

# Michael Shellenberger on Climate Panic, Safetyism, and Gen X Resilience

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## SUMMARY

*The speaker expresses a positive outlook on humanity's potential, influenced by their upbringing as a Gen Xer and the human potential movement. They argue against the pessimistic views prevalent in environmentalism, advocating for a more optimistic perspective that recognizes human capabilities and the progress made in lifting people out of poverty.*

- The speaker identifies as a Gen Xer, influenced by a less supervised upbringing and a sense of irony about life.*
- They emphasize the importance of recognizing untapped human potential and the need for enabling conditions for growth.*
- The speaker critiques apocalyptic environmentalism as a reflection of personal unhappiness and argues for a cognitive behavioral approach to counter negative thoughts.*
- They highlight the role of parenting in shaping perspectives and express concern over the pressures faced by modern parents.*
- The speaker discusses the changing media landscape, noting the rise of independent media and the influence of economic interests on mainstream narratives.*
- They argue that climate change is often framed as an apocalyptic threat due to motivations of money, power, and ideology, filling a spiritual vacuum left by declining traditional religions.*
- The speaker believes that alarmist narratives serve various interests, including media profitability and political power.*
- They suggest that climate change discourse has taken on a role similar to that of traditional religions in providing meaning and purpose in people's lives.*

why do you have a positive view on the potential for Humanity where does my positive vision of humanity come from I I think you know there must be some genetic component or there must be something around my parents and peer group I definitely identify as a gen xer it's a little strange for me to say that because to generalize about a generation is sort of absurd right there's just too many people but I think it's you know gen

xter um and it was in my case too many of us were raised uh without parents hovering over us as much we were latchy kids one of the the other characters of gen gen actors that we were ironic and so we had a sense of humor about life took it a little bit maybe didn't take it quite so seriously my dad in particular was a psychologist and very much influenced by what's known as the human potential

movement which went off in a bunch of different directions after the 60s some of it became a little culty some of it became kind of Pop self-help but at the heart of it was this idea that we should be thinking about Peak

psychology not just depth psychology so for me I've always been influenced by this idea that humans always had so much more potential than the average person really was able to realize in their jobs their their

their marriage and their educations that there's a lot of untapped resources you know when we were kids the the teachers would say things like I think it's a myth I think it's been debunked where they would say things like you know we only use like 10% of our brain or something and is you know almost certainly not true but I think it got at some broader truth which was that we're never fully realizing our potential and

so for me the part of environmentalism that was always a stone in my shoe was the negative attitude towards humankind I loved the nature preservation it was a big part of my youth my parents took me camping I wanted to protect the rainforest was the first big cause I had as a teenager I was concerned about climate change but I was just struck by just the the pessimism and the Darkness and the nihilism which has only

increased since I started working on the issue in the late 1990s so I I confess I think that much of my concern around that anti-humanism came from a kind of a priori sense in which humans have a lot of potential to be good and to create good things and we've lifted you know almost all of us 90% of humankind has been lifted out of extreme poverty and and I think there's a huge obligation to finish that task with the remaining 10%

I think everybody should be able to live in societies that allow freedom of speech I see no reason that countries should be depriving each other of those freedoms so for me it's somewhat simple I guess it's a sense in which everybody should be able to be at a level where we have the basic enabling conditions so that the rest of the work is just mental it's just doing the internal work you know including the exercise in the

morning and the the good physical health and all the things that you need but that this was enough to really unlock much more significant human potential than we've unlocked to date where does apocalyptic environmentalism come from I think apocalyptic pessimistic environmentalism is the mentality of a depressed person if you look at this cognitive behavioral therapy which is really the only proven form of therapy to address depression what it teaches people to do is to talk back to those

negative inner voices I'm a bad person the world's a terrible place the future is dark and literally like one of the first things you're taught to do with cognitive behavioral therapy is to just is to write out the negative thoughts and then write out an argument against them it's very cerebral in that way and it draws a lot on the ideas of friedrich nche who said in order to feel differently I have to think differently so I think that you know are

depressed people drawn to this depressing ideology does the ideology make people depressed it appears to be go both ways I know that the points in my life when I was the most apocalyptic about climate change I was also the most unhappy in my personal life and I think that's a characteristic of a lot of folks that have been down that road so I've always felt like I wanted to do cognitive behavioral therapy you know at the mass level I wanted to be able to

talk back to those negative thoughts and you do so through facts and logic you do so with certain amounts of empathy but but I think that we're not doomed to it but I think that as the older religious and ideological Frameworks have lost meaning you know most people don't uh have a strong religious point of view anymore you know a lot of people no longer go to church we're losing those forms of community that people end up creating new

ideologies that are often I think fairly termed nihilistic they're very negative they're very dark they end up being anti- civilization so I don't think it's a surprise of the people that are most attracted to these depressed ways of thinking are also doing things that undermine one of the core pillars of civilization whether that's cheap and abundant energy or Law and Order or meritocracy or freedom of speech it's often sad angry people that are doing

the things that undermine our ability to you know survive and thrive as a civilization how did having kids affect the way you view the world I mean your kids are just sort of when you have kids it's sort of you know it's sort of everything it's uh it's both a blessing and a burden in the sense that um it's sort of the most important thing you know for you and and you're always thinking about them and

you're always worrying about whether or not you're a good parent and and the and the part of the I I've not loved the parenting culture which I think reinforces that really kind of harsh you know voice on parents there's a lot so much pressure pressure on parents but certainly you know you have a sense of of your own immortality project you have a sense that gives your life's Works meaning it also I think has for me had

an impact on hey how do I how do I want to behave in you know hot media you know like social media where I think we all have had experiences of you know letting our emotions and passions get the best of us I always think of my my kids getting older and and being asked about things that I've said or done so some sense of responsibility but I also think that can go too far and I think there's

been a real um you know highly self-critical parenting voice that has made that I think has put a lot of pressure on parents and and and not and I think that's been part of the process of not allowing kids the free play that they need that free range playing that they need separate from parents you know I I'm a little sad about it because you know when we were we were kids growing up in the in the 70s and 80s you know

we' ride our bikes around town our parents had no idea where we were I mean absolutely no idea and there was danger there genuine danger and so I think kids at some objective level are much safer today but I think then that has fed this culture of safetyism and this desire to eliminate all risk and all danger and I think that paradoxically ends up creating its own dangers it's created people that that feel fragile maybe are more fragile than

they were when they would go through a childhood that had more hard knock is America in an information War I mean my views of the media have changed very dramatically before the Twitter files I think I felt like I knew that the media was often very dogmatic and kind of herd mentality with the media but I think I didn't

quite understand how controlled it was in the ways in which you know you'll see the the coverage often of the

same story will be uniform across all the TV networks all the news papers and I think that's I think we now know that that's not accidental there's very powerful interest groups that are shaping that media coverage I think it's imbalanced I think it used to be more heterodox the media with different voices I think with the rise of social media and the sort of uh bubbles that get created the ideological bubbles it's sort of made the mainstream news media

more for a specific particular audience of professional managerial class Elites think more working people and and people with you know less Orthodox views have turned to Independent Media and and now we see that the elite media are basically working with the censorship industrial complex to demand more censorship of their opponents so there's really an information war going on I mean this is one of the most interesting phenomenon in society right now in my view is the attacks on people like Elon

Musk after he bought Twitter which has now been rebranded X there constant attacks around Mark Zuckerberg that that's not just a sort of innocent ideological disagreement there's actually fundamental economic interests that are at play in terms of what the media decides to cover how it decides to cover it they're all competing for advertising dollars you know and so one of the questions for a journalist like myself has been can we make it with subscription only business

model and one of the most exciting things that's what we've been able to do I mean many of us at some at least some of us as substack have been able to make a living with subscriber only revenue and I think what you'll see is that a lot less obeses to the to the kinds of interest groups that support the advertising for traditional media there's really kind of three big phenomenon there's sort of the the economics of media there's the political

uh partisanship and then there's ideology and they're all there but I think they become much more visible in recent years particularly through Co um but really with the rise of social media about a decade ago how does the media feed climate hysteria at the end of Apocalypse never I look at why if climate change is real but not the end of the world do people treat it like it's this existential apocalyptic threat and I look at three big motivations

there's money power and ideology or religion and ultimately think that the ideological motivations are the are the strongest driver but certainly we see economic interests both the media make money through selling alarmist news media coverage you know if you point out that really carbon emissions globally have been flat over the last decade they've been going down for the last 15 to 50 years in developed countries it takes away a lot from the

urgency and the drama if you tell people really a lot of the increase of emissions is coming from places like China and India that are lifting their people out of poverty it just it doesn't it's not as amendable to kind of moral case that I think a lot of the folks want to make so you sort of certainly see those the media economic aspect certainly there's energy interests that are served by by exaggerating or or perpetuating

this apocalyptic story there's political interests and social interests you know people can make themselves famous but also political parties can gain power through these conversations and then really this big ideological driver I just think that you know as religion has become less important in people's lives people need some new way to make sense of the world and of their place in it a new way to define their own purpose and we certainly saw some big ideological

movements in the early part of the 20th century with first Fascism and then communism and it's notable that really the apocalyptic story about climate change emerges as the threat of nuclear conflict declined as the cold war came to an end climate change as an apocalyptic discourse really started to emerge I think it was filling a kind of spiritual vacuum a meaning or purpose vacuum that was created by the decline of those older ideological commitments and it climate change works at so many

different levels it gives it tells you what you should be eating what you should be doing what kind of car you should be driving who you should be voting for even what kind of relationships you should be in what you should be worried about so it really Pro it starts to provide a lot of the similar needs that religions had traditionally met if you like this clip it is part of a much longer conversation that is only

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