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Climate Change and the Irrational Society

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Abstract:
This essay considers the catastrophe of anthropogenic climate change in relation to two possible critical-theoretic dispositions. The first, represented by an emblematic passage from Adorno, retains the hope for the realization of a "rational society." The second, represented by a complementary passage from Foucault, enjoins critical theory to abandon any ambition toward criticizing or transforming society at a totalizing level. We argue that the unfolding climate catastrophe demands a conception of critical theory more in line with the first disposition, and that the relevance of the skeptical disposition is likewise seriously undermined if climate change is taken into account.

1

In his essay on progress, Theodor Adorno remarks on the incongruity between society's unprecedented capacity to universally meet its members' needs and the social relations that guarantee the continuance of suffering. "The forms of humanity's own global social constitution threaten its life," he writes. "Whether there will be further want and oppression—which are the same thing—will be decided solely by the avoidance of catastrophe through the rational establishment of the whole society as humanity."[1] While this essay (and Adorno's work more broadly) is well-known for its critique of positive narratives of Enlightenment and progress, he nevertheless maintains the ideal of a rational organization of society.[2] In spite of his notorious "negativism," he invokes the possibility of making full use of the productive forces whose indisputable advances have at the same time jeopardized human life itself.[3] The "global constitution" of society is a contradictory totality, since the relations governing its organization spell out impending catastrophe.

Compare Adorno's hope for a more rational organization of society to Michel Foucault's methodological reflections in his essay "What is Enlightenment?" Here, Foucault rejects the possibility of a global project of political struggle, writing off the wish for a reconciled social totality. He writes: "the historical ontology of ourselves must turn away from all projects that claim to be global or radical… the claim to escape from the system of contemporary reality so as to produce the overall programs of another society, of another way of thinking, another culture, another vision of the world, has led only to the return of the most dangerous traditions."[4] This does not mean that no struggles are worth fighting for or that no social problems can be ameliorated. But the critical project oriented toward this end must henceforth be local and circumscribed, aiming for "partial transformations" rather than "definitive knowledge of what may constitute our historical limits."[5] Adorno's "self-conscious global subject" capable of averting "the most extreme, total disaster,"[6] and his related hope for "a positive concept of enlightenment which

liberates it from its entanglement in blind domination,"[7] are the outdated remnants of a discredited intellectual and political project.

Rather than making substantive claims about each figure's body of work as a whole, we view these passages as representative emblems of two theoretical currents, one which retains the figure of "the rational society," and one which dismisses this ambition. They are not so much *positions* as *dispositions*, i.e., not well-defined sets of propositions or arguments, but temperaments, habits of thought, and broad theoretical tendencies.[8] At least since the end of the Cold War, there can be no question that the abandonment of the rational society has dominated discussions about the orientation of left-wing politics. The dominant disposition is skeptical about the figure of a more rational social order and doubtful about the categories of totality or universality for understanding society, insisting that adopting these concepts wittingly or unwittingly affirms a rigid, patriarchal, colonial, or capitalist rationality. Rather than the irrationality or wrongness of capitalist society, the proliferation of multiple rationalities, each with a context of proper application, has become the focus of an increasing share of left-wing thought.

Even figures otherwise far away from Foucault share this disposition. Hannah Arendt, for example, rejects the notion that political questions admit of determinate answers (and that political activity could help alleviate poverty)—hardly a perspective that would allow for the realization of a more rational social order.[9] Jürgen Habermas, for his part, retains the figure of a "rational society" but redefines how this is understood; social rationality can only be realized in society's communicative apparatuses and not, emphatically, in its relations of production and exchange.[10] Rejecting the aspiration to a substantially more rational society cuts across otherwise disparate theoretical approaches, from liberal democratic theory to radical democratic theory and from deconstruction to decolonial thought.[11] This skeptical consensus coincides historically with the neoliberal consensus about the ends of history, ideology, and revolutionary political projects.

In this article, we attempt to measure these competing dispositions against an empirical limit case: the catastrophe of anthropogenic climate change. The scope, severity, and nature of this problem, we argue, necessitates a shift away from the skeptical disposition represented by this passage from Foucault, and a rehabilitation of the hope for a rational society exemplified by Adorno's remark. Given the threat posed by capitalism to the ecosystem and humanity as a whole, we can clearly designate this society as "irrational." Beginning with this manifest irrationality allows us to designate a minimal criterion of rationality that is neither locally limited, nor merely contextual in its application. Since the climate catastrophe increasingly envelops the whole world, in other words, it poses a strong counterargument to the disposition that abandons the hope for a rational society. The total, global nature of this catastrophe calls for a form of reflection capable—at the very least—of envisioning a world without capitalism; or to put it another way, *a more rational social order*.

We begin by elaborating the dire empirical reality of climate change and its entanglement with our political-economic system (section two). We then juxtapose the two dispositions described above, arguing that the climate catastrophe renders the skeptical disposition obsolete and the aspiration for a rational society necessary (section three). We close by pointing to some questions that remain after we recognize the necessity of this aspiration (section four).

On March 20th, 2023, the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) released the synthesis of its sixth assessment report. It confirms that an anthropogenic warming trend has already contributed to severe heat episodes, disruptions to agriculture and fishery yields, massive population displacement, water insecurity, an uptick in infectious diseases, and unprecedented flooding. This is the result of only 1.1°C of global warming above levels from 1850 to 1900. Depending on future emissions scenarios, we are likely to pass the threshold of 1.5°C by the early 2030s; the end of the century could see temperature increases of 4°C or more, with warming continuing beyond 2100.[12] At 4°C, as Mark Lynas puts it in *Our Final Warning*, "India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh as we know them will no longer exist." Such an increase would also wipe out 139 million tonnes of annual maize production, and considered in relation to projected population increases, "the consequences hardly bear thinking about." A child born in 2020 could easily be alive to witness a future in which "civilisation is tottering."[13] Even if emissions were to begin falling at that time, positive feedback loops could feasibly ensure a steady rise in temperature. As warming climbs beyond 6°C, human extinction becomes a live possibility.[14]

To be sure, the effects of climate change will be staggered and uneven, and at first wildly disproportionate depending on geopolitical and economic location. In the end, however, no corner of the earth will be safe from rising sea levels, raging forest fires, economic collapse, an upswing of armed conflicts, migration crises of unimaginable scale, and myriad other unforeseen chain reactions. This is why governments like the United States are already preparing for a form of "green security," or what we might call Climate Apartheid.[15] But even if the privileged elite of the first world make a concerted effort to "wall themselves off from the rest of humanity…[in] green and gated oases"—to use Mike Davis's vivid and disturbing phrase—such a dystopian solution would only be temporary.[16] Given the interdependence of global supply chains, it may not even be practical; as Christian Parenti notes, "the struggling states of the Global South cannot collapse without eventually taking wealthy economies down with them."[17] There is simply no escape, only deferrals.

The IPCC is unequivocal that the only possible means of averting this catastrophic temperature increase is a deep and rapid reduction in greenhouse gas emissions across all sectors. In fact, net zero emissions must be achieved by the early 2050s to limit warming to 1.5°C (and by the early 2070s to stay within 2°C). With the exception of a brief dip during the COVID-19 pandemic, however, emission rates have been steadily *increasing* for the past several decades, and present "committed emissions" (those necessary for infrastructural functioning at expected productivity levels) are starkly incompatible with the goal of achieving net zero by midcentury.[18] The Paris Climate Accords, the most sweeping and ambitious global agreement on climate change to date, contains no commitment to reducing emissions and relies instead on the scientifically dubious plan of limiting warming to 2°C by offsetting ever-increasing emissions with carbon sinks.[19] Already in its 2018 report, the IPCC noted that drastic decarbonization would require "rapid, far-reaching, and unprecedented changes to all aspects of society."[20] Meanwhile, the most recent presidential election in the United States pitted a patent climate denier against an ostensible ally who promised that "nothing will fundamentally change" under his administration.[21] Alongside the ecological catastrophe of a warming climate, we are facing a complementary political catastrophe of inaction,

apathy, and reckless disregard. The political catastrophe, of course, contributes to and exacerbates the ecological one.

What could explain such a spectacular divergence between the ecological reality of our dire situation and the apparent inability of our political discourse and practice to adequately respond to it? "We live in a time of Climate Emergency," write Barry Gills and Jamie Morgan. "Nevertheless, our collective actions do *not yet* approximate a real understanding."[22] Or in the words of Adrian Parr, "we are poised between needing to radically transform how we live and becoming extinct"––and steadfastly choosing the latter.[23] Explanations for this disconnect have focused on the inherent moral shortcomings of human beings, on their psychological limitations, on the general lack of scientific literacy, and even on "western modernity" itself.[24] What such accounts ignore is the concerted, self-aware, and massively funded systematic attempt by specific social actors—a broad coalition of corporate-funded right-wing think tanks and lobbying firms—to disseminate misinformation on climate change and cast doubt on the scientific consensus.[25] Why is "organized denial" so necessary if the spontaneous disposition of the human psyche, its lack of intelligence, and its entanglement with "western modernity" should guarantee inaction on their own? The root of the problem runs deeper.

This discrepancy becomes less mysterious if we take seriously an increasingly common critical diagnosis: decarbonization is impossible in an economic system predicated on perpetual growth through steadily increasing material turnover.[26] Contrary to popular conceptions, the vast majority of greenhouse gas emissions come not from transportation, but from industry, electricity, heat production, and land use.[27] Achieving net zero emissions would mean a dramatic reduction in the quantity of material throughput in the production-consumption-disposal cycle, as well as a dramatic shift in its quality (away from disposable single-use items, plastics, and packaging). Capitalism, with its overriding interest in short-term profits through market competition, cannot allow for that. This can be grasped at once by considering the phenomenon of artificial obsolescence. From the point of view of emissions reduction, intentionally fabricating a product to become obsolete in five years (so a replacement must be purchased) is counterproductive: every new item has a carbon footprint. But from the point of view of growth-oriented market exchange, it is not only logical but necessary: the "treadmill of production" must keep spinning if profits are to keep flowing continuously and on an expanding scale.[28] As the degrowth movement has pointed out, hopes for "decoupling" economic growth from material throughput have dashed on the empirical rocks.[29]

Relating climate denial and inaction to the structural necessities of the capitalist system can also explain why "system justification motivation," or the extent to which one is invested in maintaining the status quo, is the greatest predictor of denialist beliefs on an individual level.[30] At the same time, we must stress that reducing emissions is not strictly a matter of ideological persuasion or of overcoming false consciousness. The functioning of the global economy is tightly imbricated with greenhouse gas emissions in startling ways. Entire countries (from Venezuela to Nigeria to Norway) rely on fossil fuel exports as the foundation of their domestic economies. The production of palm oil, which can be found in roughly half the products in any grocery store, accounts for a staggering 6 percent of global emissions.[31] The stability of the US dollar as a world currency likewise depends on the steady flow of petrodollars from oil states like Saudi Arabia.[32] Most of our cities and suburbs were designed with fossil power in mind, rather than

sustainability.[33] Johanna Oksala makes the same point: "even if all the inhabitants in the global north did miraculously wake up tomorrow with an acute environmental conscience, it would be impossible for them to suddenly shift to their new low carbon lifestyle without some significant changes to the infrastructure of our cities and economies."[34]

In addition to being constrained by economic imperatives, decarbonization also chafes against the political culture of constitutionalism and liberal democracy. In the United States especially, the notion that individual consumers have the right to purchase and dispose of whatever product they wish is a well-entrenched platitude across the political spectrum.[35] While we would firmly reject any presentation of the issue focused exclusively on consumer choices, it is nevertheless the case that certain well-liked commodities will have to be phased out if decarbonization is to be achieved––not just SUVs and private jets, but also plastic bags, beef, and gas-powered stoves. If this electorate values individual rights over social responsibility enough to refuse mask mandates, how will it respond to a qualitative and quantitative transformation of its consumption habits? American courts have already rejected "the social cost of carbon" as a viable legal category.[36] Meanwhile, climate deniers are given media airtime and perceived political legitimacy by the glorification of free speech and debate as ends in themselves.[37] Major changes in liberal constitutional democracies are by design slow, piecemeal, and tentative, while achieving net-zero emissions in a matter of decades, as we know, would require "rapid, far-reaching, and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society."[38] This incongruity, between the physical realities of atmospheric carbon and what our political-economic system can accommodate, goes a long way toward explaining why functionally no reduction in emissions has taken place despite decades of dire warnings—indeed, why we seem intent on ratcheting up the very cause of the impending catastrophe.

3

In light of the situation described in the previous section, we return now to the two dispositions represented by Adorno and Foucault, specifically the former's appeal to "the rational establishment of the whole society" by "a self-conscious global subject" and the latter's "turn away from all projects that claim to be global or radical." In this section, we elaborate why the disposition that maintains the ideal of a rational society is more adequate for understanding and responding to the global climate crisis than one that remains skeptical toward any context-transcending judgment or substantive radical ambition.

First, it is important to highlight the manifest irrationality of the current climate situation. While it is clear that the coming crisis spells doom for organized human life (and a large part of the ecosystem as well), the conditions that produced it assure its intractability within this political and economic system. These conditions indicate that capitalism's inability to prioritize the survival of society over short-term profits will lead to the annihilation of society itself (and thus any possibility of profit). Marx's conception of capital as a self-undermining system is thus reflected here, but the "gravedigger" produced by capitalism's self-expansion is not necessarily the political force of the organized workers; it is, rather, the destructive force of the environment itself.[39] In this specific sense, global capitalism is irrational: it is a social system whose continued functioning leads to the destruction of humanity and all of its attempts to avert this destruction. By imperiling human society and blocking the work of humanity's self-preservation, such a system contradicts its own immanent principles as well as any possible principle that human communities could adopt for

themselves. A system which undermines the possibility of its own existence as a whole is wholly irrational.

The existing and predicted impacts of global climate change show why our skeptic's focus on local or context-specific forms of political struggle is inadequate. As the crisis deepens and warming begins to disrupt life over larger and larger portions of the earth's surface, the global impact of carbon-based economies becomes ubiquitous. While the effects of climate change will produce all manner of localized and specific problems, in other words, climate change itself is a universal human problem. In light of this, limiting our political hopes and aspirations to particular geographic localities and avoiding a universal "we" will prove disastrous. To the skeptics of the ideal of a rational society, however, positing a universal human concern represents an unforgivable totalization; there are only local concerns, contingent "publics," and ad hoc "chains of equivalence." When it comes to climate change, however, it is not the theorist who "totalizes" first, but the ecological reality: emissions in one part of the world will cause warming in another, ocean acidification that depletes the fisheries of another, crop failure which triggers a civil war and a migration crisis in still another, and so on. "It's one thing to be told by an incomprehensible chaos theorist that a butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil can set off a tornado in Texas," Naomi Klein writes. "It's another to watch chaos theory unfold before your eyes."[40] Andreas Malm also offers a compelling formulation: "in the warming condition, every local site is a plaything in the hands of the earth system."[41]

That climate change is a universal human problem does not mean that all localities contribute to warming to the same degree. The affluent states of the "Global North," along with China, are responsible for a hugely disproportionate amount of greenhouse gas emissions and will be the last to suffer its consequences. This owes, of course, to the disparity between the wasteful consumer lifestyle of the North and the relative impoverishment of the South, a division owed, in turn, to the historical legacies of colonialism and uneven geographic development. But this issue is clouded if we remain content to condemn the North for dispossessing the South (although we should certainly do that), and adjudicate blame for climate change in strictly geographic terms. As David Wallace-Wells notes, increased access to modern technology and consumer goods—the much fabled "development" of globalization—goes hand in hand with an increase in warming; with the accrual of wealth comes the accrual of cars, fossil-powered electricity, and meat. "The graphs that show so much recent progress in the developing world…are…the same graphs that trace the dramatic rise in global carbon emissions that has brought the planet to the brink of overall catastrophe."[42] Likewise, Amitav Ghosh points out that colonialist underdevelopment of Asia and Africa, cruel and terrible as it was and is, has had the inadvertent effect of slowing the rate of climate change.[43] What all this means is that without a more fundamental structural change at a global level, the democratization of resources would only mean the democratization of emissions.

The need to transcend a strictly geographic model of climate guilt and innocence is also evident if we consider what exactly "responsibility" means in this context. China is a major emitter of carbon, but much of that comes from industrial production for foreign (especially US) consumer markets. So who is responsible?[44] If oil is drilled and processed in Norway but consumed in the United Kingdom, or if an American-owned cattle company razes parts of the rain forest with help from the Brazilian government, or if the IMF pressures various states to relax their environmental regulations,[45] which country is to blame? Driving all of this is a *system* of extraction, production,

exchange, and consumption which is undeniably *global*, and in which, as we have just noted, each facet affects every other. Some parts of the world are more invested in this system than others—there is undeniably what world systems theory calls a "center" and a "periphery"—but every part is dependent upon it, and no part exists outside of it.[46] The only appropriate word for this is totality.

To be sure, not every nation is equally well-situated and poised to be able to affect this totality; the centers of finance and military might wield enormous asymmetrical control. But even understanding *this* fact requires viewing the global economy as a connected, interdependent, bounded, and coherent whole. It is indeed complex, but to say that it is too complex to be grasped as a totality, to endlessly defer to local and individuated acts of resistance, is to preclude the possibility of addressing the problem of climate change at its source. Would one country—or one community—be able to decarbonize unilaterally without structural changes on a global level? Will a billion automobiles and tens of thousands of planes be decommissioned and replaced without centralized organization? Will the millions who earn their livelihoods directly or indirectly from fossil fuels be reemployed spontaneously? Are these changes possible without a concerted and organized push for political power?[47] These considerations suggest the need for a comprehensive and global approach to the climate crisis, guided by the necessity of overcoming the currently irrational form of production and exchange. It is not for nothing that several scholars have compared the requisite social transformation to wartime mobilization[48]— we are fighting "capitalism's war on the earth,"[49] and we will not prevail without a unified strategic plan.

If capitalism is intrinsically unable to organize global life in a sustainable way, the reflection able to chart a way out of this crisis cannot avoid pronouncing the irrationality and wrongness of this form of social organization. This irrationality and wrongness pertains to society as a globally-integrated whole, and not merely to certain of its manifestations. Political theory is thus partially the struggle for a form of thought capable of organizing and sustaining human life. Foucault and those sharing his disposition reject this goal in principle. For these theorists, politics cannot be given a rational plan, even to the minimal degree that we have argued here. It must rather seek "partial transformations" within each context, and for each specific subject, abjuring the aspiration to a global or total perspective. If this disposition is not outright complacent, at best it leaves those who hold it to document and struggle against the micrological effects of the climate catastrophe while rejecting any hope for the global organization, planning, and solidarity that would be necessary to avert it. By surrendering critique's aspiration to a universal scope, theory consigns humanity to disaster. The disposition we have begun to outline here responds by rehabilitating the hope for a rational society. We can guide such a hope with a minimal principle: the aim of politics, which must in some sense orient all of our work, must be decarbonization. This is not possible within the capitalist order, which, for worse or for better, is a globally integrated and interdependent system. In contrast to the passage from Foucault, then, Adorno's comments about how "the forms of humanity's own global social constitution threatens its life," and the need for a "self-conscious global subject" capable of avoiding catastrophe "through the rational establish of the whole society," turns out to be even more pertinent than he could have imagined.

Some critics of this view, especially those influenced by Arendt and radical democracy, might protest that it involves a certain de-politicization; in what we have said here, they might argue, politics is reduced to the achievement of some previously determined end at the expense of all others, instead of a performative good involving a kind of agonistic competition between two

opposed but ultimately mutually respecting sides. It renders politics a matter of "conversion" rather than difference, debate, and contestation. If this is right, then we should respect the climate deniers—and those who think the problem is soluble from within the present system are climate deniers—as an agonistic adversary, as an instance of that "difference" which is the real substance of the political, even if that position represents a swan song for the species. If we recoil at this suggestion, then it should prompt us to rethink this fetishization of "the political" as an end in itself; a "politics of conversion" in this case is a matter of life and death. Politics has always been that, even if the agonistic theorists have forgotten. "[We] *have* to win," Klein writes, "the stakes are too high, and time is too short, to settle for anything less."[50]

It is also the case that the line of thought developed here relies upon numerous presuppositions about the "natural" needs, capacities, and desires of human beings. Such universal and transhistorical assumptions have been subject to extreme suspicion at least since Foucault wagered that "Man" as a category would "disappear like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea."[51] Despite his retention of Enlightenment humanism, Habermas also insists that "norms for a reasonable conduct of life cannot be drawn from the natural constitution of the human species."[52] But as is the case with so many of our critical-theoretic articles of faith, the climate catastrophe represents a hard limit to the applicability of this form of critique. For every alarming facet of the looming cataclysm, there is a corresponding explanation for *why* it is alarming that posits a universal and transhistorical feature of human beings and human societies. Warming is concerning because we cannot survive certain temperatures. Food and freshwater scarcity is concerning because we need to eat and drink. We cannot understand a phrase like "ecological destabilization" without acknowledging that we rely on a metabolic relation to nature to reproduce the means of our subsistence. Uneven effects based on geopolitical, racial, and economic factors are only intelligible because this reproduction happens on a social basis, structured in a certain way, which may be more or less antagonistic. If we refuse to grant this modicum of credence to the notion of human nature, then the worst effects of climate change need not worry us very much. If we can maintain this optimism in the face of rising sea levels and increasingly severe famines, the impulse to relinquish any account of natural human needs will have been vindicated. More likely, as Malm notes, is that Foucault's wager about "Man" disappearing will come true—though not in the way he intended.[53]

All such criticisms of the disposition that hopes for a rational society will have to be measured against the obstinate realities of a changing climate and the necessities of sustaining human life within it. If we decry self-conscious planning because it inexorably leads to totalitarian domination, we must likewise ask where the lack of "all projects which claim to be global and radical" has led us. If "Enlightenment rationality" is inextricably colonialist, we are left to wonder if an anticolonial politics is really better off without an analytical diagnosis of the structural contradictions of the global system that, in one way or another, will dominate the lives of those on the periphery. In both of these cases, the skeptical disposition fixates on the risks posed by the figure of the rational society, with the "inexorable" and "inextricable" relationship between rationality and totalitarian, colonial domination standing in as unmeasurable quantities. But the severity of the climate catastrophe requires us to critically examine this argumentative strategy. If totalitarianism and domination pose a problem for political thought, we do not avoid this risk by rejecting a stance from which society's problems can be systematically related to one another. Indeed, the provincializing abandonment of universal rationality seems to run the at-least-equal

risk of rendering us powerless against the impending calamity. The task for political theory and practice, then, is to develop the political forms capable of supporting self-conscious planning for decarbonization, incorporating the particular differences and obstacles facing this project into its agenda, without the concern for particularity overshadowing this project's universality.

If Klein is right that the fact of the climate catastrophe "changes everything," then it must also change the disposition of critical theory. When she describes "a world upside down,"[54] should we chide her for presuming that the world has some determinate "right-side up"? Will this be our intervention, at this crucial historical conjuncture? Is Jane Bennett right that it is "too soon for the Counter-Reformation" that would reintroduce reason, totality, and universal interests into the theoretical landscape?[55] A generation from now, Wallace-Wells claims, the climate denial movement "will likely be seen as among the most heinous conspiracies against human health and well-being as have been perpetrated in the modern world."[56] At the same future moment, how will we look back at Foucault's injunction against "overall programs for another society" and "all projects that claim to be global and radical"? Will we lament our failure to avert catastrophe "through the rational establishment of the whole society as humanity"?

4

The intractability of anthropogenic climate change within contemporary conditions represents a limit case to the disposition that abandons the hope for a rationally ordered society. As we have seen, this clear case of capitalist society's irrationality is sufficient to ground a minimal conception of rationality that applies to society as a whole: a rational society would be one in which the obstacles to decarbonization—above all the growth-oriented telos of capitalist production—would be eliminated. Within these conditions, humanity's only hope lies in an exit from capitalism.

At the same time, there are still many theoretical and practical problems facing us once we recognize the necessity of this transformation. One of the most urgent concerns the specific political forms through which the transition to this society could be realized. When we consider this question, it becomes clear how our conception of social rationality is circumscribed by its grounding in the irrationality of current conditions. The minimal criterion of political rationality we have outlined here does not intrinsically recommend, for example, the kinds of struggles, modes of organization, or strategic and tactical orientations that could lead to the overthrow of capitalism. There is still room for considerable debate on the methods and aims of political contestation from within each context, marked by its own interrelation of oppressions. While the ideal of a rational society is necessarily silent on the positive form that this struggle might take in each geographic location, rehabilitating this ideal means that these movements must aim together for the abolition of capitalism. Just as we must recognize that the climate crisis affecting humanity as a whole plays out in different and contradictory ways throughout the globe, it is obvious that a unified response to this crisis must take multiple forms depending on context.

The disposition we have defended here must work to incorporate the small-scale transformations and local struggles sought by the skeptical disposition, without limiting its aspirations to these changes. In the day-to-day struggles of political movements, including their practices of political education, these organizations attempt to realize new forms of subjectivity through an encounter with and partial transcendence of present social forms of life and consciousness. Since these partial

movements are linked to one another by an overarching concern for ending capitalism, however, we must struggle to see the different ways in which this system affects differently situated localities in their systematic relationship to one another. In this way, the ideal of a rational society necessitates a form of solidarity transcending the boundaries of race, gender, nation-state, identity, and so on. Another minimal condition for the politics proceeding from this disposition is thus a form of working class internationalism. While the working-through of the contradictions among various political organizations and geographic localities constitutes the content of this internationalism, abandoning a formal framework committed to the end of capitalism, realized through the transnational solidarity of the dispossessed, seems to us to surrender any prospects for survival.

As we can see, the hope for a more rational society cannot solve every political problem, much less "depoliticize" our social and political discourse by instituting a positive ideal against which every form of particularity is dissolved. It does provide, however, a way to focus our theoretical and practical attention in our struggle against the complacency and demobilization that have gripped left-wing intellectuals and organizations since the Cold War. Far from instituting the rule of a colonial or totalitarian rationality, recognizing that global capitalism works against the environment and human life itself opens the possibility that we could relate to difference and particularity as necessary moments of a greater whole. If relinquishing this conception of the whole resigns us to catastrophe, the figure of a more rational society—in which decarbonization would not just be a dream but a positive reality—is a necessity for the continuation of human life.

Notes

[1] Theodor W. Adorno, "Progress," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, ed. and trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 144.
[2] Marcel Stoetzler thus notes that Adorno and Horkheimer's project "hides elements of a strangely sanguine theory that still wait to be discovered." Stoetzler, "Learning From the Power of Things: Labour, civilization, and emancipation in Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*," *Marxism* 21 (2019): 211.
[3] A discussion of Adorno's views on the progressive development of the productive forces is developed in Iaan Reynolds, "The Dialectic of Progress and the Cultivation of Resistance in Critical Social Theory" online first in *Social Epistemology* (2021).
[4] Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?", in *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. Lysa Hochroth and Catherine Porter (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007), 114.
[5] Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" 114—115.
[6] Adorno, "Progress," 144.
[7] Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), xviii.
[8] Since we are using these two specific passages as representatives of broad theoretical dispositions, whether Adorno or Foucault would agree or disagree with the figure of the rational society developed in this paper is not relevant to our purposes.
[9] Hannah Arendt, *The Recovery of the Public World*, ed. Melvyn A. Hill (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), 316––318; *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 104.
[10] Jürgen Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society*, trans. Jeremy J. Shaprio (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 118—119; *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 75—76; *Autonomy and Solidarity: Interviews*, ed. Peter Dews (New York: Verso, 1986), 94; *Between Facts and Norms*, trans. William Rehg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), xli.
[11] Nadia Urbinati, *Democracy Disfigured* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time* (New York: Verso, 1990), esp. 242—243; Benjamin Barber,

"Foundationalism and Democracy," in *Democracy and Difference*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 348—59; Grosfoguel, "Decolonizing Western Uni-versalisms: Decolonial Pluri-versalism from Aimé Césaire to the Zapatistas," *Transmodernity* 1, no. 3 (2012): 88—103.

[12] IPCC, "AR6 Synthesis Report: Climate Change 2023." https://www.ipcc.ch/report/sixth-assessment-report-cycle/

[13] Mark Lynas, *Our Final Warning* (London: 4th Estate, 2020), 173, 193, 168. See also Raphael Hébert, Shaun Lovejoy, and Bruno Tremblay, "An Observation-Based Scaling Model for Climate Sensitivity Estimates and Global Projections to 2100," *Climate Dynamics* 56 (2021): 1105—29; Chi Xu et al., "Future of the Human Climate Niche," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 117, no. 21 (2020): 11350—55.

[14] Lynas, *Our Final Warning*, 240ff.

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