Welcome to another episode of Breakthrough Dialogues, the podcast for pragmatists and problem solvers, brought to you by the Breakthrough Institute. I’m Alex Trembath, your host and communications director at Breakthrough.

Breakthrough Dialogues invites leading thinkers to talk technological and modern solutions to environmental problems. It’s part of our effort to move beyond the tribalism and polarization that too often characterizes environmental thought and debate today.

Quick note to our loyal listeners: my amazing co-host, Emma Brush, has moved on from Breakthrough to get her PhD at Stanford. She’ll be editing the Breakthrough Journal for us still, but sadly not co-hosting with me anymore. Good luck to you, Emma.

For this episode, we sat down with Rachel Pritzker, founder and president of the Pritzker Innovation Fund, which supports the development and advancement of paradigm-shifting ideas to address the world’s most wicked problems. Rachel is a longtime funder of Breakthrough, and certainly an ecomodernist thought leader in her own right. She’s a signatory of the Ecomodernist Manifesto and a leading thinker and voice in conversations around advanced nuclear energy, energy for human development, and other issues.

In this episode, we’ll talk about Rachel’s path to ecomodernism, and how big ideas and principles can help overcome partisan ruts and create real change in the world.

Rachel, thanks for being here.
Rachel Pritzker: No problem. Happy to be here.

Alex Trembath: So you're a signatory on the *Ecomodernist Manifesto*. I think people come to ecomodernism from a whole bunch of different realms. We've got historians, we've got philosophers, we've got energy experts, we've got agronomists, we've got artists. What drew you to ecomodernism and what are you trying to contribute to it?

Rachel Pritzker: I think the thing that inspires me most about the conversation the manifesto intended to start was around how you create good outcomes for both people and the environment. The idea that human needs and a modern life for humans is always going to be bad for nature is something deeply underlying a lot of traditional environmental thought. I think offering some ideas about how that may not in fact be the case and some potential solutions to address both the needs of people and the environment is deeply appealing to me because I don't think we should have to choose. I think a lot of environmentalists also will admit, sometimes only late at night or if they've had a few drinks, that for the environment to do well, we may need less people, or that we can't afford to allow people in the developing world to have a modern life, and I find that morally reprehensible.

Alex Trembath: You also come to this school of thought, to ecomodernism, largely through the energy and climate space in particular, right?

Rachel Pritzker: Yeah.

Alex Trembath: So, what has been your evolution there? What had been your journey through environmental politics, through climate politics that has gotten you to this thought leadership position within the broader environmental conversation within ecomodernism?

Rachel Pritzker: Well, I guess I could start way back.

Alex Trembath: Please.

Rachel Pritzker: So, I was raised on a goat farm in Wisconsin by my parents who had both grown up in Chicago, and decided in the 70s like many people
during the back to the land movement, that modern civilization was the root cause of all evil, and that they were going to try and recreate a bygone era, and grow all our own food, and raise goats and heat with wood. So, that was my childhood. As an example of that, that went hand in hand with that 70s idea of the future we needed to create. One of my earliest memories was protesting at a nuclear facility along the Kickapoo. Actually, I think that was on the Mississippi River because, of course, burning wood was the more natural solution regardless of pollution.

Rachel Pritzker: So, yeah, I started in a very anti-technology, you could say, worldview of how we solve these problems. As an adult I was not terribly drawn to the environmental movement. I saw ways that I could have impact in other parts of the political discourse. I was initially engaged in progressive politics more through movement building, and better media, and other avenues in that I thought might have a bigger impact, but I will admit I was definitely a partisan, and maybe even a bit of a tribal warrior, one might say.

Rachel Pritzker: Then when I had my daughter, I realized that polarization and hiding behind our barricades in different political parties wasn't creating the world that I wanted for her. So, luckily being a new mom, I had a lot of time to reflect and reassess what I was trying to do in the world. I realized that looking for the really stuck points in our polarized discourse where there were new ideas that could help break through some of that locked-up ideology would probably be a better use of my efforts in the world.

Rachel Pritzker: That's right around when I first met Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus who were in the process of creating the Breakthrough Institute and were doing a lot of deep thinking about our underlying assumptions about how we solve climate change, and about environmentalism more broadly. I realized that there might be new ways to think about this stuff, and that maybe these new ways of thinking about these things wouldn't be inherently as polarized. At least that was my hope.

Alex Trembath: What are the kinds of things you're talking about?
Rachel Pritzker: Well, I think back then in the early days, the main idea was if you could make clean energy cheap it would be, A, easier to address climate change, but, B, less of a political issue. So, the idea that we could invest in innovation so that clean energy would be a better technology, but also cheaper technology at the time was a radical idea, and it seemed like a worthy effort to try and depolarize the climate discourse.

Alex Trembath: Do you think that’s an example of progress, actually? I think that if you compare, say, the environmentalism that you were raised in, in rural Wisconsin, to maybe dominant environmentalism today, which coming from the Breakthrough Institute, won’t surprise our listeners to learn that I still think has problems. But, there has been more of an embrace of maybe a certain technology and maybe it’s just a narrow band of technologies, solar, wind inefficiency. But do you think that’s progress?

Rachel Pritzker: Yeah. I do. I definitely think the idea that making clean energy cheap is a good way to help address climate change, is no longer a fringe idea. It’s definitely, now it took 10 years for it not to be a fringe idea, but it definitely got into the more mainstream way of thinking to the point where people are deciding to create new investment vehicles, and are thinking they can even make money making clean energy cheap.

Rachel Pritzker: I’m still not totally convinced that’s quite viable yet. I think one of the things that worries me right now about philanthropy but also just wealthy people trying to help climate change is that they still are inherently suspicious of any intervention that involves government, and particularly here in the tech community, there’s a suspicion in general of nonprofits, I think, and the idea that any real solution has to be a for-profit solution.

Rachel Pritzker: I’m still not convinced. Well, I’m certainly convinced that’s not the only solution. I think government has tremendous power, both in setting some of the rules of the road, but also if you look... and Breakthrough’s done great work on this, if you look at the history of most technologies in the 20th century, a lot of it can be traced back
directly to early government funding. So, I still am a huge believer in the role of government to help de-risk a space, and to help create new technologies.

Alex Trembath: Alright, so on that note, I want to get to something that you commented on recently. So, Matthew Nisbet recently published a paper on funding priorities for major environmental philanthropies. His thesis was essentially looking at over 10 years of data that big environmental philanthropies have focused mostly on a narrow set of technologies, and narrow framing of the climate problem. You and Breakthrough's executive director, Ted Nordhaus, wrote at Inside Philanthropy about this paper. So, I wanted to ask you what your thoughts are on where environmental philanthropy is and where you think it's going, where you think it should go?

Rachel Pritzker: Yeah. I think, like we mentioned earlier, I think environmental philanthropy has moved in some ways in some useful directions, including the idea that to solve climate change, clean energy needs to be cheaper. I think there are a lot of ways in which it still needs to move. I thought the Matt Nisbet paper showed some of them. I think there's still a lot of groupthink going on in environmental philanthropy.

Rachel Pritzker: I think the benefit of being a smaller player in this space is that for me to find impact, I have to do a lot more work because I have to find the stuff people are missing. If I join in and go with the herd, so to speak, is just going to have so much less impact. So, the work we do with our thought partners and colleagues at the handful of think tanks that we've been working with over the years, to identify new areas that are being overlooked that could be important leverage points in this debate has been a really useful educational process. But also, I think it's made sure that our impact can help continue to move the discourse into those sometimes uncomfortable places.

Rachel Pritzker: I think the one thing that means is that I have to be willing to take reputational risk because often these are in fact the taboo topics. These are not overlooked by accident. So, environmental philanthropy is scared to talk about things like nuclear. It's
increasingly okay to talk about carbon capture, or carbon removal approaches, but even that, there isn’t a whole lot of funding there yet.

Rachel Pritzker: Then an even newer and still quite unfamiliar and taboo topic is the topic of geoengineering. So, I think making sure that we are continuing to have these conversations both with the experts to figure out what is... where are the overlooked or underfunded areas, and check and make sure we’re not just out there on a limb by ourselves, but actually following research and expertise where it leads us, and then building communities of other funders to have these conversations so that the discourse becomes more normalized around a variety of these topics, because frankly, I think it is confusing to me that for those of us who care, or are concerned about climate change, to want to limit the range of options for either how we power the world or how we mitigate some of the downsides of climate change seems strange. Just as a basic risk reduction strategy to make sure we're including as many potential options on the table as we can, seems like a pragmatic way to go.

Alex Trembath: Yeah. So, with an eye towards things like energy for human development in emerging economies, with an eye towards things like geoengineering, I wanted to ask you about the advanced nuclear work in particular because you've been a hugely important and influential figure in that space. Pritzker Innovation Fund has been involved since the beginning, and at least from Breakthrough's perspective, there's been such a tremendous amount of progress in advanced nuclear... in the technology, and in the business side certainly, but also in the policy side, and then the discourse side. So, I wanted to ask you what you've learned from that. Why has that been as successful as it's been so far? Has it fallen short anywhere, and what work is there left to do?

Rachel Pritzker: I think there's still a lot of work to do to make the topic of nuclear more acceptable, or even to make it a topic that people think of when they're thinking about climate change approaches. But I've learned a ton about what can be done to move new ideas and even
eventually new policy through the system to help address climate change.

Rachel Pritzker: I think one of the main things I've learned is that new ideas are often less politically rigid, and in some cases offer options for bipartisan action that we didn't know were there until we tried something new.

Rachel Pritzker: So, on the topic of advanced nuclear, most of DC, including even parts of DOE, were not aware this was an emerging sector until we, and some of our partners raised the issue. Then over the course of just a few years, it got to the place where not only was DOE creating programs specifically to help some of these entrepreneurs and companies in the space do things like access to that national lab facilities, and the expertise in our national labs, but also we have legislation that has received remarkable bipartisan support.

Rachel Pritzker: Ultimately, we didn't care that people on the right and left were supporting it for different reasons. Some of them weren't shared reasons, but I think part of, one of the things that's limited our ability to get action on climate change is both the idea that there needs to be some grand bargain that solves all the problems, which makes it inherently much tougher in this gridlocked political climate we have. But, also that we need conservatives to admit liberals were right on climate change before we'll work with them.

Rachel Pritzker: The example of advanced nuclear is that honestly, without hitting people over the head about old battles there are places we can work together already. So, I think that was a really useful lesson, and could be applied to other issues, and other technologies that we need to advance to address climate change.

Alex Trembath: Yeah. Just to chime in, that's, in my view, the main example of progress that we actually see that we hear quite a bit about big bills, or big policy initiatives, or big movements to address climate change or whatever your favorite issue is, but it's things like the 1980 through 2002 tax credit for unconventional oil and gas exploration that no one in the world basically has ever heard of, but was pretty
essential to getting fracking off the ground, and fracking for whatever you think of it as helped create major emissions reductions in the last decade or so.

Alex Trembath: More recently, you have the 45Q and other tax credits for carbon removal that are sort of a niche price on carbon, and a very narrow and very niche technology policy that did not get a lot of fanfare and, relatedly, didn’t get any controversy really, but were just passed in the normal doings of an omnibus tax bill, and might in fact be radically impactful. I mean, not to count our chickens before they roost with the carbon capture stuff, but it does seem that those types of policy instruments are more the rule than the exception when it comes to actual emissions reductions.

Rachel Pritzker: Yeah. I think another thing I noticed about those examples is that it didn’t take collective action or mass mobilizations on the streets. It was actually a wonky behind-the-scenes thing that wasn’t terribly politicized, and that maybe in fact it benefited from not being politicized. I think the more areas we can find like that, that haven't become gridlocked yet where there can be movement, the better.

Alex Trembath: So, in the last few years, you've also started working on energy in emerging economies, what we at Breakthrough call energy for human development. So, what has that work been like?

Rachel Pritzker: So, it's been remarkable for me to discover that even though we talk a lot about climate change, and we talk a lot about alleviating poverty, and we have sustainable development goals, these things often don't actually get to the harder questions of what amount and what quality of energy is it going to take to, in fact lift people out of poverty.

Rachel Pritzker: I think either because the development and the climate people don't talk, or because we have this idea that we're going to skip over the hard part of building out energy infrastructure that we did in the developing world and leapfrog, which is the term they love to use, which always pushes my buttons because we're going to leapfrog to
Rachel Pritzker: I think there is shockingly little discourse, but also remarkably little research on what that pathway actually looks like, and how it’s going to work. So, there’s a lot of experimentation going on, and to try and figure out an alternate pathway for how to power a modern life, and how to power the factories and the hospitals and the schools that people require to live safe, healthy lives. The people that are paying the price for these experiments are often the world’s poorest people.

Rachel Pritzker: So, I have been very interested to improve that discourse and make sure partly that the voices of people in the developing world, and their needs, are taken more seriously in these conversations, and that the research we’re doing actually prioritizes human wellbeing. Not just a light or a fan, but actually what’s the pathway for them out of poverty that actually works for them.

Alex Trembath: Yeah. This gets back to something that you were saying earlier about a diminishing faith in governments. Not just the US government, but in particular, governments in emerging economies. I feel like a lot of these proposals, a lot of these visions of leapfrogging, or leapfrogging the grid, or leapfrogging agricultural modernization, they speak to a real lack of faith in institutions and governments in these emerging economies as if the solutions can be dropped in from NGOs, from international financial institutions, from-

Rachel Pritzker: Or for-profits, even.

Alex Trembath: Or for-profits, even.

Rachel Pritzker: Yeah. So, the idea that we're going to skip over local governments as a... and drop in a solution to building out energy infrastructure, that may make sense in a place where there’s really no functioning government or rule of law, in a place like, I don’t know, Congo, but that's not the case in all these countries. There are a lot of functional, or at least functional enough to build out infrastructure
governments in these places where they're more in touch with local needs, frankly, than an NGO in Europe or US.

Rachel Pritzker: This is traditionally the role of government. If you look at the history of how we built out energy access in the developed world, we did it through governments. It's very hard to imagine that this is going to be a for-profit endeavor. Also, looking at historically how this has happened. I think if companies are making good profits, providing power in the developing world to the world's poorest people, I am suspicious about it being the most efficient solution. So, I think again, it points to people's inherent suspicion of government as a solution, and it's concerning.

Alex Trembath: To shift gears a little bit on that note, agreeing with you, very much agreeing with you, to find progress in unpoliticized terrain. You've also spoken a lot about your worry about polarization, hyper-partisanship. You recently started an initiative called Patriots and Pragmatists that got off the ground in the last year or so. So, I wanted to ask you what that is, and then talk to you a little bit more about your general work on polarization and your general goals for dealing with it.

Rachel Pritzker: Yeah. So, having stepped back from national politics as I described earlier and focused more on areas where I thought we could achieve some movement, I realized in the last couple of years that the broader political context within which we were trying to advance particular policies was deeply dysfunctional, and that there weren't a lot of people looking at it with... they weren't looking at it above any particular political lens, or above any issue area. So, generally when people are talking about what's wrong with our politics or trying even to figure out what to do about it, they're working with people of their political ideology, or on a particular issue like reproductive rights, or immigration, or whatever bucket they're working on things. But we, my colleagues and I with these sorts of shared concerns about the structure and function of our democracy, didn't find a place where people from a wide range of political beliefs, and a wide range of issue area expertise and concern. We're talking actually above those, about our shared concern for
democracy that really shouldn't be a partisan, or even just an issue area.

Rachel Pritzker: Not finding that, we decided we needed to create something. Really what we created was a loose network of very diverse thinkers, and heads of organizations who have come together now for a series of retreats to talk about both how we got to this dysfunctional moment in our politics, and what people see as some of the areas that can be improved upon, or worked in to improve our democracy.

Rachel Pritzker: It's been remarkable to see people from Christian conservatives from Tennessee who are gun rights advocates sit down with folks from the far left, and really from everything in between, and realize both that they like each other as people, they have remarkably shared concerns. They may initially describe them differently, but finding those areas of agreement and disagreement, and as we've learned from attending the Breakthrough Dialogue over the years, achieving disagreement, actually picking apart what it is we're actually agreeing about and what it is we're actually disagreeing about, has been remarkably useful, and I think helped everyone see the work they're doing in the world and who they are, what their role is differently. Stepping above that partisanship even just for a retreat has been really useful.

Alex Trembath: Yeah. I can think of a number of individuals and initiatives over the last decade or so that have described their mission as overcoming hyper-polarization, but I think you're right, they tend to focus very much in the weeds. Maybe even at the level of policymaking, or logrolling, or whatever you want to call it. So, what you're describing and what you think we need is a higher level, more first principles' conversation.

Rachel Pritzker: Yeah. When we were first conceiving of this idea, we talked to a number of people on the right who said, "These gatherings are always called by someone on the left, and either implicitly or explicitly, we're always required to leave our deeply held beliefs, and come to some mushy middle. We're not interested in doing that
anymore. We’ve been invited to a bunch of these things, and our deeply held beliefs are our deeply held beliefs.”

Rachel Pritzker: So, expecting to create some policy agreement, or find some centrist-moderate policy agenda that can be shared doesn’t seem, I don’t know, I mean there may be people having success with it. But I don’t think most people appreciate being invited to something where they’re expected to give up on their deeply held beliefs. Ultimately, I think we need to find a range of political persuasions, and values, and policy beliefs even that are acceptable to actually engage in discourse across those differences to realize that we are people, we disagree on some of these things, and yet there may be above those particular policies broader things we agree on that actually, in this moment, maybe those are the things we need to be focusing on.

Rachel Pritzker: Whether we have an independent Congress that can check the power of the executive, there I think a bunch, a wide range of things. I think, sure, across the political spectrum they might describe what that would look like a little differently, but in general, there are a lot of high level how our democracy should function, and how the rule of law should be applied, and not be politicized. At that level of discourse, there is still some level of agreement.

Alex Trembath: So I’ll try and tie this all together. You’ve been talking about a need to get at the bigger ideas and the fundamental beliefs that you think can unite people. I feel like ecomodernism often gets reduced to its constituent parts: energy, ag modernization, urbanization, whatever it is. One of the things I like talking to you about is that you really focus on the more fundamental part of it. Not just the politics and the discourse, but the power of ideas. I want to ask for, basically, your theory of change. How do the big ideas, how do the fundamentals and first principles, filter through anything, but maybe philanthropy in particular, because that’s your world, into creating change?

Rachel Pritzker: The first step in what I have come to see as my path to what works in philanthropy is what I think most funders often skip over. And that’s the hard work of challenging the conventional wisdom and
the underlying assumptions. And most funders just skip to advocating for the solutions that are generally accepted as the most effective ones. And I think by skipping that first step of really questioning, "Really, what's the problem, first of all? Let's actually get clear. And what's the problem under that, and what's the problem under that?" Digging down and figuring out what are some of the underlying drivers to the problems we care about. And then, let's even challenge the solution set. And let's hear from some thinkers with new solutions or new ideas and challenge those. Take a deep look at the research and the data.

Rachel Pritzker: That, actually, has been the most important step, I think, for me, as a way to identify what I think other people have overlooked, or issue areas that aren't receiving enough attention. Then, yeah. Once I feel like I have a solution that I've identified that addresses a real underlying problem that is overlooked to a degree that I think is problematic, that tends to be the criteria I use... Well, and also, that actually has a solution that is both politically and technologically reasonable... Then, that is when it feels ripe to me to actually start doing something about it. And that doing something about it, most of the issues I've focused on has involved helping to change the discourse, making sure that I'm building a community of funders thinking together about this, but also that there's a community of thinkers, researchers, digging deeper into these issues and making it a more acceptable thing to research but also discuss, have conferences about. Build that community of thinkers.

Rachel Pritzker: Then because, as I've said a couple of times, I think government is a really important, but often overlooked, lever, I think moving into the advocacy stage around particular policies that have then been worked out in the community of thinkers and researchers is a tremendously effective way to have a big impact in the world. I see, like I said, the latest thing is to try and do a for-profit solution, or a business that's going to make money that's gonna solve a problem. But when I think about the scale of the problems we're talking about, and the resources and budgets in federal governments, it becomes hard for me to think how you achieve real, lasting impact without
engaging with government and without working to leverage some of the resources better within those government budgets that can really, as we've seen historically, are the way we effect these big changes.

Alex Trembath: Before we close, I want to ask you, in or outside of energy and the environment, about an example of progress that you see in the world today.

Rachel Pritzker: Well, there's a website by a young researcher at Oxford called Our World in Data, which-

Alex Trembath: Big fan.

Rachel Pritzker: Yes. I'm a very big fan. Which shows these remarkably engaging data visualization images of ways in which the world is getting better. Because I think this is actually another inherent problematic approach in both environmentalism and in philanthropy, is that we only focus on the problems. And there are examples of progress, whether it's poverty, child mortality, a variety of ways in which the world is actually getting better. And if we don't actually acknowledge them and then try and, in fact, learn the lessons of how we achieved some of those positive outcomes, I think we're not gonna be as effective at applying them to the areas we do still need to improve.

Alex Trembath: To the listeners who are curious about Our World in Data, I don't think you'll have to scroll too far down Rachel's or my Twitter feeds to find examples of graphs and links to that fantastic website. And on that note, I want to thank Rachel for joining us.

Rachel Pritzker: Thank you for having me.

Alex Trembath: Thanks for listening to another episode of Breakthrough Dialogues. If you like our show, tell your friends, rate us on iTunes, and subscribe on whatever platform you get your podcasts. We want to again thank our guest Rachel, our producers Alyssa Codamon and Tali Perelman. Until next time, I'm Alex Trembath. Thanks for tuning in.