“[The Paris climate accord] is a fraud really, a fake. It’s just bull--- for them to say: ‘We’ll have a 2C warming target’ ... is just worthless words.... As long as fossil fuels appear to be the cheapest fuels out there, they will be continued to be burned.” (James Hansen: 2015)

“We need to stop trying to balance the increasingly parsimonious carbon emissions budgets entailed by a two-degree target on the backs of the global poor. There is no moral justification for denying those populations the benefits of fossil-fuel-driven development.” (Ted Nordhaus: Foreign Affairs, 2018)

Ted Nordhaus of Environmental Progress has widened the civil war within the climate mainstream on grounds of social justice. “The Two-Degree Delusion,” subtitled The Dangers of an Unrealistic Climate Change Target, just published in Foreign Affairs, exposes the daunting climate math of carbon-dioxide mitigation strategy. In place of too late, politically unrealistic, all-pain no-gain CO₂ rationing, Nordhaus urges a shift to a wealth-based, market-driven adaptation as climate policy.

Nordhaus’s argument can be reduced to three major points:

• Global CO₂ emissions are rising, confirming that there has not been a “step change” from fossil-fuel reliance (“what progress the world has made to cut global emissions has been, under even the most generous assumptions, incremental”).

• International efforts to jawbone and ration CO₂ emissions—symbolic, nonbinding, and largely inconsequential—have made the 40-year-old goal of keeping man-made global warming to under two degrees Celsius “no longer obtainable.”

• The “arbitrary” target to limit global warming to two degrees Celsius, which would require “emissions ... to fall precipitously,” would leave “the world ill prepared to mitigate or manage the consequences.”

His conclusion?

There is no moral justification for denying those populations the benefits of fossil-fuel-driven development. Lower-emissions levels associated with curtailed development will
not provide any meaningful amelioration of climate extremes for many decades to come, whereas the benefits that come with development will make those populations substantially more resilient to climate extremes right now.

Nordhaus works within the mainstream of climate modeling. The incremental effects of postulated CO₂-driven climate change are both uncertain and small. (“It is not until modelers project into the twenty-second century that large differences begin to emerge,” he notes.) Alleged “tipping points” for worse-case climate events, he adds, are plagued by “enormous uncertainties.” Relatedly, “the precautionary principle holds equally well at one degree of warming, a threshold that we have already surpassed; one and a half degrees, which we will soon surpass; or, for that matter, three degrees.”

Energy Realism
Nordhaus ties energy realism to climate realism. Today’s low-carbon technologies are costly, inefficient, and a burden for consumers and taxpayers, he notes. The proffered saviors of grid-level wind and solar fall short, for “the value of intermittent sources ... declines precipitously as their share of electricity production rises.”

Nuclear, while better, has disappointed: “Outside of China and a few other Asian economies, few nations have been able to build large nuclear plants cost-effectively in recent decades.”

A new generation of low-carbon energy technologies are necessary, but “all are decades away from viable application.” And the fact remains that “almost 30 years after the UN established the two-degree threshold, over 80 percent of the world’s energy still comes from fossil fuels, a share that has remained largely unchanged since the early 1990s.”

Adapt, Don’t Mitigate
Wealth is health—and the means for environmental betterment. This insight from free-market environmentalism is prominent in Nordhaus’s call for a paradigm shift in climate policy. “A natural disaster of the same magnitude will generally bring dramatically greater suffering in a poor country than in a rich one,” he notes, meaning that “the faster those nations develop, the more resilient they will be to climate change.”
“Development in most parts of the world,” he posits, “still entails burning more fossil fuels—in most cases, a lot more.”

Most climate advocates have accepted that some form of adaptation will be a necessity for human societies over the course of this century. But many refuse to acknowledge that much of that adjustment will need to be powered by fossil fuels. Hard infrastructure—modern housing, transportation networks, and the like—is what makes people resilient to climate and other natural disasters.

**More, Better Reasons Too**
Nordhaus’s adaptation-for-mitigation strategy, or free-market self-help in place of energy statism, is intellectually stronger than his article lets on. He works from the shaky premise of high-sensitivity warming from the enhanced greenhouse effect (he refers to “a planet that is almost certainly going to be much hotter even if the world cuts emissions rapidly”).

Yet sensitivity estimates have been *coming down* in the mainstream literature. And “fat tail” extreme warming scenarios are *being discounted* if not ruled out with recent research. A new base case for serious consideration is *global lukewarming*, as opposed to the (aging) standard IPCC temperature range, which both mitigates the alleged problem and reduces the effect of mitigation itself.

Nordhaus should also acknowledge (if not champion) the benefits of CO₂ fertilization and moderate warmth to upend the *social cost of carbon* to justify government mitigation of greenhouse gases.

**Conclusion**
Kudos to Ted Nordhaus for a well-reasoned scholarly article in a mainstream journal that will be hard for the entrenched climate intelligentsia to ignore. His is an intellectual moment of note for critics of global climate governance—a mistaken, futile, and socially unjust crusade.

As the *climate math* becomes more and more daunting, or just plain politically impossible, expect the adaption-not-mitigation argument to only grow in stature.