

ALSO BY NAOMI KLEIN

The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism

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Lines of the Globalization Debate

THIS CHANGES EVERYTHING

Capitalism vs. The Climate

NAOMI KLEIN

4.

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Conclusion

The Leap Years

Just Enough Time for Impossible

“We as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a ‘thing-oriented society’ to a ‘person-oriented society.’ When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.”

—Martin Luther King Jr., “Beyond Vietnam,” 1967¹

“Developed countries have created a global crisis based on a flawed system of values. There is no reason we should be forced to accept a solution informed by that same system.”

—Marlene Moses, Ambassador to the U.N. for Nauru, 2009²

In December 2012, Brad Werner—a complex systems researcher with pink hair and a serious expression—made his way through the throng of 24,000 earth and space scientists at the Fall Meeting of the American Geophysical Union in San Francisco. That year’s conference had some big-name participants, from Ed Stone of NASA’s Voyager project, explaining a new milestone on the path to interstellar space, to the filmmaker James Cameron, discussing his adventures in deep-sea submersibles. But it was Werner’s own session that was attracting much of the buzz. It was titled “Is Earth F**ked?” (full title: “Is Earth F**ked? Dynamical Futility of Global Environmental Management and Possibilities for Sustainability via Direct Action Activism”).³

Standing at the front of the conference room, the University of California, San Diego professor took the crowd through the advanced computer model he was using to answer that rather direct question. He talked about system boundaries, perturbations, dissipation, attractors, bifurcations, and a whole bunch of other stuff largely incomprehensible to those of us uninitiated in complex systems theory. But the bottom line was clear enough: global capitalism has made the depletion of resources so rapid, convenient, and barrier-free that “earth-human systems” are becoming dangerously unstable in response. When a journalist pressed Werner for a clear answer on the “Is Earth f*cked” question, he set the jargon aside and replied, “More or less.”⁴

There was one dynamic in the model, however, that offered some hope. Werner described it as “resistance”—movements of “people or groups of people” who “adopt a certain set of dynamics that does not fit within the capitalist culture.” According to the abstract for his presentation, this includes “environmental direct action, resistance taken from outside the dominant culture, as in protests, blockades and sabotage by Indigenous peoples, workers, anarchists and other activist groups.” Such mass uprisings of people—along the lines of the abolition movement and the civil rights movement—represent the likeliest source of “friction” to slow down an economic machine that is careening out of control.⁵

This, he argued, is clear from history, which tells us that past social movements have “had tremendous influence on . . . how the dominant culture evolved.” It stands to reason, therefore, that “if we’re thinking about the future of the earth, and the future of our coupling to the environment, we have to include resistance as part of that dynamics.” And that, Werner said, is not a matter of opinion, but “really a geophysics problem.”⁶

Put another way, only mass social movements can save us now. Because we know where the current system, left unchecked, is headed. We also know, I would add, how that system will deal with the reality of serial climate-related disasters: with profiteering, and escalating barbarism to segregate the losers from the winners. To arrive at that dystopia, all we need to do is keep barreling down the road we are on. The only remaining variable is whether some countervailing power will emerge to block the road, and simultaneously clear some alternate pathways to destinations that are safer. If that happens, well, it changes everything.

The movements explored in these pages—Blockadia’s fast multiplying local outposts, the fossil fuel divestment/reinvestment movement, the local laws barring high-risk extraction, the bold court challenges by Indigenous groups and others—are early manifestations of this resistance. They have not only located various choke points to slow the expansion plans of the fossil fuel companies, but the economic alternatives these movements are proposing and building are mapping ways of living within planetary boundaries, ones based on intricate reciprocal relationships rather than brute extraction. This is the “friction” to which Werner referred, the kind that is needed to put the brakes on the forces of destruction and destabilization.

When I despair of the prospects for change, I think back on some of what I have witnessed in the five years of writing of this book. Admittedly, much of it is painful. From the young climate activist breaking down and weeping on my shoulder at the Copenhagen summit, to the climate change deniers at the Heartland Institute literally laughing at the prospect of extinction. From the country manor in England where mad scientists plotted to blot out the sun, to the stillness of the blackened marshes during the BP oil disaster. From the roar of the earth being ripped up to scrape out the Alberta tar sands, to the shock of discovering that the largest green group in the world was itself drilling for oil.

But that’s not all I think about. When I started this journey, most of the resistance movements standing in the way of the fossil fuel frenzy either did not exist or were a fraction of their current size. All were significantly more isolated from one another than they are today. North Americans, overwhelmingly, did not know what the tar sands were. Most of us had never heard of fracking. There had never been a truly mass march against climate change in North America, let alone thousands willing to engage together in civil disobedience. There was no mass movement to divest from fossil fuels. Hundreds of cities and towns in Germany had not yet voted to take back control over their electricity grids to be part of a renewable energy revolution. My own province did not have a green energy program that was bold enough to land us in trade court. The environmental news out of China was almost exclusively awful. There was far less top-level research proving

that economies powered by 100 percent renewable energy were within our grasp. Only the isolated few dared question the logic of economic growth. And few climate scientists were willing to speak bluntly about the political implications of their work for our frenzied consumer culture. All of this has changed so rapidly as I have been writing that I have had to race to keep up. Yes, ice sheets are melting faster than the models projected, but resistance is beginning to boil. In these existing and nascent movements we now have a clear glimpses of the kind of dedication and imagination demanded of everyone who is alive and breathing during climate change's "decade zero."

Because the carbon record doesn't lie. And what that record tells us is that emissions are still rising: every year we release more greenhouse gases than the year before, the growth rate increasing from one decade to the next—gases that will trap heat for generations to come, creating a world that is hotter, colder, wetter, thirstier, hungrier, angrier. So if there is any hope of reversing these trends, glimpses won't cut it; we will need the climate revolution playing on repeat, all day every day, everywhere.

Werner was right to point out that mass resistance movements have grabbed the wheel before and could very well do so again. At the same time, we must reckon with the fact that lowering global emissions in line with climate scientists' urgent warnings demands changes of a truly daunting speed and scale. Meeting science-based targets will mean forcing some of the most profitable companies on the planet to forfeit trillions of dollars of future earnings by leaving the vast majority of proven fossil fuel reserves in the ground.⁷ It will also require coming up with trillions more to pay for zero-carbon, disaster-ready societal transformations. And let's take for granted that we want to do these radical things democratically and without a bloodbath, so violent, vanguardist revolutions don't have much to offer in the way of road maps.

The crucial question we are left with, then, is this: has an economic shift of this kind *ever* happened before in history? We know it can happen during wartime, when presidents and prime ministers are the ones commanding the transformation from above. But has it ever been demanded from below, by regular people, when leaders have wholly abdicated their responsibilities? Having combed through the history of social movements in search of precedents, I must report that the answer to that question is

predictably complex, filled with "sort ofs" and "almosts"—but also at least one "yes."

In the West, the most common precedents invoked to show that social movements really can be a disruptive historical force are the celebrated human rights movements of the past century—most prominently, civil, women's, and gay and lesbian rights. And these movements unquestionably transformed the face and texture of the dominant culture. But given that the challenge for the climate movement hinges on pulling off a profound and radical *economic* transformation, it must be noted that for these movements, the legal and cultural battles were always more successful than the economic ones.

The U.S. civil rights movement, for instance, fought not only against legalized segregation and discrimination but also for massive investments in schools and jobs programs that would close the economic gap between blacks and whites once and for all. In his 1967 book, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*, Martin Luther King Jr. pointed out that, "The practical cost of change for the nation up to this point has been cheap. The limited reforms have been obtained at bargain rates. There are no expenses, and no taxes are required, for Negroes to share lunch counters, libraries, parks, hotels and other facilities with whites. . . . The real cost lies ahead. . . . The discount education given Negroes will in the future have to be purchased at full price if quality education is to be realized. Jobs are harder and costlier to create than voting rolls. The eradication of slums housing millions is complex far beyond integrating buses and lunch counters."⁸

And though often forgotten, the more radical wing of the second-wave feminist movement also argued for fundamental challenges to the free market economic order. It wanted women not only to get equal pay for equal work in traditional jobs but to have their work in the home caring for children and the elderly recognized and compensated as a massive unacknowledged market subsidy—essentially a demand for wealth redistribution on a scale greater than the New Deal.

But as we know, while these movements won huge battles against institutional discrimination, the victories that remained elusive were those that, in King's words, could not be purchased "at bargain rates." There would

be no massive investments in jobs, schools, and decent homes for African Americans, just as the 1970s women's movement would not win its demand for "wages for housework" (indeed paid maternity leave remains a battle in large parts of the world). Sharing legal status is one thing; sharing resources quite another.

If there is an exception to this rule it is the huge gains won by the labor movement in the aftermath of the Great Depression—the massive wave of unionization that forced owners to share a great deal more wealth with their workers, which in turn helped create a context to demand ambitious social programs like Social Security and unemployment insurance (programs from which the majority of African American and many women workers were notably excluded). And in response to the market crash of 1929, tough new rules regulating the financial sector were introduced at real cost to unfettered profit making. In the same period, social movement pressure created the conditions for the New Deal and programs like it across the industrialized world. These made massive investments in public infrastructure—utilities, transportation systems, housing, and more—on a scale comparable to what the climate crisis calls for today.

If the search for historical precedents is extended more globally (an impossibly large task in this context, but worth a try), then the lessons are similarly mixed. Since the 1950s, several democratically elected socialist governments have nationalized large parts of their extractive sectors and begun to redistribute to the poor and middle class the wealth that had previously hemorrhaged into foreign bank accounts, most notably Mohammad Mosaddegh in Iran and Salvador Allende in Chile. But those experiments were interrupted by foreign-sponsored coups d'état before reaching their potential. Indeed postcolonial independence movements—which so often had the redistribution of unjustly concentrated resources, whether of land or minerals, as their core missions—were consistently undermined through political assassinations, foreign interference, and, more recently, the chains of debt-driven structural adjustment programs (not to mention the corruption of local elites).

Even the stunningly successful battle against apartheid in South Africa suffered its most significant losses on the economic equality front. The country's freedom fighters were not, it is worth remembering, only demand-

ing the right to vote and move freely. They were also, as the African National Congress's official policy platform, the Freedom Charter, made clear, struggling for key sectors of the economy—including the mines and the banks—to be nationalized, with their proceeds used to pay for the social programs that would lift millions in the townships out of poverty. Black South Africans won their core legal and electoral battles, but the wealth accumulated under apartheid remained intact, with poverty deepening significantly in the post-apartheid era.⁹

There have been social movements, however, that have succeeded in challenging entrenched wealth in ways that are comparable to what today's movements must provoke if we are to avert climate catastrophe. These are the movements for the abolition of slavery and for Third World independence from colonial powers. Both of these transformative movements forced ruling elites to relinquish practices that were still extraordinarily profitable, much as fossil fuel extraction is today.

The movement for the abolition of slavery in particular shows us that a transition as large as the one confronting us today has happened before—and indeed it is remembered as one of the greatest moments in human history. The economic impacts of slavery abolition in the mid-nineteenth century have some striking parallels with the impacts of radical emission reduction, as several historians and commentators have observed. Journalist and broadcaster Chris Hayes, in an award-winning 2014 essay titled "The New Abolitionism," pointed out "the climate justice movement is demanding that an existing set of political and economic interests be forced to say goodbye to trillions of dollars of wealth" and concluded that "it is impossible to point to any precedent other than abolition."¹⁰

There is no question that for a large sector of the ruling class at the time, losing the legal right to exploit men and women in bondage represented a major economic blow, one as huge as the one players ranging from Exxon to Richard Branson would have to take today. As the historian Greg Grandin has put it, "In the realm of economics, the importance of slaves went well beyond the wealth generated from their uncompensated labor. Slavery was the flywheel on which America's market revolution turned—not just in the United States, but in all of the Americas." In the eighteenth century, Caribbean sugar plantations, which were wholly dependent on slave labor,

were by far the most profitable outposts of the British Empire, generating revenues that far outstripped the other colonies. In *Bury the Chains*, Adam Hochschild quotes enthusiastic slave traders describing the buying and selling of humans as “the hinge on which all the trade of this globe moves” and “the foundation of our commerce . . . and first cause of our national industry and riches.”¹¹

While not equivalent, the dependency of the U.S. economy on slave labor—particularly in the Southern states—is certainly comparable to the modern global economy’s reliance on fossil fuels.* According to historian Eric Foner, at the start of the Civil War, “slaves as property were worth more than all the banks, factories and railroads in the country put together.” Strengthening the parallel with fossil fuels, Hayes points out that “in 1860, slaves represented about 16 percent of the total household assets—that is, all the wealth—in the entire [United States], which in today’s terms is a stunning \$10 trillion.” That figure is very roughly similar to the value of the carbon reserves that must be left in the ground worldwide if we are to have a good chance of keeping warming below 2 degrees Celsius.¹²

But the analogy, as all acknowledge, is far from perfect. Burning fossil fuels is of course not the moral equivalent of owning slaves or occupying countries. (Though heading an oil company that actively sabotages climate science, lobbies aggressively against emission controls while laying claim to enough interred carbon to drown populous nations like Bangladesh and boil sub-Saharan Africa is indeed a heinous moral crime.) Nor were the movements that ended slavery and defeated colonial rule in any way bloodless: nonviolent tactics like boycotts and protests played major roles, but slavery in the Caribbean was only outlawed after numerous slave rebellions were brutally suppressed, and, of course, abolition in the United States came only after the carnage of the Civil War.

Another problem with the analogy is that, though the liberation of mil-

* The reliance was certainly not limited to the Southern states: cutting-edge historical research has been exploding long-held perceptions that the North and South of the United States had distinct and irreconcilable economies in this period. In fact, Northern industrialists and Wall Street were far more dependent on and connected to slavery than has often been assumed, and even some crucial innovations in scientific management and accounting can be traced to the American plantation economy.

lions of slaves in this period—some 800,000 in the British colonies and four million in the U.S.—represents the greatest human rights victory of its time (or, arguably, any time), the economic side of the struggle was far less successful. Local and international elites often managed to extract steep payoffs to compensate themselves for their “losses” of human property, while offering little or nothing to former slaves. Washington broke its promise, made near the end of the Civil War, to grant freed slaves ownership of large swaths of land in the U.S. South (a pledge known colloquially as “40 acres and a mule”). Instead the lands were returned to former slave owners, who proceeded to staff them through the indentured servitude of sharecropping. Britain, as discussed, awarded massive paydays to its slave owners at the time of abolition. And France, most shockingly, sent a flotilla of warships to demand that the newly liberated nation of Haiti pay a huge sum to the French crown for the loss of its bonded workforce—or face attack.¹³ Reparations, but in reverse.

The costs of these, and so many other gruesomely unjust extortions, are still being paid in lives, from Haiti to Mozambique. The reverse-reparations saddled newly liberated nations and people with odious debts that deprived them of true independence while helping to accelerate Europe’s Industrial Revolution, the extreme profitability of which most certainly cushioned the economic blow of abolition. In sharp contrast, a real end to the fossil fuel age offers no equivalent consolation prizes to the major players in the oil, gas, and coal industries. Solar and wind can make money, sure. But by nature of their decentralization, they will never supply the kind of concentrated super-profits to which the fossil fuel titans have become all too accustomed. In other words, if climate justice carries the day, the economic costs to our elites will be real—not only because of the carbon left in the ground but also because of the regulations, taxes, and social programs needed to make the required transformation. Indeed, these new demands on the ultra rich could effectively bring the era of the footloose Davos oligarch to a close.

The Unfinished Business of Liberation

On one level, the inability of many great social movements to fully realize those parts of their visions that carried the highest price tags can be seen as a cause for inertia or even despair. If they failed in their plans to usher in a more equitable economic system, how can the climate movement hope to succeed?

There is, however, another way of looking at this track record: these economic demands—for basic public services that work, for decent housing, for land redistribution—represent nothing less than the unfinished business of the most powerful liberation movements of the past two centuries, from civil rights to feminism to Indigenous sovereignty. The massive global investments required to respond to the climate threat—to adapt humanely and equitably to the heavy weather we have already locked in, and to avert the truly catastrophic warming we can still avoid—is a chance to change all that; and to get it right this time. It could deliver the equitable redistribution of agricultural lands that was supposed to follow independence from colonial rule and dictatorship; it could bring the jobs and homes that Martin Luther King dreamed of; it could bring jobs and clean water to Native communities; it could at last turn on the lights and running water in every South African township. Such is the promise of a Marshall Plan for the Earth.

The fact that our most heroic social justice movements won on the legal front but suffered big losses on the economic front is precisely why our world is as fundamentally unequal and unfair as it remains. Those losses have left a legacy of continued discrimination, double standards, and entrenched poverty—poverty that deepens with each new crisis. But, at the same time, the economic battles the movements *did* win are the reason we still have a few institutions left—from libraries to mass transit to public hospitals—based on the wild idea that real equality means equal access to the basic services that create a dignified life. Most critically, all these past movements, in one form or another, are still fighting today—for full human rights and equality regardless of ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation; for real decolonization and reparation; for food security and farmers' rights; against oligarchic rule; and to defend and expand the public sphere.

So climate change does not need some shiny new movement that will magically succeed where others failed. Rather, as the furthest-reaching crisis created by the extractivist worldview, and one that puts humanity on a firm and unyielding deadline, climate change can be the force—the grand push—that will bring together all of these still living movements. A rushing river fed by countless streams, gathering collective force to finally reach the sea. “The basic confrontation which seemed to be colonialism versus anticolonialism, indeed capitalism versus socialism, is already losing its importance,” Frantz Fanon wrote in his 1961 masterwork, *The Wretched of the Earth*. “What matters today, the issue which blocks the horizon, is the need for a redistribution of wealth. Humanity will have to address this question, no matter how devastating the consequences may be.”¹⁴ Climate change is our chance to right those festering wrongs at last—the unfinished business of liberation.

Winning will certainly take the convergence of diverse constituencies on a scale previously unknown. Because, although there is no perfect historical analogy for the challenge of climate change, there are certainly lessons to learn from the transformative movements of the past. One such lesson is that when major shifts in the economic balance of power take place, they are invariably the result of extraordinary levels of social mobilization. At those junctures, activism becomes something that is not performed by a small tribe within a culture, whether a vanguard of radicals or a subcategory of slick professionals (though each play their part), but becomes an entirely normal activity throughout society—it’s rent payers associations, women’s auxiliaries, gardening clubs, neighborhood assemblies, trade unions, professional groups, sports teams, youth leagues, and on and on. During extraordinary historical moments—both world wars, the aftermath of the Great Depression, or the peak of the civil rights era—the usual categories dividing “activists” and “regular people” became meaningless because the project of changing society was so deeply woven into the project of life. Activists were, quite simply, everyone.

Which brings us back to where we started: climate change and bad timing. It must always be remembered that the greatest barrier to humanity rising to meet the climate crisis is not that it is too late or that we don’t know what to do. There is just enough time, and we are swamped with

green tech and green plans. And yet the reason so many of us are inclined to answer Brad Werner's provocative question in the affirmative is that we are afraid—with good reason—that our political class is wholly incapable of seizing those tools and implementing those plans, since doing so involves unlearning the core tenets of the stifling free-market ideology that governed every stage of their rise to power.

And it's not just the people we vote into office and then complain about—it's us. For most of us living in postindustrial societies, when we see the crackling black-and-white footage of general strikes in the 1930s, victory gardens in the 1940s, and Freedom Rides in the 1960s, we simply cannot imagine being part of any mobilization of that depth and scale. That kind of thing was fine for them but surely not us—with our eyes glued to smart phones, attention spans scattered by click bait, loyalties split by the burdens of debt and insecurities of contract work. Where would we organize? Who would we trust enough to lead us? Who, moreover, is "we"?

In other words, we are products of our age and of a dominant ideological project. One that too often has taught us to see ourselves as little more than singular, gratification-seeking units, out to maximize our narrow advantage, while simultaneously severing so many of us from the broader communities whose pooled skills are capable of solving problems big and small. This project also has led our governments to stand by helplessly for more than two decades as the climate crisis morphed from a "grandchildren" problem to a banging-down-the-door problem.

All of this is why any attempt to rise to the climate challenge will be fruitless unless it is understood as part of a much broader battle of worldviews, a process of rebuilding and reinventing the very idea of the collective, the communal, the commons, the civil, and the civic after so many decades of attack and neglect. Because what is overwhelming about the climate challenge is that it requires breaking so many rules at once—rules written into national laws and trade agreements, as well as powerful unwritten rules that tell us that no government can increase taxes and stay in power, or say no to major investments no matter how damaging, or plan to gradually contract those parts of our economies that endanger us all.

And yet each of those rules emerged out of the same, coherent worldview. If that worldview is delegitimized, then all of the rules within it become

much weaker and more vulnerable. This is another lesson from social movement history across the political spectrum: when fundamental change does come, it's generally not in legislative dribs and drabs spread out evenly over decades. Rather it comes in spasms of rapid-fire lawmaking, with one breakthrough after another. The right calls this "shock therapy"; the left calls it "populism" because it requires so much popular support and mobilization to occur. (Think of the regulatory architecture that emerged in the New Deal period, or, for that matter, the environmental legislation of the 1960s and 1970s.)

So how do you change a worldview, an unquestioned ideology? Part of it involves choosing the right early policy battles—game-changing ones that don't merely aim to change laws but change patterns of thought. That means that a fight for a minimal carbon tax might do a lot less good than, for instance, forming a grand coalition to demand a guaranteed minimum income. That's not only because a minimum income, as discussed, makes it possible for workers to say no to dirty energy jobs but also because the very process of arguing for a universal social safety net opens up a space for a full-throated debate about values—about what we owe to one another based on our shared humanity, and what it is that we collectively value more than economic growth and corporate profits.

Indeed a great deal of the work of deep social change involves having debates during which new stories can be told to replace the ones that have failed us. Because if we are to have any hope of making the kind of civilizational leap required of this fateful decade, we will need to start believing, once again, that humanity is not hopelessly selfish and greedy—the image ceaselessly sold to us by everything from reality shows to neoclassical economics.

Paradoxically, this may also give us a better understanding of our personal climate inaction, allowing many of us to view past (and present) failures with compassion, rather than angry judgment. What if part of the reason so many of us have failed to act is not because we are too selfish to care about an abstract or seemingly far-off problem—but because we are utterly overwhelmed by how much we do care? And what if we stay silent not out of acquiescence but in part because we lack the collective spaces in which to confront the raw terror of ecocide? The end of the world as we

know it, after all, is not something anyone should have to face on their own. As the sociologist Kari Norgaard puts it in *Living in Denial*, a fascinating exploration of the way almost all of us suppress the full reality of the climate crisis, “Denial can—and I believe should—be understood as testament to our human capacity for empathy, compassion, and an underlying sense of moral imperative to respond, even as we fail to do so.”¹⁵

Fundamentally, the task is to articulate not just an alternative set of policy proposals but an alternative worldview to rival the one at the heart of the ecological crisis—embedded in interdependence rather than hyper-individualism, reciprocity rather than dominance, and cooperation rather than hierarchy. This is required not only to create a political context to dramatically lower emissions, but also to help us cope with the disasters we can no longer avoid. Because in the hot and stormy future we have already made inevitable through our past emissions, an unshakable belief in the equal rights of all people and a capacity for deep compassion will be the only things standing between civilization and barbarism.

This is another lesson from the transformative movements of the past: all of them understood that the process of shifting cultural values—though somewhat ephemeral and difficult to quantify—was central to their work. And so they dreamed in public, showed humanity a better version of itself, modeled different values in their own behavior, and in the process liberated the political imagination and rapidly altered the sense of what was possible. They were also unafraid of the language of morality—to give the pragmatic, cost-benefit arguments a rest and speak of right and wrong, of love and indignation.

In *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith made a case against slavery that had little to do with morality and everything to do with the bottom line. Work by paid laborers, he argued, “comes cheaper in the end than that performed by slaves”: not only were slave owners responsible for the high costs of the “wear and tear” of their human property but, he claimed, paid laborers had a greater incentive to work hard.¹⁶ Many abolitionists on both sides of the Atlantic would embrace such pragmatic arguments.

However, as the push to abolish the slave trade (and later, slavery itself) ramped up in Britain in the late eighteenth century, much of the movement put considerably more emphasis on the moral travesties of slavery

and the corrosive worldview that made it possible. Writing in 1808, British abolitionist Thomas Clarkson described the battle over the slave trade as “a contest between those who felt deeply for the happiness and the honour of their fellow-creatures, and those who, through vicious custom and the impulse of avarice, had trampled under-foot the sacred rights of their nature, and had even attempted to efface all title to the divine image from their minds.”¹⁷

The rhetoric and arguments of American abolitionists could be even starker and more uncompromising. In an 1853 speech, the famed abolitionist orator Wendell Phillips insisted on the right to denounce those who in the harshest terms defended slavery. “Prove to me now that harsh rebuke, indignant denunciation, scathing sarcasm, and pitiless ridicule are wholly and always unjustifiable; else we dare not, in so desperate a case, throw away any weapon which ever broke up the crust of an ignorant prejudice, roused a slumbering conscience, shamed a proud sinner, or changed, in any way, the conduct of a human being. Our aim is to alter public opinion.” And indispensable to that goal were the voices of freed slaves themselves, people like Frederick Douglass, who, in his writing and oratory, challenged the very foundations of American patriotism with questions like “What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July?”¹⁸

This kind of fiery, highly polarizing rhetoric was typical of a battle with so much at stake. As the historian David Brion Davis writes, abolitionists understood that their role was not merely to ban an abhorrent practice but to try to change the deeply entrenched values that had made slavery acceptable in the first place. “The abolition of New World slavery depended in large measure on a major transformation in moral perception—on the emergence of writers, speakers, and reformers, beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, who were willing to condemn an institution that had been sanctioned for thousands of years and who also strove to make human society something more than an endless contest of greed and power.”¹⁹

This same understanding about the need to assert the intrinsic value of life is at the heart of all major progressive victories, from universal suffrage to universal health care. Though these movements all contained economic arguments as part of building their case for justice, they did not win by putting a monetary value on granting equal rights and freedoms. They won by

asserting that those rights and freedoms were *too* valuable to be measured and were inherent to each of us. Similarly, there are plenty of solid economic arguments for moving beyond fossil fuels, as more and more patient investors are realizing. And that's worth pointing out. But we will not win the battle for a stable climate by trying to beat the bean counters at their own game—arguing, for instance, that it is more cost-effective to invest in emission reduction now than disaster response later. We will win by asserting that such calculations are morally monstrous, since they imply that there is an acceptable price for allowing entire countries to disappear, for leaving untold millions to die on parched land, for depriving today's children of their right to live in a world teeming with the wonders and beauties of creation.

The climate movement has yet to find its full moral voice on the world stage, but it is most certainly clearing its throat—beginning to put the very real thefts and torments that ineluctably flow from the decision to mock international climate commitments alongside history's most damned crimes. Some of the voices of moral clarity are coming from the very young, who are calling on the streets and increasingly in the courts for intergenerational justice. Some are coming from great social justice movements of the past, like Nobel laureate Desmond Tutu, former archbishop of Cape Town, who has joined the fossil fuel divestment movement with enthusiasm, declaring that “to serve as custodians of creation is not an empty title; it requires that we act, and with all the urgency this dire situation demands.”²⁰ Most of all, those clarion voices are coming from the front lines of Blockadia, from those lives most directly impacted by both high-risk fossil fuel extraction and early climate destabilization.

Suddenly, Everyone

Recent years have been filled with moments when societies suddenly decide they have had enough, defying all experts and forecasters—from the Arab Spring (tragedies, betrayals, and all), to Europe's “squares movement” that saw city centers taken over by demonstrators for months, to Occupy Wall Street, to the student movements of Chile and Quebec. The Mexican

journalist Luis Hernández Navarro describes those rare political moments that seem to melt cynicism on contact as the “effervescence of rebellion.”²¹

What is most striking about these upwellings, when societies become consumed with the demand for transformational change, is that they so often come as a surprise—most of all to the movements' own organizers. I've heard the story many times: “One day it was just me and my friends dreaming up impossible schemes, the next day the entire country seemed to be out in the plaza alongside us.” And the real surprise, for all involved, is that we are so much more than we have been told we are—that we long for more and in that longing have more company than we ever imagined.

No one knows when the next such effervescent moment will open, or whether it will be precipitated by an economic crisis, another natural disaster, or some kind of political scandal. We do know that a warming world will, sadly, provide no shortage of potential sparks. Sivan Kartha, senior scientist at the Stockholm Environment Institute, puts it like this: “What's politically realistic today may have very little to do with what's politically realistic after another few Hurricane Katrinas and another few Superstorm Sandys and another few Typhoon Bophas hit us.”²² It's true: the world tends to look a little different when the objects we have worked our whole lives to accumulate are suddenly floating down the street, or smashed to pieces, turned to garbage.

The world also doesn't look much like it did in the late 1980s. Climate change, as we have seen, landed on the public agenda at the peak of free market, end-of-history triumphalism, which was very bad timing indeed. Its do-or-die moment, however, comes to us at a very different historical juncture. Many of the barriers that paralyzed a serious response to the crisis are today significantly eroded. Free market ideology has been discredited by decades of deepening inequality and corruption, stripping it of much of its persuasive power (if not yet its political and economic power). And the various forms of magical thinking that have diverted precious energy—from blind faith in technological miracles to the worship of benevolent billionaires—are also fast losing their grip. It is slowly dawning on a great many of us that no one is going to step in and fix this crisis; that if change is to take place it will only be because leadership bubbled up from below.

We are also significantly less isolated than many of us were even a decade ago: the new structures built in the rubble of neoliberalism—everything from social media to worker co-ops to farmer's markets to neighborhood sharing banks—have helped us to find community despite the fragmentation of postmodern life. Indeed, thanks in particular to social media, a great many of us are continually engaged in a cacophonous global conversation that, however maddening it is at times, is unprecedented in its reach and power.

Given these factors, there is little doubt that another crisis will see us in the streets and squares once again, taking us all by surprise. The real question is what progressive forces will make of that moment, the power and confidence with which it will be seized. Because these moments when the impossible seems suddenly possible are excruciatingly rare and precious. That means more must be made of them. The next time one arises, it must be harnessed not only to denounce the world as it is, and build fleeting pockets of liberated space. It must be the catalyst to actually build the world that will keep us all safe. The stakes are simply too high, and time too short, to settle for anything less.

A year ago, I was having dinner with some newfound friends in Athens. I asked them for ideas about what questions I should put to Alexis Tsipras, the young leader of Greece's official opposition party and one of the few sources of hope in a Europe ravaged by austerity.

Someone suggested, "Ask him: History knocked on your door, did you answer?"

That's a good question, for all of us.

THE ANTHROPOCENE AND THE GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

Rethinking modernity in a new
epoch

*Clive Hamilton, Christophe Bonneuil and
François Gemenne*



COMMISSION ON PLANETARY AGES

Decision CC87966424/49: The onomatophore of the Anthropocene

TO ALL TO WHOM THIS NEWS SHALL COME, BE IT KNOWN:

that there appeared before the Commission on Planetary Ages a creature of the species called Anthropos, a species which has achieved the fourth of the thirty-six known levels of sentience;

and that this creature announced that the world in which it has its origin, known as Earth, has entered a new stage in its journey from the nothing that was, through the something that is, to the nothing that will be;

and that the creature proclaimed that its kind was starting to understand the laws governing the becoming of worlds, and that these have revealed the role they have played in moving the Earth to a new state;

and that the creature laid a claim before the Commission, on behalf of all its kind, asserting that the new age of its world should therefore be named 'the Anthropocene', after its own kind;

and that this creature thereby claimed for its whole species the status of the onomatophore, the name-bearer, of their planetary age;

and when it had finished speaking, it struck its chest once, a sign which in some of our cultures signifies truth, in others pride, in others shame;

Planetary ages

and having regard to the powers granted to this Commission to determine the names of the ages of all worlds throughout the galaxy, according to the principles of endokairology, the science of the times that grow within self-organising things, and that out of this growth produce other times from within themselves, thus generating the lacework of times that connect the 10,000 things;

and having regard to the *first* law of endokairology, which states that a world or any other self-positing thing generates its own time out of its particular way of enduring, and that this time is not the time of *chronos*, the extensive time of mere succession, but the time of *kairos*, the intensive time of singularities and qualities;

and having regard to the *second* law of this science, which means that planetary ages are determined not by the visible signs that are written on the face of a world, but by the hidden signs and communication within it, between mantle and crust, crust and ocean, ocean and atmosphere, atmosphere and life;

and having regard to the *third* law, which means that the immanent time that a world generates through its own mode of becoming folds back on itself, so that the way a world changes changes, that a world undergoes radical leaps in its mode of becoming;

and having regard to the *fourth* law, which means that the immanent time of worlds has other immanent times curled within them – that within the aeons of a world, whose edges mark the great changes in planetary becoming when time begins anew, lie the eras of that world, and within the eras lie the periods, and within the periods the epochs, and so on;

and having regard to the consequence of the first three laws that the ages of a world cannot be laid side by side – that because the time of worlds is produced from within, and because each age has its own internal time, there is no time which can comprehend all the ages of a world; each age starts but never finishes; the time of each age is finite but eternal, which means that it can make itself felt long after other ages have started;

and having regard to the relationship of the Commission on Planetary Ages with those lower commissions responsible for the times of ecosystems, species and organisms, of objects, molecules and atoms, of bosons, leptons and quarks; and with those higher commissions responsible for the times of planetary systems, of galaxies, clusters, superclusters and filaments, of cosmoses and multiverses;

Onomatophores

and having regard to the regulations on onomatophores, which recognise that, while all agents in a planetary age are named by that age, one agent can have a special relationship to that age, and its name to the name of that age, and this is because they are the 'cause' or subject of that age, and this agent is known as the onomatophore or 'name-bearer' of that age;

and having regard to the powers granted to this Commission to determine the onomatophores of the ages of all worlds throughout the galaxy;

and recognising that to be decreed an onomatophore the agent must be the 'cause' of an age in the sense of at least one of the nine recognised kinds of cause:

- the forward cause that pushes from the earlier or
- the backward cause that pulls towards the later,
- the upward cause of part to whole or
- the downward cause of whole to part,
- the first cause that initiates or
- the last cause that completes,
- the universal cause that is always or
- the singular cause that is now, or
- the emblematic cause that summarises;

and recognising that being a cause is always relative to a particular age; that each age of a world defines and distributes agency in particular ways; and that transitions between ages redefine what an agent is and how it can act;

and having regard to the duty of the Commission, when presented with a claim by a potential onomatophore, to inform all other agents of the age under consideration that a claim has been lodged, and to consider any counterclaims received;

The Palace of the Ages

and having regard to the Palace of the Ages, where all onomatophores abide;

and recognising that this palace has many dwelling places, each of which correspond to a single age of one or other kind of body or assemblage, and that these dwelling places are arranged in ranks and lines and layers:

- from the time of the smallest particle to the time of the multiverse,
- and for each of these, from the shortest class of ages to the longest class,
- and for each of these, from the first of ages to the last of ages;

and that each of these dwelling places, one for each unit of time, is a throne;

and recognising that to become an onomatophore is to be elevated to one of these thrones alongside the other geological forces and events that determine the ages of a world – alongside magma, comets and tides; eruptions, collisions and evolutionary leaps – and alongside all the forces and events that determine the ages of every kind of body and assemblage;

and that for a being to be enthroned in the Palace of the Ages is to be made $\alpha\omega\nu\nu\omicron\nu$ [aionon], 'of the ages', which means to belong not just to the time of that being but also to an age of deep, planetary time;

and that being enthroned in the Palace of the Ages is also to be made αἰώνιος [aionios], which means 'eternal', beyond time, because each age has its own time that begins but does not end;

so that to be made onomatophore is to be placed beyond time, beyond normal agency and responsibility;

The Earth's specific planetary endokaiology

and noting that the creature's world is so far following what is called the 'main sequence', the most common trajectory in the development of rocky worlds;

and noting that the Earth has thereby exhibited the radical transitions in its mode of becoming which mark the bounds between the great **aeons** of a world, such as the establishing of continents that are not pulled down into the magma, or the taking of control over the chemical and thermodynamic balance of the world by living things;

and that the long aeons of the Earth so far number four, and are called by Anthropos the Hadean, the Archaean, the Proterozoic and the Phanerozoic;

and noting that, within a given aeon, transitions between **eras** such as the emergence of an atmosphere with free oxygen, or the rise of the terrible lizards, are the result of a dialogue between the balancing of intensive forces within a world and forcings from outside;

and that at the finer kairological level of **periods** a world moves between different points of stability within an era – often between times of great heat and of unimaginable cold;

and that at the even finer level of **epochs** a world, pressed by intensive gradients and forcings, explores the different possible states that are available to it within a given period;

and noting that the Earth has recently undergone significant changes: that the surfaces of the continents and the floors of the oceans have been profoundly altered; that the planet's subsystems, the flows of sunlight, water and nitrogen, have been captured and directed into the house of the Anthropos; that layers laid down in earlier periods have been mined and spread around the world or vented into its atmosphere; that the gifting of heat between sun and earth and space has been transformed, so that the world is warming;

and noting also that the way that the Earth's own distinctive time emerges from its internal intensive differences is also changing; that just as Proterozoic life learnt how to take the inorganic systems of the Earth up into itself, and to move the world far from equilibrium, so too have the complex organisms of Phanerozoic life learned how to take assemblages of inorganic matter and

give them their own kind of life – are creating what are known as technics or machines – and that these are altering the processes through which the Earth organises itself;

The Anthropos

and noting that at the heart of these changes is the species of the claimant, known as Anthropos;

and noting furthermore that the claim of the claimant has been challenged: that alternative onomatophores – other beings and forces which also claim the status of the name-bearer of the new planetary age of the Earth – have presented themselves to the receiving chambers of the Commission:

- the coal which laid itself down in the Carboniferous period;
- but also the fungi which held back their appearance in the Earth and permitted the coal to accumulate;
- the machines, those excrescences of vitality whose needs drive the transformation of the Earth;
- but also the economies that drive the needs of the machines

and many more candidate causes of the new epoch, of all nine kinds of 'cause';

and noting that the species of the claimant has many members and that some of these – the poor, the different, the not yet born – say that they have not been cause of the new epoch in any of the nine senses of 'cause', and that they do not pretend the title of onomatophore;

BE IT KNOWN THAT THE COMMISSION HAS DECIDED:

that the world of the claimant is indeed entering a new age;

that the epoch of human civilisation, the Holocene, is closing: its time can never end, but it will no longer define the Earth, and the agents of the Earth;

but that the proposal to name the new age 'the Anthropocene', a denomination which would locate this closing as a mere shift of epoch within the Quaternary period, itself within the Cenozoic era, must be rejected;

because the closing of the Holocene to which the Anthropos testifies is also the closing of the Quaternary period, the end of the gentle oscillation of the Earth between glaciations and interglacials, which slow music will always echo down the ages of the Earth but will no longer determine them;

and the closing of the Quaternary period is also the closing of the era of mammals – the onomatophores of the Cenozoic, who did not push that era into being from the past, but willed it into being from the future, who will not

die and will eternally be onomatophore but will no longer be emblematic, as their era has closed;

and that the closing of the Cenozoic era is also the closing of the Phanerozoic, the whole great aeon of visible life, as living matter starts to shed the limits of the organism: that multicellular organic life will continue, but will no longer be definitive of the time of the Earth;

and that the closing of the Phanerozoic aeon is also the opening of a new aeon in the Earth's immanent time, which the Commission decrees shall be called the Phanerotechnic: the aeon of technological life, of organised inorganic matter, which in the deep time of the main sequence will surely be succeeded by the Aoratotechnic, the aeon of invisible machinery, of pure organisation, when technology will finally shed its material form;

and that the opening of this new Phanerotechnic aeon is also the start of the first era of that aeon: the Proterotechnic, the era of early machines, still primitive, still tied to organic life for their purposes, not yet truly autonomous, not yet their own independent life;

and that the opening of the Proterotechnic era is also the start of the first period of that era, the period in which machine life will escape the Earth and refashion the planetary system of which it is a part, will capture the flows of energy from its sun, convert matter into energy and energy into information;

and that the opening of this period is also the start of the first epoch of that period, an epoch which is already seeing the refashioning of the home world, the enframing of its energies, the mining of its stocks, the capturing of its flows, the overturning of its layers, the fabrication of a new surface of the Earth, and the casting of a new machinic layer of the Earth far above that surface;

AND BE IT ALSO KNOWN THAT THE COMMISSION DECREES:

that the Anthropos, the species of the claimant, has indeed been cause and agent within these developments in the time of the Earth;

but that the Anthropos is only the last, the proximate cause in the pushing of the Earth into its new epoch, its new period, its new era and its new aeon, and that other agents have stronger claim to the status of onomatophore for these new units of Earth time;

and that this first new epoch that the Earth is entering feels the hand of the Carboniferous period, which closed 3,000,000 Earth years ago but whose time, like those of all past ages, still unravels in the becoming of the Earth; and that it is the machinic assemblages of engines, currencies and markets, that bring ages together, that bloom across the Earth and that govern its transformation;

and that neither will the Anthropos be emblematic of the new epoch of the Earth, though it may survive it;

but that the Anthropos is the onomatophore of the epoch that is closing, the last epoch of the Quaternary period and the Cenozoic era and the Phanerozoic aeon, for it has been the emblematic species of this closing chapter of the era of mammals and of the very aeon of complex life on the Earth;

and thus that the Holocene epoch, the epoch that is now closing, should henceforth be called the Anthropocene;

and that as one age is succeeded by the next, as the time of the world changes, as its becoming becomes, then agency itself is changing, and the agency of the human is changing; the Anthropos will always be onomatophore of the epoch which is closing, will be enthroned in the Palace of the Ages for ever, to the ages of the ages, so that the time of the Anthropos is eternal and its role not over; yet it is no longer the primary agent of Earth's becoming, since that role has passed to the machines.

The Commission is now in communication with the higher commissions, to whose jurisdiction this case will now be passed.