Eco-Miserabilism and Radical Hope: On the Utopian Vision of Post-Apocalyptic Environmentalism

MATHIAS THALER   *University of Edinburgh, United Kingdom*

Eco-miserabilism—the thought that it is already too late to avert the collapse of human civilization—is gaining traction in contemporary environmentalism. This paper offers a "reparative" reading of this post-apocalyptic approach by defending it against those who associate it with defeatism and fatalism. My argument is that authors like Roy Scranton and the members of the Dark Mountain collective, while rejecting mainstream activism, remain invested in a specific kind of (radical) hope. Eco-miserabilists, hence, promote an affective politics for our climate-changed world that is both negative and iconoclastic. Without offering blueprints for a desirable future, they critically interrogate reality and disenchant the "cruel optimism" (Lauren Berlant) behind reformist plans for a "good Anthropocene." The ultimate target of the eco-miserabilist position is the illusion that groundbreaking innovations, either in the realm of science and technology or of ordinary representative politics, could redeem us on an environmentally ravaged planet.

TOO LATE TO PANIC?

In recent years, not only the substance, but also the tone of the controversy around climate change has noticeably shifted. Even though many turn a blind eye to the devastations wrought by anthropogenic climate change, others strive to incite bystanders into meaningful action, frequently through an appeal to the galvanizing force of panic and fear. As the global icon of current environmentalism, Greta Thunberg, decried with characteristic bluntness during her by now infamous Davos speech: "I don't want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act. I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if our house is on fire. Because it is" (2019).

At the same time, another tendency has lately begun to gain traction: a bleak narrative of our climate-changed world according to which it is already too late to avert the catastrophic breakdown of human civilization or the earth system altogether.[1] Let us call this alternative view "eco-miserabilism," a term that—notwithstanding its divisive connotations—captures

something pivotal about this manner of grasping the Anthropocene: that the severity of the ecological crisis makes anything but a gloomy outlook on both the present and the future appear frivolous.

The central claim of this paper is that eco-miserabilism contains vital lessons for thinking through the complexities of a climate-changed world, via its disillusionment of powerful fantasies about science and technology as well as mainstream activism in democratic politics. Arising from an apocalyptic imaginary in ecological thought, with origins in American discourses around natural degradation from the 1960s, eco-miserabilists investigate how the false hopes peddled by overly optimistic observers of our climate-changed world continue to prop up an unjust and unsustainable status quo.

In contrast with the standard critique of these climate doomsayers, I show that their project of disenchantment is upheld by an investment in the "radical hope" that "*something good will emerge*" (Lear 2006, 94, italics in original). It is typical of this recalcitrant form of hoping that it operates on an injunction against positively picturing what the good is that eventually materializes. Seen from this vantage point, what may initially look like defeatism and fatalism can, in fact, be rendered as something completely different: as an endeavor to bring about an affective politics for a highly fraught and uncertain future. Such a politics will be suitably attuned, as I explore below, to the experiences of those attempting to inhabit a climate-changed world.

Recuperating the potential of eco-miserabilism hinges on a redescription of authors such as Roy Scranton and the members of the Dark Mountain collective, who have for some time averred that ever louder calls "to get engaged" are misguided and counterproductive. Human civilization (the exact definition of which constitutes a bone of contention) has not only come under

Mathias Thaler (ORCID), Professor of Political Theory, School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh, United Kingdom, mathias.thaler@ed.ac.uk.

[1] A note on terminology: Throughout this essay, I use the phrases "climate-changed world" and "Anthropocene" interchangeably. The justification for this move is mostly pragmatic, for the term "Anthropocene" itself—despite its well-known problems (Chiro 2017; Nixon 2018)—may still furnish us with a "framework for understanding the modern ecological catastrophe, rather than a prescription for resolving it. It is a way of seeing, not a manifesto" (Davies 2016, 193). The same applies to the term "climate-changed world."

threat of destruction; it is, in some sense, already dead. Against Thunberg's rallying cry, our house seems, in fact, not on fire at all; it is nothing but a smoldering heap of ash.

What, if anything, remains to do, then? More specifically, which practical implications does this interrogation of the Anthropocene harbor? And is all hope lost if one adopts such a negative perspective? Rejoinders vary to a considerable degree, but proponents of the eco-miserabilist program agree that we must stop investing faith in redemption and resolution. Consequently, our societal arrangements would have to be fundamentally modified, once the prospect of meaningful mitigation and adaptation measures becomes unavailable. Perishing with dignity on an uninhabitable planet might turn out to be our only option.

This conclusion has been met with extensive skepticism. Jedediah Purdy, in his historical sketch of the Anthropocene's rise, attacks Scranton for empowering the "sort of suggestive but, upon scrutiny, meaningless gesture that makes talk of 'responsibility' feel self-important and ineffective" (2015, para. 6.11). Andreas Malm, the most vocal advocate of sabotaging the infrastructure of carbon-fueled capitalism, accuses Paul Kingsnorth, the Dark Mountain collective's co-founder, of being a "green nationalist," flirting with fascist schemes (Seymour 2021).

While sharing their concern about the limitations of eco-miserabilism, this essay follows another route for making sense of this trend in contemporary environmentalism. Rather than excoriating the likes of Scranton and the members of the Dark Mountain collective for their defeatism and fatalism, I embark on what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick dubs (in a different context) a "reparative reading" (2003). According to Sedgwick, reparative readings differ from paranoid ones in that they resist the impulse to always search for texts' hidden power structures. Instead, engaging with a text in a reparative mode foregrounds the compossibility of critique and affirmation, so that it becomes feasible to be simultaneously skeptical of a particular position and still value its merits.

In times of highly polarized public as well as academic debate, the advantages of such an interpretive strategy strike me as significant.[2] By shunning gratuitous polemics, which afflict both sides of the argument, I draw a more nuanced picture of the place of pessimism in our climate-changed world. Reconstructing eco-miserabilism along these lines allows one to envision it as a unique kind of critique that keeps being sustained by a hopeful, even utopian disposition. If the analysis proves persuasive, the real challenge is to better comprehend what kind of hope

eco-miserabilists reject—and what kind of hope they rely on.[3]

A deeper investigation of this topic is so important for the debate around environmental politics and ethics because it seeks to recover what should be salvaged from this extreme version of pessimism. In an era where anxiety about climate change abounds, we need an even-handed appraisal of those who paint the present and the future in overwhelmingly gloomy colors.[4] Under these circumstances, eco-miserabilism's determination to mourn and commemorate the loss of human civilization does not possess all the answers we yearn for. That much is beyond doubt. However, it may still ascertain which pathways into the future should be eschewed, thereby establishing a preliminary, yet essential platform for coping with the climate emergency.

A reparative reading of this kind deserves the appreciation not only of students of environmental politics and ethics, but also of those members of the public feeling increasingly anxious about the future. In light of the existential challenges lying ahead, I submit that, decoded in a specific manner, eco-miserabilism can and should join the struggle against climate change. Revealing the true purpose of eco-miserabilism may even lend legitimacy to the "outlaw emotions" (Jaggar 1997, 396–8; see also Kretz 2017) that Thunberg elicits from her audience and that more and more are experiencing today.

To vindicate these claims, the paper moves through five phases: the following section outlines the key tenets of eco-miserabilism and situates it within an apocalyptic imaginary that departs from competing accounts of environmental breakdown. The commentators I am interested in should be held apart from so-called "collapsologues," who aim to predict, with the help of findings from the natural sciences, when we will likely pass tipping points toward a breakdown of the earth system. The next section grapples with the customary objection to the eco-miserabilist position—that, if taken seriously, it engenders paralysis or even nihilism. My assertion is that this interpretation loses sight of the paradoxical nature of hope. Sometimes hope can only be nurtured in one sense by fiercely demolishing it in another. In the subsequent section, I unpack this thought with reference to the afore-mentioned notion of "radical hope" and embed it in the marginalized tradition of negative or iconoclastic utopianism. This tradition, whose origins can be traced back to a variety of authors, from Walter Benjamin to Theodor W. Adorno, interdicts the conjuring of a better world to come, but concurrently rebuffs the suggestion that

---

[2] I doubt a more elaborate example will be required to underline this observation about the acerbic nature of the ongoing discussion, but perhaps a pointer to the social media outrage about a recent article in the *American Political Science Review* (Mittiga 2022) brings home what I wish to avoid here. On the short-lived "scandal," which seems to have unfolded in blissful ignorance of the paper's substance, see Drezner (2022).

[3] Although I do not pursue this thought due to space constraints, the essay's conclusion might also be applicable to other miserabilist currents in the contemporary debate, such as Afro-pessimism. For explorations in that direction, see Lloyd (2017, chap. 7) and Warren (2015).

[4] In that sense, my reflections align with Joshua Dienstag's notion that "[w]hile pessimism is a negative philosophy […] with the goal only of fortifying us in a limited existence, it is otherwise not directly related to skepticism or nihilism" (Dienstag 2006, 5).

the future is foreordained. The paper's penultimate section reasons that eco-miserabilists aim to unravel the "cruel optimism" (Lauren Berlant) behind plans for a "good Anthropocene." The actual target of their attack is the illusion that groundbreaking innovations could save us from an environmentally ravaged planet. In the final section, I draw these intersecting ideas together and argue that eco-miserabilism has a constructive role to play in the ongoing climate emergency, by putting a robust check on wishful thinking and by creating space for a new order whose concrete shape remains unknowable.

Before proceeding, a caveat and a clarification: first, in offering a reparative reading of eco-miserabilism, I do not intend to rehabilitate this tendency in contemporary environmentalism *tout court*. As anticipated already, some of its implications are disturbing and should be condemned. That is why this essay merely insists on a novel approach that discloses an alternative route for eco-miserabilism—not in terms of an ideological script that defends the status quo and disparages all forms of active engagement (as it is usually perceived), but as a defamiliarizing critique of the Anthropocene that promotes an affective politics with utopian aspirations (albeit one that is not easily discernable as such).

The resultant interpretation takes the sting out of the standard critique, by reading these pessimistic observers of the Anthropocene against the grain. My contention is that, in spite of what eco-miserabilists occasionally declare, they still depend on radical hope to justify their position politically and ethically. Beneath the manifest content of their statements thus lies a utopian framework that becomes visible in the process of upending more reformist plans for the Anthropocene. This ambiguity between the avowal and the disavowal of hopeful, even utopian aspirations, explains much of the confusion around eco-miserabilism.

Second, faced with the horrors of the ecological crisis, it is imperative for students of environmental politics and ethics to ask themselves: "Who needs such a theory? What for? What relation might it have to someone's life?" (Williams 2005, 54). Questions like these are integral to identifying the audience one aspires to reach.[5] Making explicit whom a text addresses also marks an indispensable starting point for any reparative reading. After all, repairing a tool is supposed to render it useful for someone's specific pursuit of a given goal. Deciphering a text in a reparative spirit ought to similarly enhance one's capacity to do things in certain ways.[6]

Hence, in altering the perception of eco-miserabilism, I wish to jointly sway a scholarly and an activist group of readers. The paper speaks, on the one hand, to those students of politics who are committed to environmental justice but find the bleak stories of climate doomsayers

intolerable. To them, the essay replies: not only is there hope in eco-miserabilism, it might actually turn out to be just the kind of hope required right now. On the other hand, the paper also seeks to have relevance for activists confining their politics exclusively to established types of democratic mobilization. To them, I propose: listen to what eco-miserabilists have to say and reconsider your trust in mainstream activism, for your attachment to the status quo obscures both future obstacles and opportunities. As a consequence, in demonstrating that a peculiar type of hope anchored in despair can perform important, yet often misunderstood, functions in the ongoing ecological crisis, the paper strives to build a bridge between otherwise antagonistic camps, which are nevertheless motivated by the same broad objective—to provide much-needed orientation in an age that the writer Amitav Ghosh so aptly labels "the Great Derangement" (Ghosh 2016).

EARTH SYSTEM BREAKDOWN, VIEWED THROUGH THE REAR MIRROR

In this section, my goal is to distinguish eco-miserabilism from rival strands of ecological thought. One way of achieving this would be through a historicization of the very concept of environmental apocalypse. Carson's ([1962] 2002) *Silent Spring* routinely lauded as the *urtext* of modern environmentalism in the United States, surfaced from a context rife with intellectual contestation, revolving around "the critique of the consumer society and its related way of life, the prominence of science and technology in establishing such a system, and the system's new forms of domination of both human society and Nature" (Gottlieb 2005, 134).

In the 1960s, authors as diverse as Marcuse ([1964] 2007), Goodman and Goodman ([1960] 1990), and Bookchin ([1962] 1974) mounted challenges to the postwar order that would later prove instrumental in green social movements' efforts to formulate their ambitions and strategies. Other texts, such as Ehrlich's ([1968] 1989) *The Population Bomb* and Commoner's (1971) *The Closing Circle*, deployed catastrophist tropes to kickstart transformations both within the scientific community and society at large.[7] A central feature of many of these contributions was their Promethean belief in science and technology to offset humankind's destructive tendencies, if only society were to be radically transformed.[8]

What is unique about all these writings is that their systemic critiques envisaged humanity on a path to self-destruction. As Frederick Buell asserts, these

---

[5] The question of the audience has long been recognized as a methodological concern of political theorizing (see Floyd and Stears 2011; Leopold and Stears 2008).

[6] This is a leitmotif in Judith Butler's encounter with Sedgwick's oeuvre (see Butler 2002).

[7] On the underlying connection between environmental discourse and neo-Malthusian reservations about population growth, see Robertson (2012).

[8] On the complicated history of Prometheanism, see Meyer (2016) and White, Rudy, and Wilbert (2007). For an exposition of Promethean approaches in contemporary environmentalism, see Dryzek (2013).

commentators promoted a radical agenda, propelled by the dread that the world was about to end:

> For writers in the 1960s and 1970s, these rhetorics were all equally logics and revelations. Deployed against the era's fundamental attitudes, they overturned them: they revealed. Depicting humans as having trapped themselves in a terrible rush towards world-end, they expressed a terrible logic. Together, they distinctively and creatively gave force to the feeling that the environmental problems of the day amounted to apocalypse—to rupture, world-end and a last judgment on humanity. (Buell 2010, 18)

In response, in the 1980s, a culture of denial took root, which cast aspersion on the intellectual integrity of doomsayers. During the reign of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, the public debate successively turned away from perceiving ecological problems in catastrophist terms.[9] This shift was stimulated by "merchants of doubt" (Oreskes and Conway 2011). To impair the campaign against acid rain, for example, the Reagan administration commissioned a scientific review of all the existing evidence, which was finally deemed so inconsistent that governmental reluctance with respect to emission controls seemed warranted.

But the rebuke of apocalyptic imaginaries as baseless fearmongering marks only the beginning of the story. From the 1990s onward, the mood in the public swung once again. Rather than seeing the effects of climate change as prompting a world-ending cataclysm, people began to experience the ecological crisis differently, as "global warming makes people realize that they dwell in a steadily increasing condition of risk, uncertainty, and unpredictability" (Buell 2004, 95). Knowledge of the apocalypse, in other words, turned into an ordinary way of life, summoning everyone to incessantly ponder the multiple perils associated with the destruction of nature.

Building on Beck's (1999) prescient study of "risk society," Ursula Heise investigated this evolution by separating apocalyptic from risk perspectives. Commencing in the 1990s, a profound swerve occurred, from a situation where the apocalypse is conceptualized as a rupture with a more or less bucolic present, to a frame whereby the future comes to resemble the present in that humanity will continue to "dwell in crisis," aspiring to reduce risks as much as possible, without ever managing to successfully eradicate them (Heise 2010, 119–203).

A good illustration of this second, risk-centered perspective, in which the irreversibility of a climate-changed world is taken for granted, can be found in David Wallace-Wells's recent bestseller *The Uninhabitable Earth.* Wallace-Wells studies the "existential crisis" global warming has brought about, imprisoning us "between two hellish poles, in which our best-case outcome is death and suffering at the scale of 25 Holocausts, and the worst-case outcome puts us on the brink of extinction" (Wallace-Wells 2019, para. 6.52). The book's objective is, thus, to shake readers out of their complacency about climate change, through the marshaling of data that proves the lethal, yet differential effects hotter weather and more extreme flooding, for example, will have on humans around the world.

Although the term has hitherto not circulated in Anglophone academia, *The Uninhabitable Earth* partakes in an incipient genre of writing about the environment: collapsology.[10] Harking back to the findings of the Club of Rome from the early 1970s (Meadows, Randers, and Meadows [1972] 2005) and informed by the natural sciences, collapsologues direct attention to climatic tipping points beyond which human civilization on earth would become untenable.[11] Since the publication of the latest draft report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 2021, their dire warnings have increased in urgency. In the shadow of the ongoing climate emergency, the promise of "business as usual" appears to be nothing but a dangerous chimera. What is needed instead is a realistic outlook that puts "all our remaining energy into a rapid and radical transition, in building local resilience, whether in territorial or human terms" (Servigne and Stevens 2020, para. 23.8).[12]

The latest addition to this line of thought has happened over the past decade or so, as another approach to our climate-changed world slowly garnered popularity. Some observers today subscribe to the idea that we inhabit a "post-apocalyptic" age in which "loss [is] experienced as already having occurred, as ongoing or as impossible to prevent, rather than as a future risk or threat" (Cassegård and Thörn 2018, 563). To illuminate this viewpoint, I shall in the following focus on the writings of Roy Scranton. The reason for concentrating on this author is straightforward: his thought typifies eco-miserabilism in a paradigmatic fashion. Scranton's reflections articulate a current in contemporary environmentalism that is shared by other influential commentators, including prominent novelists such as Jonathan Franzen (2018, chap. Save What You Love; 2019) and outspoken philosophers like Timothy Morton (2020).

Scranton believes that humanity urgently needs to change tack so as to come to terms with the Anthropocene. In *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*, he posits that the basic premise of mainstream activism is fatally compromised, for, due to the depth of the ecological crisis, the very pursuit of redemption and resolution is a nonstarter:

> The greatest challenge the Anthropocene poses isn't how the Department of Defense should plan for resource wars,

---

[9] On this development, see Buell (2005, 2–33).

[10] For an introduction, on which I draw in the following, see Stetler (2020).

[11] For a critique of this type of environmentalism's neo-Malthusian premises, see Kallis (2019).

[12] A recurrent objection to collapsology is that it remains the privileged product of white middle-class consciousness. As Whyte (2017, 208) has shown, Indigenous people today already "live in [their] ancestors' dystopia." There is, from this perspective, no need to zoom ahead into the near or far future—the breakdown has already taken place in the past. Eco-miserabilists concur with this diagnosis.

whether we should put up sea walls to protect Manhattan, or when we should abandon Miami. It won't be addressed by buying a Prius, turning off the air conditioning, or signing a treaty. The greatest challenge we face is a philosophical one: understanding that this civilization is already dead. The sooner we confront our situation and realize that there is nothing we can do to save ourselves, the sooner we can get down to the difficult task of adapting, with mortal humility, to our new reality. (Scranton 2015, para. 7.28)

Scranton, thus, maintains that a clearheaded look at all the available data makes a mockery of endeavors to keep optimistic about the future. The gist of his argument is that our species simply does not possess the tools or the knowledge to tackle the complex problems generated by climate change. This makes it imperative for humankind to reinvent itself in and for the Anthropocene, via original stories that grapple with extinction. Scranton describes these narratives as cultural "arks" that are supposed to store the memory of human knowledge.[13]

In essence, Scranton claims that the civilizational form of carbon-based capitalism has already passed its expiration date. The thought that our species could somehow harness its ingenuity to "decouple" resource systems, as ecomodernists promulgate (Asafu-Adjaye et al. 2015; for an analysis, see Symons 2019), is ultimately self-aggrandizing hubris. Scranton speaks disparagingly of the quest for techno-optimist solutions, which aim to retain the capitalist order in place, while tweaking energy production and consumption patterns on the margins.

Notwithstanding this bleak outlook, Scranton (2015, para. 7.30) ostensibly disavows nihilism, for "humanity can survive and adapt to the new world of the Anthropocene if we accept human limits and transience as fundamental truths, and work to nurture the variety and richness of our collective cultural heritage." Once, as a species, we take seriously the lesson of letting go of all certainties about permanence and stability, what is left to keep going?

Scranton (2015, para. 12.20) insinuates that practices of memory-making can "save those who are already dead." These encompass the creation and curation of an archive of human experiences that connects our species' momentary being on an uninhabitable planet to past and future generations. His vision for life after humankind's extinction is, therefore, geared toward the building of shelter zones where the memory of the already dead can be preserved.

In sum, Scranton submits that there is nothing humanity can do to prevent the impending catastrophe from happening, yet still insists on the faint possibility that it "can survive and adapt to the new world of the Anthropocene." From this standpoint, there is no need to look ahead into the future to search for signs of our species' downfall—it is already in the past, in plain sight

of the rearview mirror. Rather than sounding the alarm about existential risks that are just on the horizon, eco-miserabilists, hence, narrate "post-cautionary tales" (Hine et al. 2013), stories of a climate-changed world that abstain from warning us about impending disaster. Instead, they attempt to manipulate the perception of political time by shrinking the horizon of expectation to an infinitesimally small point.[14]

The absence of a cautionary impetus marks the chief difference with the collapsologues portrayed before.[15] Collapsologues are reticent to deny the potential of collective action altogether—"The fight is, definitively, not yet lost—in fact will never be lost, so long as we avoid extinction," Wallace-Wells (2019, para. 6.59) declares—while eco-miserabilists like Scranton have nothing but scorn for the green movement, or indeed any organized form of resistance: "And at this point […], after decades of failed protests against institutional racism, gun violence, sexism, nuclear weapons, abortion, war, environmental degradation, and a raft of other issues only the deluded and naïve could maintain that nonviolent protest politics is much more than ritualized wishful thinking" (Scranton 2019). Quitting, consequently, amounts to an indisputable maxim of the eco-miserabilist position (Stephenson 2012): "[W]e don't need more politics. We need more hospice" (Scranton 2016).

DESPAIR AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Unsurprisingly, the eco-miserabilist program has triggered numerous objections, both within public and academic circles. In this section, my aim is to first outline and then juxtapose them to an alternative interpretation that foregrounds the paradox of hope. The most comprehensive refutation of eco-miserabilism can be found in Andreas Malm's recent defense of sabotage as a viable tactic of environmental activism. In a chapter entitled *Fighting Despair*, Malm confronts those who declare we are doomed, unable to do anything to forestall the breakdown of the earth system. Short of straightforward denialism, he considers the ascendancy of commentators like Scranton, Kingsnorth, Franzen, and Morton the most worrying development in contemporary environmentalism.

Malm even compares the climate doomsayers with those who defended slavery in the late eighteenth century on the grounds that, as an institution, it had persevered already for a very long time. The riposte asserts that, just because an injustice has existed for hundreds of years, it does not follow that resistance

---

[13] In a subsequent collection of essays (Scranton 2018), Scranton developed these ideas further.

[14] On the relationship between political time and climate change, see Galaz (2019) and Merrill (2012).

[15] Some collapsologues have in the meantime switched to the language of "deep adaptation" to address Thunberg's concern: "The house fire isn't certain, but because you take it seriously (it certainly can happen) you act accordingly. And if you act, then it is less likely to happen. In other words, we better take societal collapse for granted to have any chance of avoiding it or, at least, reducing its worst effects." (Servigne et al. 2020).

would be futile or unjustified. Every act of resistance against an oppressive system must by default assume that the current situation can somehow be altered; otherwise, any appeal to structural change would have to appear misleading from the get-go.

The principal flaw that Malm detects in the works of Scranton, Kingsnorth, Franzen, and Morton is that they promote a "reification of despair" (Malm 2021, para. 8:13): instead of gauging the transformational power of more just and sustainable ways of inhabiting our climate-changed world, eco-miserabilists fall back on complacent accommodations of "business as usual." If it is already too late to reduce carbon emissions, then individual or collective mitigation measures will be completely useless. Eco-miserabilism consequently turns into a self-fulfilling prophecy that accelerates and intensifies the ecological crisis.

Crucially, Malm traces the political shortcomings of eco-miserabilism (its bias in favor of an unjust and unsustainable status quo) back to a failure in imagination:

> The climate crisis unfolds through a series of interlocked absurdities ingrained in it: not only is it easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, or the deliberate, large-scale intervention in the climate system – what we refer to as geoengineering – than in the economic system; it is also easier, at least for some, to imagine learning to die than learning to fight, to reconcile oneself to the end of everything one holds dear than to consider some militant resistance. Climate fatalism does all in its power to confirm these paralyzing absurdities. Indeed, that is its vocation. (Malm 2021, para. 8.15)

The crux of this objection is that eco-miserabilists assume absolute inevitability where there is only relative probability. When all hope about progressive transformation is forsaken, acting in concert with others becomes impossible.[16] Although the current trajectory of various scenarios points toward breakdown, it would be premature to conclude that any systemic intervention comes too late and is bound to fail.

Rather than defeatism and fatalism, Malm celebrates the world-making impact of resistant action, breaking with the shibboleths of nonviolence and civil disobedience: "Few processes produce as much despair as global heating. Imagine that, someday, the reservoirs of that emotion built up around the world—in the global South in particular—find their outlets. There has been a time for a Gandhian climate movement; perhaps there might come a time for a Fanonian one" (Malm 2021, para. 8.41).

I find Malm's analysis stimulating in some respects, yet wanting in others. Where he is correct is in the trenchant dissection of eco-miserabilism's motivational and mobilizational shortcomings. In practical terms, encouraging the art of quitting is a precarious proposition, for it feeds all too easily into the destructive agenda of capitalism. As I illustrate in the essay's

penultimate section, eco-miserabilism's dismissal of all types of resistance needs rectifying, for it conflates two distinct targets: the termination of a contingent civilizational form (variously termed "carbon-fueled capitalism" or "aggressive human monoculture") and the extinction of the human species as such. Insofar as withdrawing from all modes of environmental activism constitutes an explicit demand that eco-miserabilists of different stripes endorse, they unintentionally align themselves with those who propagate "business as usual." The scientific evidence gathered by the IPCC specifies, however, that every fractional rise in temperature counts and that increasingly vigorous mitigation measures and massive reductions in emissions are going to be required in the immediate future. We will simply not manage to get there without organized resistance movements that genuinely disrupt the status quo and thereby unsettle "normalized practices and their significance for everyday life" (Lipschutz and McKendry 2011, 379).

That said, the claim that hope is comprehensively elided in the eco-miserabilist position requires probing. At first glance, Malm seems right to remark that defeatism and fatalism are logically entwined in what Scranton promulgates. As we have seen, there is plenty of textual proof to warrant this suspicion. And yet, another interpretive framework, which recuperates a different meaning of hope so as to clarify the actual purpose of eco-miserabilism, might be more promising. In their engagement with the Dark Mountain collective, whose pronouncements resonate with Scranton's ideas, Cassegård and Thörn (2018, 571) pursue precisely this intuition when they underscore the "paradox of hope"—"the fact that hope is sometimes gained not by promoting explicitly hopeful messages, but by ostensibly denying hope." The idea is to envisage eco-miserabilism's retreat from activism, in spite of its potentially debilitating consequences, as distinct from a thorough depoliticization of the Anthropocene.

Given that at least some eco-miserabilists primarily renounce mainstream activism, but continue to operate in small-scale communities (Wilt 2014), Cassegård and Thörn's assessment appears to be accurate. It would, therefore, be overhasty to charge the champions of post-apocalyptic thinking with embracing "antisocial dreaming since they reject the possibility of human action to perfect or save the ecosphere" (Jendrysik 2011, 36). In other words, although Malm and other critics are on the right track when they condemn its practical implications, they are mistaken to attribute a completely hopeless disposition to eco-miserabilism. This matters to our overall evaluation, for it leaves the door open for another construal of those who observe civilizational breakdown through the rear mirror; one in which their analytical work might be incorporated in the wider struggle to tackle anthropogenic climate change.

This point is once again vindicated by Cassegård and Thörn when they submit that optimism about our planetary condition is eco-miserabilism's real target, not hope per se. As Eagleton (2019, 2) puts it, "unlike hope […] optimism is not a disposition one attains

---

[16] For an empirical study of this effect, see Mayer and Smith (2019).

through deep reflection or disciplined study. It is simply a quirk of temperament." While finding this distinction persuasive, it needs to be elaborated more to become wholly convincing. How is the hope that eco-miserabilists cling to different from the one that they shun? In the next step, I answer this question by teasing out the qualities of a specific type of hope that remains foundational to their position—radical hope.[17]

RADICAL HOPE AND THE PROHIBITION OF DEPICTING THE FUTURE

My argument in this section is that, in deviation from the standard critique, radical hope and a particular version of utopianism underpin post-apocalyptic environmentalism. To develop this counterintuitive proposal, let us commence with the term "radical hope."[18] Jonathan Lear coined this notion in a subtle interpretation of the pronouncements of the last great chief of the Crow Nation, Plenty Coups. Radical hope involves the anticipation of a "good for which those who have the hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it" (Lear 2006, 103). It is based on an ethical orientation toward a future horizon that one is incapable of fully comprehending. The chief's stance when everything seemed lost can, therefore, be reconstructed as both a yearning for collective survival and a diffuse, but efficacious faith in the redemptive potential of a fraught and uncertain future. What the object of Plenty Coup's hope amounts to stays entirely undecided. Radical hope merely carves out a blank space, no matter how limited it may look, on which the desire for alternatives can be projected. Hope of this variety conveys not only a longing for endurance in the face of cultural and social devastation, but also a trust in the prospect of an open future.[19]

Given that eco-miserabilists wish to deflect the accusation of defeatism and fatalism, it seems reasonable to infer that it has to be radical hope, in Lear's sense, that they keep being tethered to. This is not a form of hoping that lends itself to individual feats of activism, however.

Neither can it necessarily rouse people into jointly launching resistance movements. But it is hope, nonetheless. If that view is appropriate, as I contend, then even Scranton's ruminations about the need for more hospice, as opposed to more politics, require a rearticulation.[20] Accordingly, we might perceive the process of "hospicing," of facilitating a "good death," as a double movement: "On the one hand, there is the work of offering palliative care to assist with what is dying (i.e., hospicing). On the other hand, there is the work of assisting with the birth of something new, without suffocating it with projections (i.e., assisting with midwifery)" (Machado de Oliveira 2021, para. 21.16). Otherwise put, the demise of an old order does not mark the culmination of the story—it simply paves the way for the emergence of a thoroughly new one. Even though such a construal runs against what eco-miserabilists frequently state in explicit terms, it is much better aligned with what authors like Scranton actually defend. Their adoption of a post-collapse perspective does not entail abandoning all hope. Instead, it compels us to work through the blockages that incapacitate established patterns of thinking and acting in the Anthropocene.

Should this intuition be accepted, the standard critique of climate doomsayers loses its stringency. Recall how Malm's worry is that, because eco-miserabilism forsakes hope altogether, it ends up in a bind and tightens the constraints of the status quo. The notion of radical (as opposed to ordinary) hope suggests that Scranton and other eco-miserabilists are, in fact, spurred by a desire, however deeply buried it might be within the recesses of their bleak stories, for "revival, for coming back to life in a form that is not yet intelligible" (Lear 2006, 95).

The paradox of hope, then, describes a phenomenon whereby one keeps being driven by that desire while relinquishing an optimistic attitude toward our species' capacity to "solve" the ecological crisis—a thought I will revisit in the next section. Before that, though, let us investigate an issue that lies at the heart of Malm's objection: that champions of eco-miserabilism suffer from a lack of actionable imagination when they reify despair. The notion of radical hope throws doubt on this argument, as it gestures at a hopeful orientation toward the future, without spelling out how the alternative world on the horizon might be composed.

Up to this juncture, my plan has been to subject eco-miserabilism to a reparative reading that locates at its core a commitment to a distinct type of hope whose object remains indeterminate. The peculiar nature of radical hope makes it hard to be recognized as such, which, in turn, renders the customary identification of eco-miserabilism with defeatism and fatalism cogent. If hope is, indeed, pivotal to eco-miserabilism, how should we make sense of the imaginative framework behind it? One manner of answering that question would be through the lens of negative or iconoclastic

---

[17] Flores and Rousse (2016) also draw on Lear's notion to elucidate our species' predicament in the Anthropocene. For other uses of "radical hope," see Thompson (2009) and Williston (2012). Although I share their interest in this concept, my approach differs from both Thompson's and Williston's in that I home in on a tendency in environmental thought that is *prima facie* hostile to all forms of hoping—eco-miserabilism.

[18] Space constraints prevent me from grappling in depth with the rich literature on hope in political theory. For surveys, see Blöser, Huber, and Moellendorf (2020) and Blöser and Stahl (2017).

[19] In drawing on Lear's notion, I stay agnostic on the question whether Plenty Coup's decision to cooperate with the U.S. government and accept the fate of reservation life testifies to the chief's impoverished judgment or not. The way Lear derived his concept of "radical hope" from the actual history of the Crow Nation has rightly been called into question, but my supposition here is that the idea itself can become generative even if the case study illustrating it turns out to be inaccurate. For a critique of Lear's "philosophical anthropology" and its speculative conclusions, see Goldstone (2008).

[20] I thank Robin Celikates for this pointer.

utopianism.[21] While this might at first sound self-contradictory—after all, it appears that all utopias convey positive visions of an ideal future—it captures with great accuracy how eco-miserabilism proceeds when it announces our species' demise.

To explain this, it will initially be useful to evoke the critical function that utopias perform. Utopias are never only about the perfect commonwealth on other worlds; they always hold up a mirror to society and thereby unearth problems concealed by the status quo. Utopias written in the Science Fiction genre, for example, deploy such critique by estranging readers from how they usually experience their private lifeworlds and political arrangements (Suvin 1972). By making the extraordinary look normal, utopias create epistemic friction within habitual perceptions of social reality, which, in turn, prepares the ground for real-world change (Levitas 2011). Estrangement is, therefore, purposefully induced: "it shatters a given order by offering alternative ways to deal with authority and power" (Ricœur 1986, 179).[22] So, in a straightforward sense, utopias are imbued with a negative thrust. The image of a better world on the horizon necessitates the foil of another picture preceding it—that of today's rotten order, which the author wants to get rid of and replace with an improved one.

But negativity can mean something else as well, going beyond the dissolution and neutralization of reality.[23] To grasp this, consider why both Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno developed forms of critique that resisted the impulse to depict positive alternatives: in Benjamin's case, via the linking together of revolutionary politics with the "organization of pessimism" (Benjamin 1978, 55–6); in Adorno's case, by means of a "negative dialectics," which connects the theological ban on images to materialist philosophy (Adorno 1973, 207).[24] Critical projects such as Adorno's are, despite their profound negativity, predicated on the simultaneous acknowledgement that things could always be otherwise and that one is incapable of prefiguring "*how* things would then be—what utopia would consist in positively speaking" (Freyenhagen 2013, 48, italics in original). An aversion to flesh out what the future will bring is, thus, integral to their utopianism.

This perspective assists us in parsing two broad frameworks for the utopian imagination. On the one hand, there are stories and theories that seek to make transparent what lies beyond the utopian horizon. Jacoby (2005) dubs this the "blueprint" tradition and deems it the historically dominant version of social dreaming. Whenever a utopian writer or theorist captures in detail the conditions under which the ideal commonwealth should be forged, they design a positive model for society to emulate.

On the other hand, there is a second school of thought, which refrains from manufacturing blueprints and to which both Benjamin and Adorno belong. Jacoby names this the "iconoclastic" tradition, associating it predominantly with the Jewish faith:

> The Jewish tradition gave rise to what might be called an iconoclastic utopianism – an anti-utopian utopianism that resisted blueprints. This iconoclastic utopianism was "anti-utopian" to the extent that it refused to map out the future; it was utopian in its commitment to a very different future of harmony and happiness. The iconoclastic utopians inclined toward the future, but unlike the blueprint utopians, they abstained from depicting it. To put this differently, while Jewish history is replete with reformers, revolutionaries, and visionaries, it includes almost no equivalent to Thomas More, Charles Fourier, or Edward Bellamy, who demarcated the exact dimensions of utopia. (Jacoby 2005, 85)[25]

Notwithstanding doubts regarding Jacoby's genealogical account of the Jewish background (Levitas 2007, 302–3), the conceptual distinction between the blueprint and the iconoclastic tradition proves beneficial for reflecting on eco-miserabilism. In their issuing of death certificates to human civilization, authors like Scranton intend to "make the present impossible" (Blanchot 2006, 378). Eco-miserabilism distrusts the reformist assurances of environmental activism and instead proclaims the wholesale abolition of the status quo. This negative orientation reverberates with both Benjamin's and Adorno's pessimistic sensibilities.

To illuminate this idea further, a comparison with other abolitionist projects in contemporary politics is instructive.[26] Controversies around prison abolition and reform, for example, are often vexed by apprehensions about real-world alternatives (Ben-Moshe 2013; McLeod 2015). If we truly got rid of carceral spaces, how would society organize the fair and indispensable punishment of offenders? Angela Davis has delivered what is the best reply to this concern: "I do think that a society without prisons is a realistic future possibility, but in a transformed society, one in which people's needs, not profits, constitute the driving force. At the same time, prison abolition appears as a utopian idea precisely because the prison and its bolstering ideologies are so deeply rooted in our contemporary world"

---

[21] On green utopias more widely, see Garforth (2018).

[22] Jameson (1977) makes a similar point when he insists that utopias always exert a destructive effect insofar as they "dissolve" and "neutralize" the world from which they depart.

[23] For a discussion of utopia's "negative hermeneutic," see Moylan (2008).

[24] On the resonances between these authors, see Benzaquén (1998), Khatib (2014), and Yasin (2018)). For an interpretation of Adorno's understanding of hope that relates it to Lear's notion, see Jütten (2019). On Benjamin's understanding of utopia, see Abensour (2017).

[25] There are other examples of this strand of utopianism: from Landauer's (1911) admission that he will, in his rendering of the route to socialism, "offer no depiction of an ideal, no description of a Utopia," to Horkheimer's (2008) statement that "critical theory […] has its roots in Judaism. It arises from the idea: Thou shalt not make any graven image of God."

[26] Beyond prison abolition, perhaps the most widely discussed proposals revolve around abolishing gender (Cull 2019; Earp 2021) and the police (Chazkel, Kim, and Paik 2020; McDowell and Fernandez 2018).

(Davis 2016, para. 7.21; see also Davis and Rodriguez 2000).

The principal consideration here is that, so long as we remain stuck in a profit-driven society, we will by necessity lack the capacity to adequately picture how an alternative to the prison-industrial complex would look like. This is what renders the plea for abolition utopian in the first place, but, crucially, not in the sense of a wishful thinking that becomes fully detached from a sober reckoning with reality. Rather, the utopian nature of campaigns for prison abolition is premised on the yearning "not to be integrated within the existing framework but to work toward the liberation of us all from it" (Ben-Moshe 2018, 352). Abolitionists, hence, maintain that, even though we cannot work out the specifics of where we are heading, we are capable of communicating with utmost clarity what must be left behind.[27]

This abolitionist standpoint can elucidate the unique character of eco-miserabilism's utopianism. Via the hyperbolic means of a death certificate, authors like Scranton and the members of the Dark Mountain collective activate processes of obliterating a present that has come under the spell of a self-destructive ideology. On this account, collapsologues do not go far enough when they keep searching for glimmers of hope within the status quo, investing faith in the transformative potential of environmental activism. The danger is that, once we begin to "dwell in crisis," the current malaise becomes routinized, slowly eroding the galvanizing impact that panic and fear are supposed to exert. Eco-miserabilists derive a drastic lesson from this observation: that we need to stop speaking of the climate emergency altogether and start pondering extinction.

Proclaiming the downfall of human civilization, then, is not the sign of an attenuated imagination, as the standard critique holds. Rather, it consists in a purposefully exaggerated statement that summons its addressees to discard conventional templates for inhabiting a climate-changed world so as to free up space for new ones. Although eco-miserabilism discloses a novel perspective on a highly fraught and uncertain future, the radical hope behind its rhetorical appeal makes it impossible to tease out concretely what will come next. Yet that does not diminish its utopian character, which diverges from the blueprint tradition's modeling of desirable alternatives.

---

[27] This does not imply that defenders of prison abolition would have nothing of substance to say about practical alternatives to reformism. As Davis remarks, "[e]ffective alternatives involve both transformation of the techniques for addressing 'crime' and of the social and economic conditions that track so many children from poor communities, and especially communities of color, into the juvenile system and then on to prison. The most difficult and urgent challenge today is that of creatively exploring new terrains of justice, where the prison no longer serves as our major anchor" (Davis 2003, 20–1). In situating this line of thinking within the tradition of negative or iconoclastic utopianism, all I am suggesting is that abolitionist projects can justifiably be propelled by the motivation to rid the world of oppressive structures, even if they have not managed to hash out all the details of what Davis refers to as emerging "terrains of justice."

AGAINST CRUEL OPTIMISM

Thus far, I have embarked on a reading of eco-miserabilism that underscores its paradoxically hopeful aspirations and thereby weakens the charge of paralysis or even nihilism. Still missing from this picture is an explanation of what it is that eco-miserabilism wishes to dissolve and neutralize through its negative, iconoclastic utopianism. As we have seen above, authors like Scranton tend to equivocate between various positions: "this way of life," "this order of things," "carbon-fueled capitalism," and "aggressive human monoculture" are all descriptors of the present condition that eco-miserabilists draw on. To disambiguate these positions in a reparative spirit, this section contends that eco-miserabilism can be shown to remove a highly specific phenomenon that blocks the path toward a more creative approach to what is going on: the cruel optimism of those who trust that either science and technology, or ordinary representative politics will somehow succeed in "solving" the ecological crisis.

The term "cruel optimism" designates an affective relation whereby "something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (Berlant 2011, 1). A paradigmatic example of cruel optimism resides in the American Dream's totemic attachment to meritocracy. The myth of upward social mobility for deserving, hardworking people is, in fact, maintained by an entirely fantastical notion of economic uplift and constant growth. Due to the historical impenetrability of the class structure in the United States, however, the stubborn longing for individual betterment becomes an impediment to leading a good life. Putting faith in a solution that comprises within it the very causes of the problem ultimately represents a form of self-harming cruelty.

Berlant's analysis is insightful for explicating eco-miserabilism because it theorizes action in a way that dovetails with the positions rehearsed before: as "the action of not being worn out by politics" (Berlant 2011, 262). This phrase conveys precisely the goal that both Scranton and other eco-miserabilists want to accomplish. Since they aspire to keep defeatism and fatalism at bay, they must affirm the possibility that some form of hope—radical hope—keeps guiding those who live through the end of times. "Not being worn out by politics," then, signals a modification in the temperamental register of environmentalism: away from an emphasis on finding solutions, wherever they might come from, toward fundamentally new modes of cultural and social interaction.

Eco-miserabilists, hence, shift from an alarmist mindset about the climate emergency to one that centers memory-making. In opposition to collapsologues, they foreground the significance of remembering what has already been lost.[28] Grieving the disappearance of human civilization as we know, it can, in principle, serve as a steppingstone for coping with the present moment,

---

[28] On the role of mourning and melancholia in debates around the Anthropocene, see Barnett (2021) and Cunsolo (2012).

for, in Haraway's (2016, 39) words, it opens up "a path to understanding entangled shared living and dying."

This point is fundamental since it explains the ways in which eco-miserabilists call into question two potent trends in contemporary environmentalism: First, when ecomodernists, both from the right (Pinker 2018) and the left (Phillips 2015) of the political spectrum, conjure a bright clear future, they intend to counteract the apprehension and depression about climate change that has begun to take hold across society. In response, Scranton and the members of the Dark Mountain collective insist that adopting such a stance can backfire insofar as it glosses over (and hence entrenches) the deeper structures sustaining the Anthropocene.[29] Science alone will not save us from an environmentally ravaged planet because "on its own [it] offers no moral vision, no ethical stance, and no political architecture for delivering the sort of world people desire" (Hulme 2020, 310). And, technology always remains, at least to some degree, wedded to the status quo. The promise of a cleantech revolution, for example—perhaps best epitomized by ubiquitous invocations of Net-Zero targets—springs from a "green spirit of capitalism" that is at its core deeply conservative (Goldstein 2018).

The second current in contemporary environmentalism that eco-miserabilists renounce revolves around the notion that ordinary representative politics can be remodeled to alleviate the current crisis. *Learning How to Die in the Anthropocene* as well as the various texts produced by the Dark Mountain collective assert that grasping for a more democratic Anthropocene through environmental activism is far from benign—it ends up obstructing a sober reckoning with the present. For them, there appears to be not much of a difference between Bill Gates' technologically infused Pollyannaism and Bill McKibben's "spiritual dregs of '60s hippie optimism" (Scranton 2019): both amount to deleterious expressions of "solutionism" (Morozov 2013) according to which every cultural and social problem can be sorted out with the help of groundbreaking innovations.

Of course, eco-miserabilists are not the only contributors to the debate around environmental politics and ethics who combat solutionism in all its guises. But what is distinctive about their ideas is the observation that some variants of hope can by themselves undermine efforts to address the causes of the ongoing climate emergency (Lynch 2017).[30] Through bleak stories of life and death in the Anthropocene, eco-miserabilists steer attention to the fact that false hopes continue to reinforce an unjust and unsustainable order.

In contrast with Malm's assumption, however, this essay sought to demonstrate that the despair at the core of their narratives is essentially "episodic," rather than

"resignative"[31]: by making space for the arrival of a new order, eco-miserabilists have to affirm the possibility of something yet ungraspable evolving after the demise of the world as we know it. In that regard, the despair undergirding their project resembles "grief associated with the death of a loved one, except that it is the death or dismissal of our dreams, our illusions, our fantasies, and the awareness of the need to have them replaced with values and aspirations that are in reality feasible, allowing fulfillment and joy, rather than ones that are illusory" (Kassiola 2015, 192).

The error that Malm accurately detects in the eco-miserabilist view is that it conflates its aversion to scientific techno-optimism and ordinary representative politics with a rebuttal of all forms of active engagement against climate change. This totalizing diagnosis is unconvincing precisely because it treats the success (or downfall) of a particular human civilization as synonymous with the survival (or extinction) of our species as such. The generic dismissal of any kind of resistance can only be understood against the backdrop of this unhelpful equivocation. Even if one is less sanguine than Malm about the morality and efficacy of violent protest, surely his celebration of alternative green movements beyond the mainstream indicates that powerful forms of active engagement may arise from outside, or on the margins, of the already dead civilization bemoaned by eco-miserabilists.[32]

My reparative interpretation intimates that it is not only feasible, but necessary to separate eco-miserabilism's indictment of solutionist shortcuts from its ostensible instigation of paralysis or even nihilism. This move gives us an idea of where there might be common ground between competing ways of contemplating the Anthropocene—so long as both sides are ready to leave wanton polemicism behind.

Scholar-activists like Malm would certainly agree with climate doomsayers that, without attending to the genuine causes of the current malaise, which are culturally and socially determined, environmental politics and ethics keep stuck in the futile management of superficial symptoms. Among other things, this means that we must overcome Promethean conceptions of science and technology and incorporate both future-oriented foresight and past-oriented afterthought in our responses to the Anthropocene (Dillet and Hatzisavvidou 2022). And, eco-miserabilists should on their part concede that exhortations to hospice a moribund civilization are deliberate interventions that prepare the ground for a new order they cannot envision in positive terms. In other words, their pronouncements are inherently political, despite being masked as aloof meditations on resigned surrender.

NEGOTIATING RIVAL UTOPIAN VISIONS

Summing up, eco-miserabilism's utopianism is spurred by a longing to dismantle the cruel optimism behind

---

[29] In this regard, the eco-miserabilist critique displays affinities with other objections to homogenizing accounts of the Anthropocene. See Haraway (2015) and Moore (2016).

[30] As Freyenhagen (2013, 225) observes, this concern also marks the foil of Adorno's negativistic philosophy—"the hope that makes us overlook the real despair of our social world and remain in the burning house because things are bound to get better."

[31] On this distinction, see Huber (2023, 5–6).

[32] On this point, see Schlosberg and Coles (2016).

mainstream activism insofar as it stays tethered to solutionist frameworks, either in the realm of science and technology or of ordinary representative politics. The motivation behind this type of environmentalism needs to be denounced as what it is: a delusional fantasy that makes it harder, rather than easier, to come to terms with the climate emergency. Nonetheless, eco-miserabilism's destructive effect does not exhaust its whole potential. The persistence of radical hope enables scholars as well as activists to become receptive to what is yet to come.

To clarify its place within the broader landscape of contemporary thinking about the environment, consider that, like all forms of negative, iconoclastic utopianism, eco-miserabilism is reactive (but not reactionary). To the extent that it operates on an injunction against articulating how the future should look like, it presupposes a critical judgment as to what it plans to negate and dissolve. This judgment will shift from one context to another. The precise objective of every abolitionist undertaking is contingent on first delineating the ideological agendas that dominate differently vulnerable populations. It follows that one cannot divorce the evaluation of eco-miserabilism from the specific circumstances into which it interferes. And the circumstances right now appear suffused with an almost universally felt yearning not only for techno-optimistic proposals, but also for the smooth functioning of mainstream activism, both of which keep the deeper structures of the Anthropocene firmly in place, via the cultivation of false hopes.

Against this setting, we should stop conceiving of eco-miserabilism as a freestanding project that remains completely at odds with other radical interrogations of the status quo. If we do that, we finish where Malm's standard critique has left us, lambasting Scranton and others for their lack of actionable imagination. This inference can be disputed, once we switch from a paranoid mode of reading to a reparative one. Refracted through such a reparative lens, eco-miserabilism reveals a pathway for a new affective politics, by dismantling rejoinders to the ecological crisis that search for solutionist shortcuts out of the climate emergency and thereby perpetuate the current predicament. In this process of providing orientation, its pessimistic stance will eventually have to be confronted with, and complemented by, affirmative images of where we should be heading.[33] It is in this sense that we can anticipate a holistic approach to the ecological crisis—through a productive negotiation of rival utopian visions of our climate-changed world; a negotiation in which those who grieve what has already been lost face on equal terms those who imagine a more just and sustainable future.

---

[33] Apart from Malm's preferred option of violent world-making, another direction in which this positive project could be taken is through explorations of degrowth, which have recently started to tackle the climate emergency. See D'Alisa, Demaria, and Kallis (2015), Hickel (2020), and Liegey and Nelson (2020).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

REFERENCES

Abensour, Miguel. 2017. "Walter Benjamin, the Sentry of Dreams." In *Utopia from Thomas More to Walter Benjamin*, by Miguel Abensour, 61–103. Minneapolis, MN: Univocal Publishing.

Adorno, Theodor W. 1973. *Negative Dialectics*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Asafu-Adjaye, John, Linus Blomqvist, Stewart Brand, Barry Brook, Ruth de Fries, Erle Ellis, Christopher Foreman, et al. 2015. "An Ecomodernist Manifesto." http://www.ecomodernism.org/.

Barnett, Joshua Trey. 2021. "Vigilant Mourning and the Future of Earthly Coexistence." In *Communicating in the Anthropocene: Intimate Relations*, eds. C. Vail Fletcher and Alexa M. Dare, 13–34. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Beck, Ulrich. 1999. *World Risk Society*. Cambridge, MA: Polity Press.

Benjamin, Walter. 1978. "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia." *New Left Review* 108 (1): 47–56.

Ben-Moshe, Liat. 2013. "The Tension between Abolition and Reform." In *The End of Prisons: Reflections from the Decarceration Movement*, eds. Mechthild E. Nagel and Anthony J. Nocella II, 83–92. New York: Brill.

Ben-Moshe, Liat. 2018. "Dis-Epistemologies of Abolition." *Critical Criminology* 26 (3): 341–55.

Benzaquén, Adriana S. 1998. "Thought and Utopia in the Writings of Adorno, Horkheimer, and Benjamin." *Utopian Studies* 9 (2): 149–61.

Berlant, Lauren. 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Blanchot, Maurice. 2006. "The Proper Use of Science Fiction." In *Imagining the Future: Utopia and Dystopia*, eds. Andrew Miller,

Matthew Ryan, and Robert Savage, 375–83. Melbourne: Arena Publishing.

Blöser, Claudia, Jakob Huber, and Darrel Moellendorf. 2020. "Hope in Political Philosophy." *Philosophy Compass* 15 (5): e12665.

Blöser, Claudia, and Titus Stahl. 2017. "Hope." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/hope/.

Bookchin, Murray. [1962] 1974. *Our Synthetic Environment*, Revised Edition. New York: Harper and Row.

Buell, Frederick. 2004. *From Apocalypse to Way of Life: Environmental Crisis in the American Century*. London: Routledge.

Buell, Frederick. 2010. "A Short History of Environmental Apocalypse." In *Future Ethics: Climate Change and Apocalyptic Imagination*, ed. Stefan Skrimshire, 13–36. London: Continuum.

Buell, Lawrence. 2005. *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Butler, Judith. 2002. "Capacity." In *Regarding Sedgwick: Essays on Queer Culture and Critical Theory*, eds. Stephen M. Barber and David L. Clark, 109–19. New York: Routledge.

Carson, Rachel. [1962] 2002. *Silent Spring*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

Cassegård, Carl, and Håkan Thörn. 2018. "Toward a Postapocalyptic Environmentalism? Responses to Loss and Visions of the Future in Climate Activism." *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 1 (4): 561–78.

Chazkel, Amy, Monica Kim, and A. Naomi Paik. 2020. "Worlds without Police." *Radical History Review* 2020 (137): 1–12.

Chiro, Giovanna Di. 2017. "Welcome to the White (M) Anthropocene? A Feminist-Environmentalist Critique." In *Routledge Handbook of Gender and Environment*, ed. Sherilyn MacGregor, 487–505. London: Routledge.

Commoner, Barry. 1971. *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man, and Technology*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Cull, Matthew J. 2019. "Against Abolition." *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 5 (3). https://doi.org/10.5206/fpq/2019.3.5898.

Cunsolo, Ashlee. 2012. "Climate Change as the Work of Mourning." *Ethics and the Environment* 17 (2): 137–64.

D'Alisa, Giacomo, Federico Demaria, and Giorgos Kallis, eds. 2015. *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*. New York: Routledge.

Davies, Jeremy. 2016. *The Birth of the Anthropocene*. Oakland: University of California Press.

Davis, Angela Y. 2003. *Are Prisons Obsolete?* New York: Seven Stories Press.

Davis, Angela Y. 2016. *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books.

Davis, Angela Y., and Dylan Rodriguez. 2000. "The Challenge of Prison Abolition: A Conversation." *Social Justice* 27 (3 (81)): 212–18.

Dienstag, Joshua Foa. 2006. *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Dillet, Benoit, and Sophia Hatzisavvidou. 2022. "Beyond Technofix: Thinking with Epimetheus in the Anthropocene." *Contemporary Political Theory* 21 (3): 351–72.

Drezner, Daniel. 2022. "Anatomy of a Political Theory Controversy." *Washington Post*, January 5. https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/01/05/anatomy-political-theory-controversy/.

Dryzek, John S. 2013. *The Politics of the Earth: Environmental Discourses*, Third ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Eagleton, Terry. 2019. *Hope without Optimism*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Earp, Brian D. 2021. "Abolishing Gender." In *Future Morality*, ed. David Edmonds, 35–49. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ehrlich, Paul R. [1968] 1989. *The Population Bomb*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Flores, Fernando, and B. Scot Rousse. 2016. "Ecological Finitude as Ontological Finitude: Radical Hope in the Anthropocene." *Telos* 2016 (177): 127–43.

Floyd, Jonathan, and Marc Stears, eds. 2011. *Political Philosophy versus History?: Contextualism and Real Politics in Contemporary Political Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Franzen, Jonathan. 2018. *The End of the End of the Earth: Essays*. London: 4th Estate.

Franzen, Jonathan. 2019. "What If We Stopped Pretending the Climate Apocalypse Can Be Stopped?" *New Yorker*. September 8. https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/what-if-we-stopped-pretending.

Freyenhagen, Fabian. 2013. *Adorno's Practical Philosophy: Living Less Wrongly*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Galaz, Victor. 2019. "Time and Politics in the Anthropocene: Too Fast, Too Slow?" In *Anthropocene Encounters: New Directions in Green Political Thinking*, eds. Frank Biermann and Eva Lövbrand, 109–27. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Garforth, Lisa. 2018. *Green Utopias: Environmental Hope before and after Nature*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Ghosh, Amitav. 2016. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. London: Penguin.

Goldstein, Jesse. 2018. *Planetary Improvement: Cleantech Entrepreneurship and the Contradictions of Green Capitalism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Goldstone, Brian. 2008. "Critique of Abysmal Reasoning." *Theory & Event* 11 (2). http://muse.jhu.edu/article/240326.

Goodman, Percival, and Paul Goodman. [1960] 1990. *Communitas: Means of Livelihood and Ways of Life*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Gottlieb, Robert. 2005. *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement*, Revised and Updated Edition. Washington, DC: Island Press.

Haraway, Donna. 2015. "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin." *Environmental Humanities* 6 (1): 159–65.

Haraway, Donna. 2016. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Heise, Ursula. 2010. *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hickel, Jason. 2020. *Less Is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World*. London: William Heinemann.

Hine, Dougald, Nick Hunt, Paul Kingsnorth, and Adrienne Odasso. 2013. "Editorial: Post-Cautionary Tales." *Dark Mountain*.

Horkheimer, Max. 2008. "Letter to Otto O. Herz, Vienna (1 September 1969)." In *Theodor W. Adorno: One Last Genius*, ed. Detlev Claussen, 365. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Huber, Jakob. 2023. "Hope from Despair." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 31 (1): 80–101.

Hudson, Laura. 2021. "At the End of the World, It's Hyperobjects All the Way Down." *Wired*. November 16. https://www.wired.com/story/timothy-morton-hyperobjects-all-the-way-down/.

Hulme, Mike. 2020. "One Earth, Many Futures, No Destination." *One Earth* 2 (4): 309–11.

Jacoby, Russell. 2005. *Picture Imperfect: Utopian Thought for an Anti-Utopian Age*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Jaggar, Alison. 1997. "Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology." In *Feminist Social Thought: A Reader*, ed. Diana T. Meyers, 385–405. New York: Routledge.

Jameson, Fredric. 1977. "Of Islands and Trenches: Neutralization and the Production of Utopian Discourse." *Diacritics* 7 (2): 2–21.

Jendrysik, Mark S. 2011. "Back to the Garden: New Visions of Posthuman Futures." *Utopian Studies* 22 (1): 34–51.

Jütten, Timo. 2019. "Adorno on Hope." *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 45 (3): 284–306.

Kallis, Giorgos. 2019. *Limits: Why Malthus Was Wrong and Why Environmentalists Should Care*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Kassiola, Joel Jay. 2015. "The Surprising Value of Despair and the Aftermath of September 11." In *Explorations in Environmental Political Theory: Thinking about What We Value*, ed. Joel Jay Kassiola, 189–98. London: Routledge.

Khatib, Sami. 2014. "To Win the Energies of Intoxication for the Revolution." *Anthropology & Materialism. A Journal of Social Research* (2). https://doi.org/10.4000/am.348.

Kretz, Lisa. 2017. "Emotional Solidarity: Ecological Emotional Outlaws Mourning Environmental Loss and Empowering Positive Change." In *Mourning Nature: Hope at the Heart of Ecological*

Loss and Grief, eds. Ashlee Cunsolo and Karen Landman, 258–91. Montreal, Canada: McGill-Queen's Press.

Landauer, Gustav. 1911. "Call to Socialism." https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/gustav-landauer-call-to-socialism.

Lear, Jonathan. 2006. *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Leopold, David, and Marc Stears, eds. 2008. *Political Theory: Methods and Approaches*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Levitas, Ruth. 2007. "Looking for the Blue: The Necessity of Utopia." *Journal of Political Ideologies* 12 (3): 289–306.

Levitas, Ruth. 2011. *The Concept of Utopia*, Student Edition. Oxford: Peter Lang.

Liegey, Vincent, and Anitra Nelson. 2020. *Exploring Degrowth: A Critical Guide*. London: Pluto Press.

Lipschutz, Ronnie D., and Corina McKendry. 2011. "Social Movements and Global Civil Society." In *Oxford Handbook of Climate Change and Society*, eds. John S. Dryzek, Richard B. Norgaard, and David Schlosberg, 369–83. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lloyd, Vincent W. 2017. *Religion of the Field Negro: On Black Secularism and Black Theology*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Lynch, Tommy. 2017. "Why Hope Is Dangerous When It Comes to Climate Change." *Slate Magazine*. July 25. https://slate.com/technology/2017/07/why-climate-change-discussions-need-apocalyptic-thinking.html.

Machado de Oliveira, Vanessa. 2021. *Hospicing Modernity: Facing Humanity's Wrongs and the Implications for Social Activism*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books.

Malm, Andreas. 2021. *How to Blow Up a Pipeline: Learning to Fight in a World on Fire*. London: Verso.

Marcuse, Herbert. [1964] 2007. *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. London: Routledge.

Mayer, Adam, and E. Keith Smith. 2019. "Unstoppable Climate Change? The Influence of Fatalistic Beliefs about Climate Change on Behavioural Change and Willingness to Pay Cross-Nationally." *Climate Policy* 19 (4): 511–23.

McDowell, Meghan G., and Luis A. Fernandez. 2018. "'Disband, Disempower, and Disarm': Amplifying the Theory and Practice of Police Abolition." *Critical Criminology* 26 (3): 373–91.

McLeod, Allegra M. 2015. "Prison Abolition and Grounded Justice." *UCLA Law Review* 62 (5): 1156–239.

Meadows, Donella H., Jørgen Randers, and Dennis L. Meadows. [1972] 2005. *The Limits to Growth: The 30-Year Update*. London: Earthscan.

Merrill, Karen R. 2012. "The Risks of Dead Reckoning: A Postscript on Oil, Climate Change, and Political Time." *Journal of American History* 99 (1): 252–55.

Meyer, William B. 2016. *The Progressive Environmental Prometheans: Left-Wing Heralds of a "Good Anthropocene."* Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Mittiga, Ross. 2022. "Political Legitimacy, Authoritarianism, and Climate Change." *American Political Science Review* 116 (3): 998–1011.

Moore, Jason W., ed. 2016. *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*. Oakland, CA: PM Press.

Morozov, Evgeny. 2013. *To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism*. New York: PublicAffairs.

Morton, Timothy, dir. 2020. "The End of the World Has Already Happened." *BBC Radio 4*. https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000cl66.

Moylan, Tom. 2008. "Making the Present Impossible: On the Vocation of Utopian Science Fiction." *Arena Journal* 31: 79–108.

Nixon, Rob. 2018. "The Anthropocene: The Promise and Pitfalls of an Epochal Idea." In *Future Remains: A Cabinet of Curiosities for the Anthropocene*, eds. Gregg Mitman, Marco Armiero, and Robert S. Emmett, 1–18. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Oreskes, Naomi, and Erik M. Conway. 2011. *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*. New York: Bloomsbury Press.

Phillips, Leigh. 2015. *Austerity Ecology & the Collapse-Porn Addicts: A Defence of Growth, Progress, Industry and Stuff*. Washington, DC: Zero Books.

Pinker, Steven. 2018. *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress*. New York: Penguin.

Purdy, Jedediah. 2015. *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Ricœur, Paul. 1986. *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*. trans. George H. Taylor. New York: Columbia University Press.

Robertson, Thomas. 2012. *The Malthusian Moment: Global Population Growth and the Birth of American Environmentalism*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Schlosberg, David, and Romand Coles. 2016. "The New Environmentalism of Everyday Life: Sustainability, Material Flows and Movements." *Contemporary Political Theory* 15 (2): 160–81.

Scranton, Roy. 2015. *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization*. San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books.

Scranton, Roy. 2016. "Response to the New Nature." *Boston Review*. January 4.

Scranton, Roy. 2018. *We're Doomed, Now What? Essays on War and Climate Change*. New York: Soho.

Scranton, Roy. 2019. "No Happy Ending: On Bill McKibben's 'Falter' and David Wallace-Wells's 'The Uninhabitable Earth.'" *Los Angeles Review of Books*. June 3. https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/no-happy-ending-on-bill-mckibbens-falter-and-david-wallace-wellss-the-uninhabitable-earth/.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. 2003. "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You're so Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is about You." In *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, 123–51. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Servigne, Pablo, and Raphaël Stevens. 2020. *How Everything Can Collapse: A Manual for Our Times*. trans. Andrew Brown. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Servigne, Pablo, Raphaël Stevens, Gauthier Chapelle, and Daniel Rodary. 2020. "Deep Adaptation Opens Up a Necessary Conversation about the Breakdown of Civilisation." *Open Democracy*. August 3. https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/oureconomy/deep-adaptation-opens-necessary-conversation-about-breakdown-civilisation/.

Seymour, Richard. 2021. "Destroying the Means of Planetary Destruction: Richard Seymour in Conversation with Andreas Malm." *Salvage* (blog). June 1. https://salvage.zone/articles/destroying-the-means-of-planetary-destruction-in-conversation-with-andreas-malm/.

Stephenson, Wen. 2012. "'I Withdraw': A Talk with Climate Defeatist Paul Kingsnorth." *Grist* (blog). April 11. https://grist.org/climate-energy/i-withdraw-a-talk-with-climate-defeatist-paul-kingsnorth/.

Stetler, Harrison. 2020. "'Collapsologie': Constructing an Idea of How Things Fall Apart." *New York Review of Books* (blog). January 21. https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2020/01/21/collapsologie-constructing-an-idea-of-how-things-fall-apart/.

Suvin, Darko. 1972. "On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre." *College English* 34 (3): 372–82.

Symons, Jonathan. 2019. *Ecomodernism: Technology, Politics and the Climate Crisis*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Thompson, Allen. 2009. "Radical Hope for Living Well in a Warmer World." *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 23 (1): 43–59.

Thunberg, Greta. 2019. "'Our House Is on Fire': Greta Thunberg, 16, Urges Leaders to Act on Climate." *Guardian*. January 25. https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/jan/25/our-house-is-on-fire-greta-thunberg16-urges-leaders-to-act-on-climate.

Wallace-Wells, David. 2019. *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life after Warming*. New York: Tim Duggan Books.

Warren, Calvin L. 2015. "Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 15 (1): 215–48.

White, Damian Finbar, Alan P. Rudy, and Chris Wilbert. 2007. "Anti-Environmentalism: Prometheans, Contrarians and Beyond." In *The SAGE Handbook of Environment and Society*, eds. Jules N. Pretty, Andy Ball, Ted Benton, David R. Lee, David Orr, and Max Pfeffer, 124–41. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Whyte, Kyle. 2017. "Our Ancestors' Dystopia Now: Indigenous Conservation and the Anthropocene." In *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities*, eds. Ursula Heise, Jon Christensen, and Michelle Niemann, 206–15. New York: Routledge.

Williams, Bernard. 2005. *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*, ed. Geoffrey Hawthorn. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Williston, Byron. 2012. "Climate Change and Radical Hope." *Ethics and the Environment* 17 (2): 165–86.

Wilt, James. 2014. "Admit Defeat, Then Engage: An Interview with Paul Kingsnorth." *Geez: Contemplative Cultural Resistance*. https://geezmagazine.org/magazine/article/admit-defeat-then-engage/.

Yasin, Buğra. 2018. "Utopia as 'Genuine Progress': Adorno and the Historicity of Utopia." *Thesis Eleven* 144 (1): 13–29.