front. Industry does not, and even as one industry (or, usually, one company) is being relentlessly attacked, others stay silent rather than keeping together to fight back.

Attacking industry, scaremongering and creating distrust are easy low-hanging fruits for NGO groups profiting from fear and outrage. They cannot attack a product on the scientific evidence, quality or the effectiveness so they attack it as a product adding to the profits of Big Pharma, Big Oil, the Chemical Cartel... and the public eats it up (as well as the companies' products).

And when activists set their guns on one target, all of the other companies, like the second slowest zebra, keep their heads down, thankful they are not the activist dinner for the day. Without a coordinated response against these reputational assault artists, the public buys into their rhetoric. Industry needs to take a page out of the activist playbook and stand as one, speak out when (most) claims are unfounded and let the hypocrites lie in the muck of their lies.

Until industry can stand together and defend all businesses, until they can fight against any unfounded claims with one voice, they are easy pickings for the trust vultures circling above.

2. Be loud, be proud

Industry can claim credit for some outstanding achievements over the last century, creating products and processes that have improved our quality of life, well-being, safety, public health, economic wealth and entertainment pleasures. We are living longer and better thanks to the innovations and technologies that have been in a constant state of continuous improvement. Were it not for the ingenuity, efficiency and capacity of industry, we would still be suffering from COVID-19 lockdowns and many more loved ones would have died.

Yet we only hear of the (very few) setbacks or the cases of inequity that any disruptive technology will first create. It's easy for the critics to paint a skewed image of reality as industry groups do not respond or stand up and promote their achievements (except internally). Industry needs to speak loudly and proudly of the daily benefits societies have been able to enjoy thanks to their continuous entrepreneurial, innovative developments. Especially after so many companies stepped forward during the pandemic to find solutions and relief, isn't it time for industry to stand up and take credit for all it has achieved.

3. Fight against hypocrisy

Industry actors are so used to being bashed on the daily that they stay quiet, even in the face of sheer hypocrisy. Large international NGOs like [Greenpeace](#) or [Friends of the Earth](#) are not transparent, openly lie and take money from unscrupulous actors, but such behaviour goes unanswered as if the rules don't apply to them. And apparently they don't. Activist groups have hammered the European Commission so much about consulting industry actors that the EU has effectively imposed a ban on its civil servants meeting any industry actors outside of trade associations (but this does not apply to meetings with individuals from NGOs).

Meanwhile, the European Green Party is using taxpayer funds for NGOs to run campaigns out of the European Parliament (and only the Risk-Monger is trying to [call them out](#) for that). In the case of the paltry Pesticide Action Network document on glyphosate, it is not so much about the poor quality of the research

or that they [flew so many activists](#) into Brussels for a week of campaigns and hearings in the European Parliament, but that they did it on the European taxpayers' coin thanks to European Green Party functionaries. If industry tried such a stunt, there would be hell to pay.

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Industry should speak up and demand the same rules and restrictions for everyone rather than letting the NGOs have a free rein in the policy arena. Instead, the cunning little skunks are trying to [ban industry actors](#) from even being allowed in the European Parliament. They did this to chemical and tobacco companies, so why not the rest? Big Oil is the next slowest zebra. When will all industry wake up and realise this strategy applies to all of them. Industry is [not welcome](#).

4. Demand ethical codes of conduct from all actors

When I joined Solvay, at that time a Belgian chemicals and pharmaceuticals company, one of the first things I did was sign an ethical code of conduct. Given my academic background, I took great interest in this document and was quite impressed. Companies cannot afford to have their employees behaving badly, not just for PR but for legal reasons and they regularly, if not quietly, enforce these codes. I never signed an ethical code of conduct at my university and clearly what I [saw](#) my boss doing to students was enough reason for me to leave.

Most NGOs do not have ethical codes of conduct – in fact they celebrate when their activists break laws, attack others or mislead the public. About ten years ago, I challenged Greenpeace to stop their hypocrisy and develop a code, and eventually they did! But even then, it is a [loose collection](#) of pontifications rather than rules to guide the actions of their staff. Few other NGOs have bothered and many, like Extinction Rebellion or Just Stop Oil, celebrate their activists breaking the law.

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5. Take back the narrative

Many left-wing parties in the West have used the narrative of a climate crisis as an opportunity to call for a de-industrialisation, to abandon capitalism, turn back the clock on economic growth and redefine prosperity. *“No time to lose!”* This is something they can claim only due to the affluence that industry, international trade and capitalism has brought to Western societies. Views like [Naomi Klein’s](#), that we cannot have both capitalism and fight climate change (therefore, to save the planet, we need to veer sharply to the political left). Others from the WEF to the European Commission speak of a capitalism reset or degrowth like it is the only alternative.

This is madness. Climate mitigation cannot be effectively addressed by some activist solution of precaution and pulling back from all human activity. Like other perceived crises in the past, we need to find technological solutions and innovations, and to do that we need industry, entrepreneurs and capital investment. This narrative is rarely heard (unless there is a pandemic or health crisis where these same critical social actors are then seen begging industry to find a solution).

6. Industry isn’t one side in some culture war

Industry and capitalism have been portrayed as a middle-aged, white male curse on humanity, creating global suffering for the profits of a few. Many activist groups from Friends of the Earth to Greenpeace have co-opted social justice causes from gender rights to racial diversity as part of their struggle against industry and capitalism; agroecologists have turned rural development into a fight of peasant smallholders against big business; Big Pharma is seen as neglecting women’s diseases and only looking at solutions to the profitable Western medical establishment ...

Industry needs to re-tell their stories, how they have found solutions for the most vulnerable and how they have broken ground as social justice leaders. Private companies like Solvay and J&J were the first to guarantee pensions for their workers, shorter work weeks, maternity leaves... Corporations rank among the highest aid donors, be it via medicines to developing countries, cash payments, schools or infrastructure projects. The anti-industry NGOs who talk a big talk about social justice do little in comparison (to the contrary, many of them suck up public funds for their salaries). Why did industry allow these malcontents to steal the justice issue from them and cloak their intolerance as virtue?

7. Stand up for credible science

Industry spends billions investing in new technologies. They have to get the science right, if anything, just for existential reasons. Their commitment to good laboratory practice (GLP) and responsible research are key components of their innovation strategy. Today I cannot think of a company or industry that does not practice sustainability by design in the research approach (an evolution from the product stewardship culture that shaped CSR in the 1990s).

Five years working in a corporate research park will attest that companies pay top dollar to get the best

scientists out of graduate programmes and work to provide them with the means to develop cutting-edge research. With so much riding on proper methodology, research integrity is etched into their ethical codes of conduct. So why do I hear, constantly, that research results can't be trusted because they are either industry-based or funded? Are these second-rate researchers still so bitter that their former classmates got the good jobs and they didn't?

8. Speak out against activist science

Activist scientists, on the other hand, exist only to try to create doubt and distrust of innovations. There are no consequences if these malignant tumours of the research community cherry-pick or mislead the public – they are paid to do so and in a clear majority of the cases, their claims are bogus and eventually disproven (not without first creating alarm and a loss of trust in research innovations). When activists try to ignore results from industry science because it is simply industry funded, or when they try to discredit distinguished researchers for working with industry, it is time for the scientific community to stand up and put the record straight.

But industry leaders do not speak out against the worst, most corrupt scientists. This site recently [showed](#) how a group of anti-industry, retired regulatory scientists have come together around a PR-driven non-profit called Collegium Ramazzini, taking blood-money from American tort law firms suing companies based on misleading claims they make via malleable channels of influence like IARC. Instead companies settle out of court with these Predatorts, providing more funds for more evidence fabrication by these lamentable activist scientists.

With the NGO success in removing the post of Chief Scientific Adviser to the European Union, there is no strong voice for science in the EU regulatory process so we see policies being based on aspirational ideologies rather than science. Industry needs to speak for a return to evidence-based policies based on the best available science. Myself and others have [called](#) for some sort of Brussels science-based organisation to be formed that can defend scientific literacy and research evidence within the policy process.

9. Stand up and walk out

Industry still holds to their CSR strategy of the 1990s: that stakeholder dialogue is the best means to gain public trust. Listen and engage with those with other views and they will also consider your views, creating the atmosphere for better dialogue in the policy process. What a load of crap that turned out to be. By letting the activists sit at the table, the first thing they did was work to exclude industry from the room and then eat their lunch.

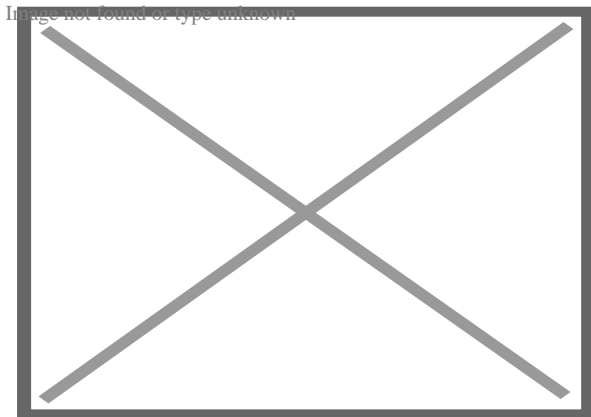
In Brussels in the 2000s, NGO activists threatened to walk out of participatory processes like the European Technology Platforms (ETPs) unless they were given more say, more money and less industry involvement. Soon industry lost its voice in the policy process as activists continued to discredit companies, often banning them from meeting policymakers or even being allowed to enter institutions like the European Parliament. And nobody in industry speaks out when other industries are attacked or

banned. This is shameful.

Industry has to stop letting the European Commission and the NGOs bully them. Like the NGO threat to leave the ETPs, industry should be prepared to walk out of EU policy processes until their voice is also considered, until the lobbying rules are applied to all parties fairly and until NGOs are equally held accountable for their lies and fear campaigns. The Brussels policy process is built on a stakeholder consultation process; if industry refuses to join the game when the rules are stacked against them, Brussels risks delegitimising itself (further). If industry walks out, regulators will be forced to be fair.

Of course, European trade associations exist to be that voice in Brussels, so the initiative will never come from those still selling the “engagement is key” mantra. Industry leaders need to ask where the root cause of this problem is coming from.

10. Set demands on regulators



The policy process (particularly in Brussels) needs to change. Reliance merely on the Precautionary Principle and a hazard-based approach has led to the inability for policymakers to manage risks. Precaution is a tool that should be applied when the risk management process has failed, not instead of the entire process. Industry should abandon the EU policy process until the Commission launches a White Paper on Risk Management. It also needs a clear delineation of how and when hazard-based approaches should or should not be used.

Precaution, banning any uncertainty and promising to keep populations “safe” is actually quite irresponsible. It is an institutionalised failure when precautionary inaction puts social goods at risk, denies benefits, innovations and technologies that societies need to live well, prosper and ensure future generations have the tools to continue to find solutions to any challenges.

Those who argue for precaution also argue to move societies “[*Beyond Growth*](#)”. These people are well fed, enjoy an affluence unseen in history and are not worried about their economic future. They are too self-absorbed to realise that most of humanity can only dream of the good fortune these zealots have been given. Industry has provided enormous social goods, but there is still so much want and need, and

the voices of the developing world needs to be amplified.

11. Celebrate leadership

There are very few true leaders today in governments. Most are pretending to practice virtue politics, inclusion and consensus building which ironically is creating a more divisive, intolerant and unequal society. Leaders lead by earning trust, inspiring and being role models. Corporate leaders moved up the ladders by exhibiting these traits (... unless they were ruthless, high-functioning sociopaths). As industry leaders put their heads in the sand or pass public leadership onto their ESG bean counters, the public does not identify corporate leaders as titans of industry, creating value and changing the world.

The corporate titan story – that captures dreams and builds trust – is rarely being told today. When J.P. Morgan's Jamie Dimon once [hinted](#) to a journalist that he “would not be unwilling” to serve in public office, the next day there were calls from high places for him to run for president. (Where have you gone Joe DiMaggio???) It is easy to paint CEOs as out-of-touch, greedy billionaires if they do not exhibit their inspirational skills or celebrate their achievements.

The Industry Complex can be solved if corporate leaders had the courage to stand up and lead from the front. For every Steve Jobs or Jeff Bezos that leaves the stage, we find functionaries and shadows who fail to lead. Without business leaders out front, the young are left to be inspired by activist influencers and professors (neither of whom are around six months later).

12. Return to Realpolitik

Politics is not about giving everyone what they want but about finding practical solutions so that they can get what they need. Decades of post-Cold War affluence in the West have created a form of luxury governance and simplified policymaking: any uncertainty or risk could just be “precautioned away” (we could just import our food and energy needs and write someone else a cheque). But that is not what politics is about and, as we have pilfered away our prosperity, we have to get back to hard decisions, pragmatic solutions and finding ways to minimise wants and shortages. In the 1970s and 80s, this was known as [Realpolitik](#) and the concept needs to return to our political discourse.

The risk-averse activist ideologues will have to accept that we need innovative technologies, accessible energy and a certain level of social risk acceptance. We cannot run factories just with solar panels on a roof or feed the world with organic beans grown from a window-box. Industry needs to promote that political reality and continue to offer solutions to reduce the impact of the necessary socio-economic sacrifices.

These 12 recommendations may not solve all of the trust problems industry is facing today, but they offer a potential way to at least stop the rot. They are far better answers than the ostrich strategy we presently see that has merely worsened the Industry Complex. It takes strength to try to be reasonable with the unapologetically irrational. It takes courage to stand up to a band of well-funded ideologues communicating via slick, coordinated campaigns and personal attacks. But without such leadership, what

future will industry have? What future will developed Western societies have?

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