Our readers are invited to present their own reports of what they are paying attention to in the transition from economic-industrial to ecological-cultural societies.

From Alice Loyd

Looking back at the past month’s news stories in light of ecozoic priorities, the lead story must be the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Report Summary

Andrew Revkin of The New York Times focused on the following sentence as the most important in the report: “By the mid-21st century the magnitudes of the projected changes are substantially affected by the choice of emissions scenario.” Commenting on it, he wrote, “That’s a time scale that people can reasonably understand. Energy and environmental policies being considered now can matter not just to great grandchildren, but to many global citizens alive today.” Climate Panel’s Fifth Report Clarifies Humanity’s Choices

Most news articles on the report focused on the 95% certainty of the panel regarding the human role in the problem. The report states, “It is extremely likely that human influence on climate caused more than half of the observed increase in global average surface temperature from 1951 to 2010.” Climate Panel Cites Near Certainty on Warming

“There’s a mismatch between what scientists say about how certain they are and what the general public thinks the experts mean,” however, according to an Associated Press story. “The [Assessment Report] asked scientists who specialize in climate, physics, epidemiology, public health, statistics and risk just what in science is more certain than human-caused climate change, what is about the same, and what is less. . . . They said gravity is a good example of something more certain than climate change.” Climate change “is not as sure as if you drop a stone it will hit the Earth,” Princeton University climate scientist Michael Oppenheimer said. "It’s not certain, but it’s close." What 95% Certainty of Warming Means to Scientists

What does seem certain is that as long as uncertainty can be declared to any degree, there will be resistance to the findings of climate science. On October 10 in the Washington Post, Michael Gerson commented, “The intersection of science and policy, of climate and politics, has become a bloody crossroads. Blog-based arguments over ocean temperatures and the thickness of the Greenland ice sheet are as shrill and personal as any tea-party primary challenge. The IPCC report—designed to describe areas of scientific consensus—has become an occasion for polarization.” He calls this debate “even more bitter and polarized than the budget showdown.” Gerson’s conclusion? “The main problem in dealing with climate change is not scientific uncertainty. It is the inability of political systems to deal with a certain type of risk and reward.” Politics Is Poorly Suited to Address Global Warming
It is this inability that three prominent Americans sought, in an October 3rd op-ed in The Washington Post, to remedy by calling for the United States to undertake a climate change risk assessment. Michael Bloomberg, independent Mayor of New York; Hank Paulson, former chairman of Goldman Sachs and Treasury Secretary in the George W. Bush administration; and Tom Steyer, founder of Farallon Capital Management and co-founder of Next Generation co-wrote, “If the United States were run like a business, its board of directors would fire its financial advisers for failing to disclose the significant and material risks associated with unmitigated climate change.” They’ve formed an initiative to “look across the U.S. economy and assess the potential impacts of climate change by region and by sector.” They say their analysis “will arm decision-makers with the information they need to determine how much climate risk they are comfortable taking on.”

We Need Climate Change Risk Assessment

For ecozoans, the political polarization that resulted in partial government shutdown and nearly resulted in sovereign debt default would be another major topic of concern in recent news reports. An online, October 8, 2013, commentary by Tom Edsall stated, “Animosity toward the federal government has been intensifying at a stunning rate. In a survey released on Sept. 23, Gallup polling found that the percentage of Republicans saying the federal government has too much power—81 percent—had reached a record-setting level.”

Anger Can Be Power

The lead sentence in the Edsall op-ed is, “The depth and strength of voters’ conviction that their opponents are determined to destroy their way of life has rarely been matched, perhaps only by the mood of the South in the years leading up to the Civil War.” The same concern marked a piece written by Colbert I. King on October 4. King refers to “this virulent hostility to the Union . . . that shut down the federal government, and without even firing a weapon.” He calls the hostile faction “The New Confederacy,” and says it is “as churlish toward President Obama as the Old Confederacy was to Lincoln.”

New Confederacy

Following the October shutdown, many commentators saw the schism between business Republicans and the Tea Party goals. Joe Echevarria, the chief executive of accounting and consulting firm Deloitte, said in an interview, “I’m a Republican by definition and by registration, but the party seems to have split into two factions.” “While both parties have extreme elements, he suggested, only in the G.O.P. did the extreme element exercise real power. ‘The extreme right has 90 seats in the House. . . . Occupy Wall Street has no seats.’”

Tea Party and Business

Democrats have their own schism, according to an article published earlier this year. While the number of the devout has remained steady, fewer of those in the religious middle identify with the organizations and values of the devout. What we are seeing, according to the Pew Research Center, is not “secularization but polarization. Institutional religion has gained a larger body of critics.” The article continues, “On the level of politics, this trend aids cultural liberalism and the Democratic Party. About 70 percent of [those who indicated no religion] voted for President Obama. . . . This sets up some possible conflicts within the Democratic Party. Its second-largest religious group is black Protestants, among the most religious of
Americans.” But the main tension is emerging between the parties. Religious conservatives remain the largest constituency within the Republican Party. So America is moving in the direction of having one secular party and one religious party, bringing polarization to a new level of intensity. **Split on Religion**

Western governments are under strain for non-political reasons as well, and increasing numbers of the former middle class face greater economic hardship. “As bad as things in Washington are . . . they are going to get much worse, for the United States and other advanced economies, in the years ahead,” begins an op-ed by Stephen D. King in the *New York Times* on October 6, 2013. “We are reaching end times for Western affluence. Between 2000 and 2007, ahead of the Great Recession, the United States economy grew at a meager average of about 2.4 percent a year—a full percentage point below the 3.4 percent average of the 1980s and 1990s. From 2007 to 2012, annual growth amounted to just 0.8 percent. In Europe, as is well known, the situation is even worse.” When the money runs out, a rising state, which [Adam] Smith described as “cheerful,” gives way to a declining, “melancholy” one: promises can no longer be met, mistrust spreads and markets malfunction.” **When Wealth Disappears**

For a discussion of how US and non-US fiscal issues may affect the environment, see Andrew Revkin, *Soundtrack for a Debt Showdown—In the Red, Got No Green and I’m Feeling So Blue* and *On Death, Taxes, and Temperatures*.

The result of political polarization is governmental paralysis, and for people working toward climate solutions or any other ecozoic aspiration requiring large-scale remedy, paralysis is concerning. It’s particularly concerning for the poor, who not only suffer the first and worst effects of climate change, but many of whom are also presently being excluded even from the Affordable Care Act.

A sweeping national effort to extend health coverage to millions of Americans will leave out two-thirds of the poor blacks and single mothers and more than half of the low-wage workers who do not have insurance, the very kinds of people that the program was intended to help, according to an analysis of census data by *The New York Times*.

Because they live in states largely controlled by Republicans that have declined to participate in a vast expansion of Medicaid, the medical insurance program for the poor, they are among the eight million Americans who are impoverished, uninsured and ineligible for help. The federal government will pay for the expansion through 2016 and no less than 90 percent of costs in later years.

Those excluded will be stranded without insurance, stuck between people with slightly higher incomes who will qualify for federal subsidies on the new health exchanges that went live this week, and those who are poor enough to qualify for
Medicaid in its current form, which has income ceilings as low as $11 a day in some states. Health Impacts on the Poor of Polarization

It would be good to close with good news, and it does exist, even in alarming stories about climate change. Here is one paragraph from a report in The New York Times on October 10, 2013: “The models show that unprecedented temperatures could be delayed by 20 to 25 years if there is a vigorous global effort to bring emissions under control. While that may not sound like many years, the scientists said the emissions cuts would buy critical time for nature and for human society to adapt, as well as for development of technologies that might help further reduce emissions.” Timing of Climate Change

I’d never read that delay itself would help nature adapt, but it makes sense. When I passed the paragraph on to a friend, she responded:

You’re right. The range of trees can move only so many miles per year. Extra years would let the range get farther. And people could use those extra years to help plant tree seeds farther north [or south, as the case may be], to extend the range faster than the range extends by wind, birds, insects or other animals. I imagine other plants and animals work this way too. I could see this as a heroic task—for a generation or two to move the plants and animals far enough north [or south, as the case may be] to survive another generation. And to move the ones going up mountains so they’re instead going up north [or south, as the case may be]. It is a good vision of what to do with the years coming up.