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## Climate Change: The Final Crisis Of Capital

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CLIMATE CHANGE: THE FINAL CRISIS OF CAPITAL

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MASTER'S PROGRAM IN PHILOSOPHY

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CLIMATE CHANGE: THE FINAL CRISIS OF CAPITAL

By

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THESIS

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## Chapter One: Introduction

Thus, at every step we are reminded that we by no means rule over nature like a conqueror over a foreign people, like someone standing outside nature — but that we, with flesh, blood and brain, belong to nature, and exist in its midst, and that all our mastery of it consists in the fact that we have the advantage over all other creatures of being able to learn its laws and apply them correctly.<sup>1</sup>

(Friedrich Engels, 1876)

### 1. A Pressing Issue

The end of World War Two and the dawn of the Cold War ushered the world into the age of “crisis.” First in the extra-ordinary sense as demonstrated by the shocking events of the Cuban missile crisis, or the Iranian hostage crisis. Then it became a word for the dangerous but nebulous issues that you know you should be worried about, but that no one seems to really understand like the 2008 economic crisis, or the ongoing supply chain crisis. And now it has taken on a mundane sense where every day inconveniences like forgotten paperwork, or lost luggage can put you in “crisis mode.” In daily life, as in this paragraph, the word crisis has been overused to the point of meaninglessness; it is now an adjective that can be applied to imminent nuclear annihilation equally as well as a missing expense report.

Beyond frustrating some few of us with the inaccuracy of language, the loss of the word crisis also signals a loss of the idea *crisis*. Language is the medium of thought and change in its

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<sup>1</sup> Engels, Friedrich. 1996. "The Part played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man."

usage is often a good indicator of change in general thinking, and, as such, it stands to reason that the equivocation of the existential and the mundane goes beyond mere common parlance and instead rests somewhere deeper. Proof of this is easy enough to provide with a simple thought experiment. As I am writing this, we are still in the throes of the Covid-19 pandemic, a disease which kills many and maims even more, and, for our purposes, is a perfect example of the loss of *crisis*. Imagine that as you are packing up to leave your office for the day you get an email saying that one of your colleagues has tested positive. You had sat next to them at lunch last week, but it has been about six days since you were around them and you are not symptomatic yet, but it is still too soon to be sure if you are safe. Distracted by the news, you drop your keys in a storm drain on your way to your car. It's not the end of the world since you have spares of some, and can get replacements for the others easy enough, but it is extremely inconvenient. Which of these two events dominates your worries as you wait for your ride home? I am willing to bet that the majority of people, including myself, would be more troubled by the keys than the potentially fatal virus.

It could of course be countered that the seeming disordering of priorities is merely a problem of immediacy. One happened more recently than the other and so it would naturally get a stronger reaction. I would argue that it is something more fundamental than that. Disease is a future problem, and only a possible one at that, while the immediate inconvenience is a thing of active experience. What I intend to demonstrate here by example is that it is the latter type of problems that occupy the vast majority of our thinking. The difficulty is not surprising, our mind is the outcome of evolutionary conditioning and in that context near blinding focus on the immediate problem is advantageous. However, humans have worked themselves into a position in which their long-term concerns are more often of much greater importance than the immediate ones. Nowhere is this more apparent than in true *crisis*, which is existential and abstract by nature. It is only rarely

that such events are reducible to moments and single actions (i.e. the Cuban Missile Crisis), the majority evolve slowly and outside of our direct perception (i.e. the recent Ebola outbreak); we can hardly be faulted for lacking a clear grasp on them.

But, if we do conclude that we lack the ability to concretely understand *crisis*, how then do we propose to understand the ramifications of something as large and complex as climate change? Its threats are numerous, and many have already begun their initial stages. To quote the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), “It is unequivocal that human influence has warmed the atmosphere, ocean, and land. Widespread and rapid changes in the atmosphere, ocean, cryosphere, and biosphere have occurred.”<sup>2</sup> What is represented here in sterile scientific language is the horrifying reality that with each passing year our industry renders the planet a little less inhabitable. Extreme weather events like hurricanes, snowstorms and tornados are becoming both increasingly frequent and more powerful; deserts are growing, overtaking previously arable land; and sea levels are starting to creep ever closer into the streets of coastal cities.

It is the knock-on effects of these changes that are the true killer. Disruptions in infrastructure like blackouts and floods strains our ability to provide necessities like food, medicine, and shelter. Severe weather paired with increased temperatures hampers agricultural production. And the rise of sea levels will displace billions of people as the majority of humanity lives on coastal land. These in turn will lead to a plethora of political issues, economic depressions, and an overall miserable time. If anything should be called a crisis, climate change qualifies for the label in its truest sense, and it is clear that something must be done.

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<sup>2</sup> Masson-Delmotte, et al. 2018. "Global Warming of 1.5C: Summary for Policymakers." *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*.



## **2. Selecting a Lens**

It is tempting to jump ahead to the question of what to do; however, it would be a mistake, as we have yet to address our first concern: how do we clearly understand climate crisis? What is needed is a clear view of the problem. Philosophers, as a rule, love their analytical frameworks, and I am no exception. Yet, some approaches are better than others, and so here I would like to offer a preliminary defense of my own. First and foremost, I argue that climate change is an issue of political economy. Capitalism is indisputably the hegemonic political-economic organization that governs the world today, and with that reality comes an unavoidable contradiction with the environmental stability of our planet. The matter is quite simple at its core: capitalism requires infinite expansion for stability, but the world is finite. It is the secondary and tertiary effects of this relationship that are difficult to understand, and for those I pull heavily on Marxist thought specifically that of John Bellamy Foster, Louis Althusser, and Marx himself.

Despite my strong sympathies, I will readily concede that the more “orthodox” Marxist approach feels somewhat incomplete. Critics will often note that staunch materialism ignores the more ethereal and personal elements that characterize human existence. I am dubious as to whether or not these claims apply to Marx himself, but it seems that many who claim adherence to his theory warrant such critique. Wishing to avoid that pitfall myself, I will also draw heavily on the work of phenomenologists like Sartre and critical theorists like those of the Frankfurt School to provide a psycho-social analysis of climate crisis. It is detrimental to separate the abstract idea of climate change from our lived experience of its effects. Much as Marx seems the natural answer to address questions of political economy; phenomenology seems the natural answer to address questions of experience.

A friend once accused me of being a dualist (and therefore inherently anti-Marxist) for my seeming separation of the material reality of political-economy and the supposed non-material reality of phenomenology. I understand where such a critique comes from, as I have represented my approach as “two-pronged” suggesting a division between the two methods. However, their objections also highlight a common belief that Marxism is unconcerned with inner-life. As explained by Sartre,

It is clear that this kind of materialism is not Marxist, but still it is defined by Marx: 'The materialist outlook on nature means nothing more than the conception of nature just as it is, without alien addition.' On this conception, man returns to the very heart of Nature as one of its objects and develops before our eyes in accordance with the laws of Nature, that is, as pure materiality governed by the universal laws of the dialectic.<sup>3</sup>

This approach to materialism treats all the intangible aspects of humanity as an “alien addition” to be discarded. And should one mistake Marx as one such a theorist, they fall into the all-too-common belief that Marxism is a dogmatic and reductionist view of the world.

As Sartre explicitly says and I here re-enforce, the flattening of existence by excluding what is intangible is not Marxist. Rather, if we understand phenomenology as a methodological approach focused on subjective experience, Marx himself qualifies as a practitioner. William McBride describes this argument by saying,

Marxism’s ultimate assumption is, I contend, that what is of greatest importance and value is the daily life of human beings. It takes daily life, as it is lived at

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<sup>3</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1976. *Critique of Dialectical Reason: Volume 1*.

present and as it has been lived in past historical periods, as being problematic, because its various structures have prevented, and continue to prevent, the full realization of real human possibilities. On the basis of these fundamental premises, it proceeds to generate an organized, systematic, phenomenological description of the social world in such a way as to try and uncover the hidden, underlying structures that are most important in giving the daily life of the society that is being investigated its particular characteristics<sup>4</sup>

Even tacit familiarity with his critique of capitalism will reveal Marx's concern with lived experience. Take for example the Marxist concept of alienation: The mental distress of being separated from the means and products of one's labor, and therefore their *species-essence*. The development of this idea would not be possible if Marx were guilty of the reductivist materialism he is often accused of. It could only arise from a theorist who shows great concern with the inner-life and, therefore, demonstrates the essential phenomenology of Marx.

This refined materialism is the answer to our initial problem of comprehending climate crisis, and the exploration of the understanding it provides will compose the main body of this work. Yet, the inter-related nature of Marxist theory presents us with a difficult challenge: how do we efficiently structure an essentially tangled critique?

It is not a perfect solution, but we should avoid the worst of the confusion by working like painters: beginning with the largest rough forms of the image, and then refining our analysis with each pass until it captures the smallest of details. Thus, I will decompose the argument into four sequential steps. In chapter one I will detail Marx's description of capitalism to both demonstrate

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<sup>4</sup> McBride, William. 1975. "Marxism and Phenomenology."

the inherent irrationality of the system, and also to represent the ecological critique implicit in Marxist Theory. This is the foundation of Marxist theory and represents the primary forms of our critique. In chapter two, I will examine how the ideology of neoliberal political theory is woefully unprepared to address crisis, and how its deficiencies will exacerbate the fascist and reactionary elements that are already present in liberal democracies. This chapter is concerned with the ideological outgrowth of the economic foundation: the blocky colors of our metaphorical painting. Chapter three will then break from the purely descriptive and instead focus on how to effectively address the crisis at hand. By narrowing our focus from the ideology to the group, we introduce shadows into our heretofore flat image. Finally, the project will end by examining the role of hope and despair in the face of crisis: the final highlights that bring life to the critique.

It is a serious undertaking, and I doubt that the relative brevity of my current format will allow for anything close to an exhaustive investigation. What I hope to offer in the following pages is a break from the typical language of climate discussion. Science, as the primary driver of discussion around climate change, has unintentionally converted an apocalyptic drama into a banal curiosity. Of course, I do not question the necessity of scientific discourse, but ecological crisis is not only a problem of data and experiments. Any attempt to resist the environmental abuse of capitalism will require an ideological battle, and it is on that field that philosophy is king.

## Chapter Two: How Capitalism Drives Climate Change

Through this movement [man] acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature. He develops the potentialities slumbering within nature, and subjects the play of its forces to his own sovereign power.

(Marx, Capital Volume 1 1990, 283)

### 1. Introduction

The IPCC predicts the average rise in global temperatures to reach 1.5 degrees Celsius between 2030 and 2052 if no action is taken to counteract the primary drivers of global warming.<sup>5</sup> This increase appear innocuous—1.5 degrees of temperature change would not affect a cup of tea or a pleasant spring day—but in the above context such a change is nigh apocalyptic. 1.5 degrees of warming translates to an increase in both the frequency, and intensity of severe weather like hurricanes, blizzards, and tornadoes.<sup>6</sup> 1.5 degrees of warming will raise sea levels, devastating coastal cities and ecosystems alike.<sup>7</sup> 1.5 degrees of warming will stress energy, food, and water production to the point of failure, and, in turn, the global poor will be driven from their homes as climate refugees..<sup>8</sup> 1.5 degrees of warming will even kill indirectly by increasing the range of malaria and dengue fever and turning urban centers into “heat islands,” suffocating those without proper shelter.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Masson-Delmotte, V., et al. 2018. "Global Warming of 1.5C: Summary for Policymakers." Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

*1.5 degrees of warming will be apocalyptic.*

*We are already at 1.18 degrees.*

The prognosis is paralyzing. Clearly something must be done, but how can we act without understanding the issue? Granted, we understand *how* climate change occurs—the increase in greenhouse gas emissions raises the energy capacity of the atmosphere—and we understand that the majority of that pollution is produced by industrial development. However, there is a deeper question yet left unaddressed: If we know that industry is the problem, why does it continue to grow? Finding an answer to this question is the central purpose of the first chapter. Of course, we are not without leads for the investigation; industry is fundamentally bound to economics, and capitalism is the current ideological global hegemon. Through the work of Marx, I will use the following pages to demonstrate (1) that the very logic of capitalism requires it to ceaselessly grow and expand, and (2) that this grow-or-die and drive for limitless expansion and consumption of resources is incompatible with the laws of ecology and limitations of nature, and, (3), capitalist dynamics inevitably brought about the current crisis of runaway climate change.

The bulk of this chapter is set aside to establish these claims in three steps. First: we must clearly define what capitalism is, and how it functions. Second: we need to establish a theory of biological economics—what Marxists refer to as social metabolism. Once both premises have been explored, we will then see how they function in the context of two kinds of crisis: socio-economic and environmental. I will then conclude the chapter by highlighting the ecology implicit in Marxist theory and explaining its unique advantages over other political and economic theories for our analysis of climate change.

## 2. What is Capitalism?

Despite its recent climb to global hegemony, the general public is unable to articulate what constitutes capitalism. A random sample of average United States citizens will yield an interesting (if frustrating) plethora of answers. Experience indicates that—should we make a ranked list—the most common responses would be something akin to, “when you buy and sell goods,” or in more academic terms, “the presence of a free market.” Though wrong, this is a surprisingly good guess as it at least attributes capitalism as a whole to one of its constituent parts. Further down the hypothetical list, answers will become a bit more nebulous. In conversation with the average American, capitalism is quickly revealed to be nothing more than a synonym for the vague ideal of “American spirit” or “self-reliance” in the eyes of many. Perhaps this should be unsurprising given that even well-educated people espouse the view that, “we need a healthy mix of socialism and capitalism”—a nonsensical statement unless you understand the two terms as if they were flavors or colors which can be applied with varying intensity to balance each other. In light of this, I must ask that you indulge me as I attempt to summarize in the next few pages, what Marx wrote in close to one thousand.

Economic exchange historically began with tribal societies trading regional goods or surplus resources between themselves. Marx labels these transactions as C-C (commodity-for-commodity) exchanges; or, what is more commonly known as simple bartering. However, such exchanges quickly become impractical as social structures grow in complexity and individuals become increasingly economically specialized. This in turn created quickly expanding marketplaces where it was necessary to establish a universal medium of trade which allowed for the separation of selling and buying into distinct transactions. Therefore, money (M) comes into being to allow C-C exchanges to become C-M-C exchanges. Money is “merely the reflection

thrown upon a single commodity by the relations between all other commodities.”<sup>10</sup> Historically this took the form of durable, compact, and rare commodities like precious metals because small amounts of such material objectified a great deal of value. In modernity money is no longer an object of inherent value but is instead a symbolic representation of such.

These early markets were not capitalist as their purpose was the mutual exchange of commodities to fulfill social needs. Or, as it is explained in *Capital*, “the path C-M-C proceeds from the extreme constituted by one commodity, and ends with the extreme constituted by another, which falls out of circulation and into consumption.”<sup>11</sup> At each end of the process rests the commodity. The seller exchanges the products of their labor for money which they then use to buy a different commodity which fulfills their own needs. The exchange then continues in this cyclical pattern, in which every participant contributes exchange-value to extract use-value. However, Markets begin to take on a capitalist character when someone enters into the market with the intention to make an M-C-M exchange which, “proceeds from the extreme of money and finally returns to that same extreme. Its driving and motivating force, its determining purpose, is therefore exchange-value.”<sup>12</sup> It is difficult to understate the radical nature of this transition. Whereas primitive markets harnessed the power of economic exchange to fulfill social needs, capitalist markets inverted this relationship by relegating this fulfillment to a mere byproduct of otherwise uncaring exchange.

However, as Marx notes, there seems to be little purpose in performing this new kind of exchange. If one buys a commodity and sells it again, they have simply converted money into a commodity and then back into the same amount money, where the value of each step involved in

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<sup>10</sup> Marx, Karl. 1990. *Capital Volume 1*. Pg. 184

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* Pg. 250

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*



the exchange is equivalent. To have a purpose, such exchanges must aim for the second money value to be higher than the first, and it is here that the capitalist emerges. Of course, one could simply “buy low and sell high,” but this would necessarily be an exception to the common rule of exchange. For the capitalist to acquire ever greater amounts of money he must transform his commodity so that he may sell it at a higher price. The capitalist mode of exchange is  $M-C-M'$  where  $M'$  is greater than  $M$ . If we accept that all value comes from labor, then it follows that this transformation of the intermediate commodity is carried out by and is the objectification of labor.

Thus, Marx states that the value of any object is constructed of two component parts: (1) the value of its materials and (2) the value of the labor objectified in its construction. The first is self-obvious, as the materials of any project are contained in the product or discarded as waste. If I need 10 yards of linen to make a single coat, then that finished coat in addition to its offcuts still contains the initial mass of fabric. Of course, it is not only fabric, but also contains thread, wax, and fasteners all of which must have been purchased; The coat also represents the energy of the sewing machine, the wear of the fabric shears, and even the light of the factory as all are necessary components of its production. Yet, if I simply made a pile of these parts I would not have a coat. It is the second component of value, human labor, which represents the relative values of this hypothetical pile and the actual coat; it is only by the transformative property of labor that the former may become the latter. The coat is made because for its utility, and its particular price may reflect its scarcity, but its *value* is derivative of the worker’s labor objectified in its transformation from cloth to coat. Marx succinctly states his “Labor Theory of Value” in saying that “what

exclusively determines the magnitude of the value of any article is therefore the amount of labor socially necessary...for its production.”<sup>13</sup>

The cycle of capitalism begins at first with the investment of capital (M) with which the capitalist makes two purchases. First, he purchases the tools and resources required for the transformation of the commodity—what Marxists call the means of production—which is one half of what is represented by C in our formula. He may use them himself, but in doing so his potential profit is strictly limited by his natural capacities. If the capitalist truly wishes to profit, he must also purchase a special commodity, “whose use-value possesses the peculiar property of being a source of value, whose actual consumption is therefore itself an objectification of labor, hence the creation of value.”<sup>14</sup> This commodity is labor power, and it composes the other half of C. The capitalist purchases it from the worker who enters into the marketplace without their own means of production, and, therefore, nothing to sell as a commodity except their labor. By purchasing the workers labor and setting them to the use of the means of production, the capitalist objectifies the work of the former in the transformation of the latter, raising its value and allowing it to be sold (C-M’) for a hefty profit. The worker is not compensated for the full value of their labor—if they were there would be no profit—they instead are merely paid enough to afford the resources (shelter, food, etc...) required for a socially acceptable standard of living, and then must return to work the next day to repeat the cycle. This relationship—where the capitalist privately owns the means of production and exploits the worker to profit from its development—is the formal Marxist definition of capitalism. This simplified explanation is easiest to see in the context of early

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<sup>13</sup> Marx, Karl. 1990. *Capital Volume 1*. Pg. 129

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* Pg. 270

industrialism (I will discuss the more recent mutations of capitalism in depth in chapter 2), but it would be a mistake to assume that the progress of history has since moved us past this relationship.

Yet, despite its remarkable self-preservation, Capitalism is by no means unfamiliar with difficulty. Economic crisis should be familiar to most—at time of writing the United States is currently undergoing one caused by the COVID-19 pandemic—and their periodic occurrence has been a feature of capitalism since its inception. The mechanism of these market failures is covered in this passage from *Capital Volume II*:

The volume of the mass of commodities brought into being by capitalist production is determined by the scale of this production and its needs for constant expansion, and not by a predestined ambit of supply and demand, of needs to be satisfied... Within certain bounds, the reproduction process may proceed on the same or on an expanded scale, even though the commodities ejected from it do not actually enter either individual or productive consumption. The consumption of commodities is not included in the circuit of the capital from which they emerge. As soon as the yarn is sold, for example, the circuit of the capital value represented in the yarn can begin anew, at first irrespective of what becomes of the yarn when sold. As long as the product is sold everything follows its regular course, as far as the capitalist producer is concerned. The circuit of the capital value that he represents is not interrupted.<sup>15</sup>

Explained another way, the smooth operation of capitalist exchange requires that commodities exit circulation through consumption at the same rate they are introduced by production; however,

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<sup>15</sup> Marx, Karl. 1992. *Capital Volume II*. Pg. 156

market forces push capitalists to produce more commodities than can possibly be consumed. At first this goes unnoticed, as an intermediate purchaser absorbs the excess in hopes of eventually selling it after a slight delay. Industrial capital—thus rewarded by the purchases of retail capital—continues to convert that profit to capital, increasing production, and therefore, increases the rate of overproduction. Eventually this cycle reaches a breaking point, and burdened by the excess of commodities, the circulation of the market grinds to a halt. *Without circulation there is no profit.* Thus, the capitalist then withdraws his money from the market, no longer purchasing labor and leaving many without employment. Eventually the intervention of the state is required for circulation to resume.

The severity of economic crisis has only grown with the domination of modern market economies by fictitious capital. In the third volume of *Capital* Engels writes:

...a large portion of this money-capital is always necessarily purely fictitious, that is, a title to value – just as paper money. In so far as money functions in the circuit of capital, it constitutes indeed, for a moment, money-capital; ... it exists only in the form of claims to capital. With the assumption made, the accumulation of these claims arises from actual accumulation, that is, from the transformation of the value of commodity-capital, etc., into money; but nevertheless, the accumulation of these claims or titles as such differs from the actual accumulation from which it arises...<sup>16</sup>

In essence, fictitious capital is the borrowing of capital leveraged against future profitability; its most common instantiation in modern capitalism is the stock market. When a

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<sup>16</sup> Marxists Internet Archive. n.d. Encyclopedia of Marxism: Fi.

company sells stock they do so to raise immediate capital, and the purchaser of that stock expects a dividend from the valorization of that capital. Yet, despite money changing hands, the corporation's acquisition of capital is detached from any extant material objectification of labor: no value has actually been created, instead it has only been promised. Thus, the accessibility of capital is contingent not only on the continued profitability, but, moreover an *increase in the rate of profitability*. As an investor, one only invests in stocks if they indicate better returns than the direct exploitation of labor would at the given moment: stagnation is as problematic as decline.

This framework will be intimately familiar to any who lived through the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. Though it is complicated by the institutions of financial investment, the basic progression of the crisis begins with the banks offering mortgages to individuals that were unable to make the payments. Called subprime loans, these investments were unlikely to generate returns individually, but they were sold by the banks as packages to secondary investors who, unfamiliar with the instability of the assets, expected to turn a healthy profit. Their expected returns would never come, and eventually, now aware of the loss, they quickly offloaded the toxic investments for pennies-on-the-dollar. Accordingly, the banks who had originally sold the mortgages now lacked the capital to offer credit to other businesses; the entire network of fictions capital collapsed overnight, devastating the global economy, and requiring massive government bailouts to resume operation.

While the above discussion dissects capitalism in the context of a singular relation between the working and ownership class, common experience demonstrates that this relationship is more complicated. There is not a single unified capitalist class but rather many competing capitalists. Whereas the medieval present would get their bread from a single village baker, modern shoppers are inundated with an overwhelming number of choices which all slightly differ in price, quality,

and image. Each choice represents a competing company struggling for a larger share of the market and its profits.

Though marketing, price fixing, and a myriad of other stratagems have been developed in the course of capitalist conflict, it is increasing the efficiency of production that remains chief among them. As explained by Marx,

[Efficiency] is just another expression for the progressive envelopment of the social productivity of labor, which is shown by the way that the growing use of machinery and fixed capital generally enables more raw and ancillary materials to be transformed into products in the same time by the same number of workers, i.e., with less labor.<sup>17</sup>

As we have established above, the value of a given commodity is derived from the labor objectified in its production; thus, an increase in the efficiency of production allows the capitalist to sell the same product for less than their competitors. When the two are of comparable quality, it is the cheaper product that will typically win out, garnering a windfall of profit for the capitalist as their competitors scramble to also increase the efficiency of their own factories. Overtime, the competition of the market creates and explosion in the productive capacity of the capitalist society. The drive for efficiency is the highest merit of capitalism, but it also contains the seeds of its own self destruction, and, as we will see in the following sections, the destruction of the natural world.

As was first observed by liberal economists like Ricardo and Smith the rate of profit has a tendency to fall overtime; however, it was not until Marx that this phenomenon was explained by

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<sup>17</sup> Marx, Karl. 1993. *Capital Volume III*. Pg. 318

way of the increase in efficiency.<sup>18</sup> The logic is quite straightforward. If less labor (variable capital) is objectified in a given individual product, then a greater degree of its value is compromised by the means of production (constant capital). Profit may only be derived from the former, and its relative diminution in comparison to the later means that less profit may be derived from the sale of the individual commodity; thus, overtime the forces of the market result in a decrease of the *rate* of profit even if the magnitude of labor remains constant. As Marx explains it,

The same rate of surplus-value, therefore, and an unchanged level of exploitation of labor, is expressed in a falling rate of profit, as the value of the constant capital and hence the total capital grows with the constant capital's material volume.<sup>19</sup>

Let us now return to our previous bakery example. If capitalist A uses a traditional oven and employs 10 workers (paid \$10/day) to make 100 loaves of bread a day, then each loaf contains 1/10<sup>th</sup> or \$1 of labor cost. If capitalist B uses a new automated bread machine that can be operated by 2 workers paid the same to produce the same 100 loaves, then each loaf contains 1/50<sup>th</sup> or 20 cents of labor cost. If B and A both exploit their workers at a rate of 100% (making a profit equal to the labor cost) then B may sell his bread much cheaper than A, but whereas A was making \$1 of profit per item, B is only making \$0.20 or 1/5<sup>th</sup> the profit. By increasing the efficiency of production, the rate of profit falls.

Of course, B has a few solutions to this problem. For one, B may increase the price of his bread to be only slightly cheaper than A. Let us say that A sells his bread for \$4, where \$2 is the cost of the ingredients, \$1 is labor and \$1 is profit. B then sells his bread for \$3.90, where the ingredients are the same, but \$0.20 is for labor and \$1.70 is for profit. B then has a higher rate of

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<sup>18</sup> Marx, Karl. 1993. *Capital Volume III*. Pg. 319

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* Pg. 317

profit than A; however, as soon as A acquires one of those new bread machines, he may set the price at \$3.80, prompting B to move to \$3.70, and so on until the price war stabilizes at \$2.40, or the original rate of exploitation of 100%. Another approach B might take, is to lower the wages of his workers to \$5/day, and therefore double his rate of profit.<sup>20</sup> Yet, the workers can only stay employed as long as they can continue to labor, and so they must be paid enough to house, feed, and care for themselves, or they will seek other employment; thus, labor costs have a minimum point beyond which continued access to labor is unstable. In either case, efficiency unavoidably results in a decline in the rate of profit.

The most common solution to the problem is the expansion of production. If B goes from making 100 loaves of bread a day to 500, then—even with a reduced rate of profit—he still creates \$100 dollars in profit a day. However, this only mitigates the effects of the tendency, and does not eliminate it. Each individual product is still less profitable than the previous. A's original production created \$1 in profit for every \$4 spent, B's production—even if larger in magnitude—generates \$0.20 in profit for every \$2.40 spent; A's rate of profit is 0.25, B's is 0.08. As efficiency increases each investment must be larger to generate the same return, or, as Marx describes it,

As the process of production and accumulation advances, therefore, the mass of surplus labor that can be and is appropriated must grow, and with it too the absolute mass of profit appropriated by the social capital. But the same laws of production and accumulation mean that the value of the constant capital increases along with its mass, and progressively more quickly than that of the variable portion of capital which is converted into living labor. The same laws,

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<sup>20</sup> Marx, Karl. 1993. *Capital Volume III*. Pg. 342



therefore, produce both a growing absolute mass of profit for the social capital, and a falling rate of profit.<sup>21</sup>

On a long enough timeline, the rate of profit grows ever closer to zero, rendering market exchange (M-C-M') tautological, and halting the cycle capitalist exchange. The structure of capitalism, in an effort to avoid this slow death, seeks to constantly expand the output of production—offsetting the falling rate of profit by increasing its absolute magnitude. Marx notes that this constant pressure to evade death results in a feedback loop of development, quote:

The course of the development of capitalist production and accumulation requires increasingly large-scale labor processes and hence increasingly large dimensions and increasingly large advances of capital for each individual establishment. The growing concentration of capitals (accompanied at the same time, though in lesser degree, by a growing number of capitalists): is therefore, both one of its material conditions and one of the results that it itself produces.<sup>22</sup>

To compete the capitalist must become efficient, but to offset that efficiency capitalism as a whole must grow. If that growth were to stop, the system would collapse upon itself like a deflating balloon. Capitalism can do nothing but grow or die.

### **3. Production is Social-Metabolism.**

So far, our discussion has avoided the other critical component of value. We have demonstrated that the value of an object in any society—not just a capitalist one—is the objectification of human labor in material form. However, it is also vital to acknowledge that this material must come at

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<sup>21</sup> Marx, Karl. 1993. *Capital Volume III*. Pg. 325

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

first from the Earth, and all subsequent transformation can be traced back to its extraction. As it is explained by Marx,

Labor is, first of all a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates, and controls the metabolism between himself and nature. He confronts the materials of nature as a force of nature. He sets in motion the natural forces which belong to his own body, his arms, legs, head, and hands, in order to appropriate the materials of nature in a form adapted to his own needs.<sup>23</sup>

This conception of the labor process as a metabolic function is another key piece to understanding our current environmental crisis. For Marx, this concept represented a “concrete way of expressing the notion of the alienation of nature (and its relation to the alienation of labor) that was central to his critique.”<sup>24</sup> In addition, it supports our current efforts by providing a powerful analytic lens.

The use of ‘metabolism’ in this case may seem peculiar, but it hints at a deeper aspect of the relationship between man and nature. Despite all rejection and insecurity, humans cannot avoid the reality that they are fundamentally animals. When a colony of ants cultivates fungi or a beaver builds a dam, we recognize the resulting change in the environment as natural. Our construction of buildings and tilling of the soil is, on the contrary, labeled as anything but. Yet, under thoughtful consideration, it becomes quickly apparent that our actions share the same motivations that drive ants and beavers: humans are living things and require the means of substance. The actions of labor are thus metabolic not merely in the sense that they are consumptive, but also in that they represent the actions of life. Sociologist John Bellamy Foster describes this Marxist conception social

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<sup>23</sup> Marx, Karl. 1990. *Capital Volume 1*. Pg. 283

<sup>24</sup> Foster, John Bellamy. 2000. *Marx's Ecology*.

metabolism and “its attendant notions of material exchanges and regulatory action,” as expressing the “human relation to nature as one that encompassed both ‘nature-imposed conditions,’ and the capacity of human beings to affect this process.”<sup>25</sup>

The analogy continues to hold even if we take it further by considering a society as if it were itself a single organism. In the biological sciences, metabolic processes can be separated into two opposing categories. Anabolic processes are those that build complex molecules and structures out of simpler subunits; whereas catabolic processes are those that decompose the complex into the simple. A straightforward example would be the construction of our muscles. First sources of protein from our diet must be catabolized by the digestive system into amino acids, which are then used by the anabolic action of ribosomes to produce new protein structures. The same relationship is true of a society. Extractive industries gather raw materials by catabolizing natural reserves through logging, mining, and farming. Those raw materials are, in turn, anabolized into new forms of use-value: becoming the skeleton that is infrastructure, the skin of shelter, or the social muscles represented by tools. Marx conceived the analogy in a similar fashion as is evidenced by his description of both tools and workers—which are both derived from the resources of nature—as “organs” of economic production.<sup>26</sup>

Our conception of metabolism as the relationship between two distinct but conjoined categories of bio-chemical reactions also implicates a notion of balance and circularity. All actions of biology are, at first, a combination of chemical reactions, and everything that is constructed is eventually broken-down only to be reconstructed again. Therefore, the word metabolism represents the synthesis of the dialectic between destruction and construction; that is to say, a

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<sup>25</sup> Foster, John Bellamy. 2000. *Marx's Ecology*.

<sup>26</sup> Marx, Karl. 1990. *Capital Volume 1*. Pg. 494

balanced cycle. Climate change is the “symptom” of a metabolic imbalance between capitalism and the environment. In the individual human example, an imbalance of this type may be observed in the case of starvation. An extended period of caloric deficit deprives the internal metabolic functions of necessary raw materials, not allowing it to continue its life-giving cycle. The body will then compensate by slowing the overall rate of reaction until more resources are available, or should the deprivation continue, it will cannibalize itself. Historically, the social metabolism displays no such controls, and its problems are not as simple as lacking necessary resources. Instead, climate change is the result of an intentional and unsustainable increase in the rate of social metabolism beyond what it is possible for the surrounding environment to support.

It is a common mistake to assume that such an imbalance is uniquely characteristic of capitalism, but examples can be found that date back to prehistory. The hunting of prehistoric tribal societies in Eurasia resulted in devastating environmental trauma. As author Kirkpatrick Sale notes in his book on the subject, “after some 8000 years—by roughly 10,000 years ago—100 percent of the animals over 2200 pounds, the large mammals in the mammoth family, were extinct in Eurasia and the Americas, as were 76 per cent of the mid-sized animals... and 41 per cent of smaller ones.”<sup>27</sup> Comparable results can also be observed in those early people's use of fire to conduct primitive agriculture by burning established plants to encourage an increased growth of edible species.<sup>28</sup> These actions represent our species first steps into the unbridled expansion of social metabolism through the development of human domination. Sale writes that the “psychological effects” of such newfound power must, “have been immense, conferring on these people a sense

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<sup>27</sup> Sale, Kirkpatrick. 2006. *After Eden: The Evolution of Human Domination*. Pg. 90

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* Pg. 25

of power over their environment that when coupled with their newfound skills at hunting and fishing, must eventually have led them to a new perception of their uniqueness in the world.”<sup>29</sup>

We can again see examples of this phenomenon in the actions of the earliest city states. As Engels wrote in his 1876 essay *The Part played by Labor in the Transition from Ape to Man*, “The people who, in Mesopotamia, Greece, Asia Minor and elsewhere, destroyed the forests to obtain cultivable land, never dreamed that by removing along with the forests the collecting centers and reservoirs of moisture they were laying the basis for the present forlorn state of those countries.”<sup>30</sup> Material wealth in these early societies, came again at the expense of their surrounding environments. Additionally, the actions of these city states indicate that market systems—even primitive ones—encourage the expansion of resource exploitation. The devastation of these lands left deeper scars than that of their prehistoric predecessors because the productivity of their labor was dramatically more developed. Whereas tribal societies with stone tools took thousands of years to inflict injury on the natural world, the organized force of the city-state delivered through the cutting edges of metal tools traumatized its surroundings in merely a few hundred.

Taken in concert, these two examples allow us to extrapolate a general principle: It is the historical development of productive forces that governs the rate of social metabolism. Capitalism and its close ties to the advent of industrialism represents an unprecedented evolution in the efficacy of labor. Marx asserts the “correctness of the law discovered by Hegel, in his logic, that at a certain point merely quantitative differences pass over by a dialectical inversion into qualitative distinctions,” and this law makes its presence clear in our case.<sup>31</sup> New tools and machines have made the work of one person equivalent to what was once that of hundreds. The

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<sup>29</sup> Sale, Kirkpatrick. 2006. *After Eden: The Evolution of Human Domination*. Pg. 25

<sup>30</sup> Engels, Friedrich. 1996. "The Part played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man."

<sup>31</sup> Marx, Karl. 1990. *Capital Volume I*. Pg. 423

fundamental difference between us and the tribal hunter is that our hour of labor is a significantly more powerful than theirs. This distinction makes itself known in the subconscious sense that we hold a greater power over the world around us. Thus, capitalism both does and does not represent a unique instantiation of social metabolism. Its basic impetus to over consume predates the evolution of modern humans, but the degradation of the environment it drives is so overwhelming that it the defining factor of our current epoch—the Anthropocene.<sup>32</sup>

A prime example of capitalism’s destructive powers can be seen in its reckless usage of fossil fuels. Coal—the primary fuel of global power production—formed when logs from the Carboniferous Period (roughly 350-300 million years ago) were subsumed into the Earth’s crust and, as a result of extreme heat and pressure, became deposits of condensed carbon (similar processes give rise to oil and natural gas). The result is a dense fuel source that generates a staggering amount of both energy and gaseous waste when burned. The first of these products is incredibly useful for driving the engines of industry, and its relative abundance in England was a primary factor in the start of the industrial revolution. The second of these products, however, is the primary driver of our current predicament. The resulting abundance of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere leads to greater retention of solar energy, this in turn leads to higher average global temperatures and increasingly violent weather. Compounding the problem, fossil fuels are only reproduced on geological timescales, and so their social-metabolic consumption is inherently impossible to balance with environmental limitations.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> The Anthropocene is an unofficial and somewhat controversial label for the current geological period and is defined by the rapid changes in the environment (mass extinction, global warming, etc....) which result from human activity.

<sup>33</sup> The evolution of bacteria that digest lignin at around the end of the carboniferous period means that coal will never reform again.

Dubbing it “Fossil Capital,” author Andreas Malm explains the current paradigm of production as follows,

What do we mean by ‘the fossil economy’? A simple definition would be: an economy of self-sustaining growth predicated on the growing consumption of fossil fuels, and therefore generating a sustained growth in emissions of carbon dioxide. Roughly synonymous with ‘business-as-usual’ in the lexicon of climate politics, this, we submit, is the main driver of global warming. It first appeared during the industrial Revolution, whose great historical feat was to inaugurate an era of ‘self-sustaining growth’ meaning a process of growth that was not episodic, evanescent, broken off after a brief efflorescence, but persisted and unremitting, a secular progression propelled by its own inner forces.<sup>34</sup>

Fossil Capitalism is a wonderfully descriptive name for this relationship as it could not possibly exist without the combustion of prehistoric carbon. As seen above, fossil fuels are the transformed remains of previously organic materials, but the energy contained in those organisms is sourced at first from the sun. Hence when Engels makes mention of solar heat, he is alluding to the geological energetics of fossil fuel production, demonstrating that mere decades after the industrial revolution—and fewer yet since the development of modern chemistry—it was possible to form a cogent and purely thermodynamic critique of capital. Yet, despite one hundred and fifty years of foresight, the forces of capital still pursued the exploitation of fossil fuels.

Nineteenth century critiques of fossil capitalism were not only limited to the field of chemistry. For example, any reader who has taken an introductory biology class will be familiar

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<sup>34</sup> Malm, Andreas. 2016. *Fossil Capital*.

with the pepper moth: the archetypal example of Darwinian natural selection. In an 1891 study conducted by British biologist J. W. Tutt, it was observed that individuals of the species *Biston betularia* were increasingly dark in color.<sup>35</sup> Tutt demonstrated that populations of pepper moths around factories had developed this new coloration as an adaptation to the increasing presence of industrial pollution (primarily in the form of ash) lowering the effectiveness of their historically light grey camouflage. Tutt labeled the phenomenon “industrial melanism,” and in doing so drew a clear link between the exploitation of fossil fuels and environmental mutation. Thus, to say that fossil capitalism is only now becoming aware of its consequences is unintentional apologetics. A glance to the scientific literature of the industrial revolution, reveals that the effects of industrial pollution, and the in-sustainability of fossil fuel-based production were readily apparent from the beginning.

A similar example can be seen in the destruction of soil fertility by agriculture in the United States. Westward expansion through North America was primarily conducted by colonial farmers looking to claim what they considered “uninhabited” land. Those that settled in the Great Plains had found a seemingly unlimited expanse of flat fertile soil perfect for agricultural exploitation. Mechanization soon followed revolutionized the speed and intensity of the food production, and the local environment had become unstable. Topsoil, depleted of moisture and no longer cemented by native grasses, quickly began to erode giving rise to the dramatic sweeping storms of the dustbowl. More recent analysis shows that the area has lost roughly a third of its fertile soil and increasing use of chemical fertilizers is only accelerating the issue.<sup>36</sup> Here again we should be unsurprised, Marx (through his study of Liebig’s work on soil chemistry) predicted the occurrence

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<sup>35</sup> Cook, L M, and I J Saccheri. 2012. "The peppered moth and industrial melanism: evolution of a natural selection case study."

<sup>36</sup> Thaler, Evan A., Isaac J. Larsen, and Qian Yu. 2021. "The Extent of Soil Loss Across the US Corn Belt."



of such events, as can be seen in his discussion of the metabolic rift between town and country.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, collapse of this ecosystem would devastate world food production—especially of wheat, corn, and soy—thus the gluttonous social-metabolism of capital is obvious here as well.

#### **4. The Inherent Impossibility of a “Sustainable Capitalism”**

Where capitalist theory comes into contact with material reality, we may observe that the two are logically incompatible; the infinite growth of productive capacity demanded by the ceaseless pursuit of profit, is essentially contradictory with the limitations of a finite ecology. Yet, recognition of the contradiction has, so far, been insufficient motivation to establish alternatives; however, this does not mean that the oncoming crisis should be taken lightly. To explicitly justify my concern about climate change I now turn to show both the severity of the problem, and, furthermore, to demonstrate that it is an unavoidable outcome of capitalist production.

As demonstrated in section 2, by either stagnation or collapse, the failure to grow makes a business vulnerable to predation by the competition. Returning to volume one of *Capital*, Marx summarizes:

The development of capitalist production makes it necessary constantly to increase the amount of capital laid out in a given industrial undertaking, and competition subordinates every individual capitalist to the immanent laws of capitalist production, as external and coercive laws. It compels him to keep extending his capital, so as to preserve it, and he can only extend it by means of progressive accumulation.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Foster, John Bellamy. 2000. *Marx's Ecology*.

<sup>38</sup> Marx, Karl. 1990. *Capital Volume 1*. Pg. 739

To survive each capitalist must continually elevate their rate of profit to resist consumption by their competition, and, as we have demonstrated above, profit may only be derived from the exploitation of labor. Thus, by the competition of the market, survival requires an increase in the *rate* or *amount* of labor exploitation. An increase in the rate of exploitation is accomplished by lowering wages or lengthening the working day; an increase in the magnitude of exploitation requires the expansion of the means of production. In turn, both these changes require an associated increase in the exploitation of natural resources, as expanded productive capacity only matters if it has access to materials in which to objectify labor value. Taken together we arrive at one definite conclusion: the continued function of capitalism requires an unceasing growth in the despoliation of natural resources. It is here that the second type of crisis (environmental crisis) originates.

In the previous section I established two premises. First: the resources of the natural world are inherently finite; this limitation may be absolute as it is with precious metals or fossil fuels (which are not meaningfully replenished on a human timescale), or it may be capacitive as it is with the resiliency of agricultural soil (which can be continually exploited if restricted by the rate of natural restoration). Second: the interaction between productive forces and the natural world takes the form of a consumptive social metabolism. Taken together, we may see that their function in environmental crisis is similar to that of the market in economic crisis, as social metabolism represents a cyclical exchange between human societies and their surrounding environment. Crisis occurs when the social metabolism oversteps the reproductive limitations of the natural world, and, now, left without the materials it requires, its operations cannot meet the demands of humanity. As Malm explains it,

Capital is quantitative in nature: thus it recognizes no end point. It reconverts the profit from the first circuit into more labor power and means of production

for the next, moving on relentlessly through reinvestment, ‘expanded reproduction’ or simply *accumulation of capital*; it resumes production on a larger scale, and on a larger scale again, so that the [metabolism] ‘changes into a spiral. For every consecutive circuit, capital will ceteris paribus appropriate greater chunks of nature.’<sup>39</sup>

The incessant expansion of production required to preserve the function of capitalism will necessarily drive the exploitation of natural resources beyond this concrete limit, which, admittedly, is a rather banal way to describe the protracted and indirect murder of millions by rendering vast swaths of the Earth inhospitable to human life.

We have already discussed multiple examples of social-metabolic imbalance, but now that we have established an explicit theory of environmental crisis, I think it will be expedient to develop another, where the mechanism at play is more readily apparent: the collapse of global fisheries.

From the years 1951 to 1999 the revenue gathered from global fishing grounds fell 95%, as over-exploited fisheries provided smaller and lower quality harvests.<sup>40</sup> The cause of this decline is twofold. Most direct are the effects of environmentally destructive overfishing which has devastated both freshwater and marine populations of large fish. Trawling (the primary method of industrial fishing) is done by dragging enormous nets along the seafloor, and not only do these nets harvest indiscriminately, but they also destroy the topographical features that those exploited fisheries need to reproduce. Indirectly, climate change has raised the temperature and acidity of

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<sup>39</sup> Malm, Andreas. 2016. *Fossil Capital*.

<sup>40</sup> Sethi, Suresh A, Trevor A Branch, Reg Watson, and Jim Kitchell. 2010. "Global fishery development patterns are driven by profit but not trophic level."

the oceans; this, in turn, reduces the amount of dissolved oxygen and encourages the growth of algae blooms which reduce available nutrients. Thus, the microscopic species that form the foundation of the marine food web, and, by extension, the rest of the trophic structure are facing a serious threat. Current research on the biodiversity of marine ecosystems has projected that this combination of fishing, and climate pressures will result in “the global collapse of all taxa currently fished by the mid-21<sup>st</sup> century,” specifically 2048 by their model.<sup>41</sup> In addition to the abject horror of such destruction is the associated famine it will cause for the billions of people who rely on those fish as a vital pillar of their diet.

Despite the totalizing suffering implicated by the possibility of global fishery collapse, nearly every article you will find on the subject contains some mention of the *economic damage* it will cause. It is by no means limited to this topic alone; the literature around any crisis contains some gesture to the money that will be lost. In this seeming disregard for the *real problems* of crisis there is the indication of a deeper connection: economics is emergent from social metabolism, and thus, a crisis of the later will inevitably result in a crisis of the former. Thus, in the case of climate crisis, we may recombine the two as the product of one prime contradiction: capitalism cannot its need for reconcile infinite expansion with the finite bounds of nature.

Sustainability, by its simplest definition, may only be claimed by systems that can operate continuously without fundamental change, and, as such, it cannot be a valid description of capitalism. Even in the absence of outside limitations, the internal logic of markets is broken, and capitalist circulation requires external intervention to maintain its movement. When placed in the context of a finite environment, that irrationality becomes apocalyptic. Thus, our conclusion is

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<sup>41</sup> Worm, Boris, Edward B. Barbier, Nicola Beaumont, J. Emmett Duffy, Carl Folke, Benjamin S. Halpern, Jeremy B. C. Jackson, et al. 2006. "Impacts of Biodiversity Loss on Ocean Ecosystem Services."

decisive: There is not, and there cannot be, a sustainable capitalism. Green capitalism, market-based environmentalism, and all other half measures will be inadequate; the problem is fundamental and cannot be solved without building something new. As long as growth continues unchecked, we will slide ever closer to environmental catastrophe. If tomorrow we magically reduced global carbon emissions to zero, the degradation of topsoil would threaten agricultural collapse. If not that, then the growing shortage of clean fresh water would, the proliferation of micro-plastic pollution, or the collapse of ocean ecosystems would be nearby to take its place. All these problems require the regulation or outright cessation of social-metabolic growth, a solution that cannot co-exist with capitalism.

## **5. Marxist Ecology**

The role of capitalist ideology in our current institutions will be the focus of Chapter 2, and the work of replacing those institutions will be the focus of Chapter 3; but first, I think it is critical to briefly reassert the value of the Marxist analysis in the context of climate change.

First, let us address the common mischaracterization of Marx as an unrepentant industrial modernist. The conclusion is understandable on two accounts: historic and theoretical.

Historically, the largest explicitly Marxist projects, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and the Communist Party of China, have both made rapid industrialization of their respective economies a core tenant of their domestic policy. At a passing glance, both appear to be the dogmatic pursuit of industrialism without environmental concern, but each, in their own way, is the logical result of frank material analysis. Of course, we may criticize both, but let us not forsake reality by way of that criticism.

The logic is more easily seen in the case of the U.S.S.R. as rapid industrialization was critical to surviving enforced self-reliance. Especially in the postindustrial United State, it is incredibly easy to forget that the mass outsourcing of production is a recent phenomenon, and that, for most of human history, the nearly all production was preformed domestically. Only in the relative stability the relative stability following World War Two, has it been possible for developed nations to globalize their economies, move production to the global south, and reorient domestic industry around the service, and financial economies. The U.S.S.R. was forcibly excluded from such developments by economic isolation. The “iron curtain” is often construed as a barrier against information, but it was more so a barrier against economic development. What the U.S.S.R. needed it had to produce, and the demands of the modern state it aspired to be could only be met by the infrastructure of industrial development. This deficit of productive capacity was only further exacerbated by the destruction the Nazi armies wrought on the major industrial centers of Russia, which still had yet to completely overcome the semi-feudal conditions of their pre-revolution existence. All told, the Stalinist doctrine’s dogged pursuit of industrialization should not be a surprise to the student of history.

The same explanation is applicable to the Chinese Communists of the early revolution, but, history indicates that the majority of industrial development post-dates the economic liberalization of China. The policies of Deng Xiaoping have been contentious. For the western powers they indicated the failure or collapse of Chinese communism; for many Marxists they signaled a betrayal of the revolution. Yet, I think both are idealistic reactions. The Chinese communists were keen students of the Soviet project, and, according to their literature, blamed the failure of their northern neighbors on the pressures of economic isolation. Isolation, however, could be avoided by opening China to foreign investment, and, by accepting foreign industry, China has acquired a

staggering degree of productive force. Furthermore, the importance of Chinese manufacturing in global economics also functions as protection against economic warfare. As can be clearly seen by the United States few skirmishes, a trade war with China has become an unwinnable prospect. Yet, Chinese industrialization is still seen as environmentally destructive, and this critique is not misplaced; however, it ignores one critical fact: what was outsourced to China may well have been outsourced to India or Singapore. The expansion of this industry would have happened regardless, its location in China does not make it any more or less destructive in the global context.

On theoretical grounds, one may read Marx as an industrialist by confusing his *descriptive* account of historical development as *prescriptive*. It is true that he places industrial capitalism as a precondition to socialism, but this is fundamentally an observation of historical trends. It is simply a fact of history that economies tend to progress in similar patterns from the dialectical evolution of productive forces. The village becomes a city, the market requires currency, and capitalism is intrinsically linked to industrialism. That is simply a description of history. The introduction of prescriptivism comes when one reads Marx too similarly to Hegel. In the Hegelian dialectic, the progress of history is teleological, and each development represents a more perfect objectification of the ideal. In contrast Marx's conception is evolutionary. History is the outcome of natural forces interacting and society grows in adaptation to its environment.<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore, the anti-ecology reading of Marx—as championed by theorists like Ted Benton—presupposes that industry is inherently contradictory with environmental stability, which is itself a reduction of the issue.<sup>43</sup> Yes, it is true that *our current industry* is environmentally destructive, but, as demonstrated above, its un-sustainability is not because it is industry: *it is*

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<sup>42</sup> Althusser, Louis. 1969. *For Marx*.

<sup>43</sup> Benton, Ted. 1989. "Marxism and Natural Limits: An Ecological Critique and Reconstruction."

*because it is capitalist.* There is a possible industrial economy build on renewable energy and need based production that can operate in balance with the limitations of the natural world. It is the commodity economy, and it's ever-expanding pursuit of profit that creates environmental harm.

A fair reading of Marx's own writing reveals an explicit concern with ecology. For example, the concept of social metabolism that we have already discussed could only come from a theorist deeply concerned with the interactions of humans and their environments. While it is not presented in the environmentalist language, we are familiar with, Marx's description implies the same concepts of balance and responsibility. Engels anthropological work also shows a nuanced view on the development of productive forces. John Bellamy Fosters book *Marx's Ecology*, also highlights that Marx was a devoted student of German biochemist Justus Freiherr von Liebig, and that the influence of his then novel science is evident in *Capital* when Marx describes the growing division between urban industrialism and rural agrarianism.<sup>44</sup> <sup>45</sup> Ecology is, and always will be essentially an issue of economics; thus Marx, as one of the great economists, is a natural choice for our investigation.

Yet the reduction of Marxist theory to mere economics is intellectually dishonest, as within the corpus of writing produced by Marx and his intellectual decedents there is a wealth of social, historical, and scientific knowledge that is indispensable when dealing with the modern world. I may well assert that the problem is fundamentally economic, but the effects of climate change will not be so tightly constrained. Marxist history allows us to see the progression of the dialectic between man and nature not just at the current moment, but as traceable to the origins of human

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<sup>44</sup> Foster, John Bellamy. 2000. *Marx's Ecology*.

<sup>45</sup> Regrettably, the aims and restrictions of this project require us to only briefly deal with the ecological character implicit in Marx. Though, even if I had the time to cover the topic, I could not do a better job than Foster already has. For readers interested in this side of Marx I implore you to read the book; it has been incredibly helpful for my own study of Marxist theory.



society. Marxist sociology allows us to understand the reflections of economics in political policy, and therefore holds some predictive power. Marx's work is more important now than it has ever been. Capitalism has pushed us to the edge of apocalypse, and we will find the beginnings of a solution in the work of its greatest critic.

## Chapter Three: Capitalist Realism and the Ideology of Eco-Fascism

“Friedrich Engels once said: “Bourgeois society stands at the crossroads, either transition to socialism or regression into barbarism.” What does “regression into barbarism” mean to our lofty European civilization? Until now, we have all probably read and repeated these words thoughtlessly, without suspecting their fearsome seriousness.”

(Luxemburg, 1915)

### 1. Introduction

“Socialism or Barbarism!” was the rallying cry of the German Communist Party (KPD) as they struggled for control of the pre-war streets, and—as history shows—it was a prophetic slogan indeed. Rosa Luxemburg had noted in her 1915 publication of the *Junius Pamphlet* how the structures of imperialism had brought the major powers of the Western world into the then unprecedented conflict of World War One;<sup>46</sup> the confusing web of international alliances, colonial exploitation, and newly industrialized militaries, which were now necessitated by the increasing demands of capital, had heightened the tensions in Europe beyond any hope of stability. With one small push the weapons of foreign domination were turned inwards; the “bloody sword of genocide [had] brutally tilted the scale toward the abyss of misery.”<sup>47</sup> This haunting lesson would be quickly repeated, as economic crisis in Germany only intensified the long-standing political turmoil which plagued the country. And, when the fascists of the National Socialist German Workers’ Party

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<sup>46</sup> Luxemburg, Rosa. 1915. "The Junius Pamphlet."

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

(NSDAP) eventually triumphed over the KPD, the “barbarism” of the resulting Second World War reinforced the principle beyond all doubt.

The eventuality of both wars was guaranteed by the inability of capitalism to avoid crisis. World War One represented a crisis of competition between imperial nations, as the growing hunger of industrialization required the dominant powers of Europe to seek new materials abroad. World War Two resulted from a crisis of economics. In the interwar period, hyper-inflation devastated the German economy, pushing the country to lash out against any enemies—internal or external—that it perceived as responsible for its misery. Yet, our crisis is different; why should we think that climate change is analogous with either of the above? Granted, the particulars are quite different; however, this question is slightly misguided. In each case the specifics of the crisis determined the character of the reaction, and this holds true in our case—I am by no means arguing that climate change will result in an imminent World War. Rather, by using the World Wars, it is possible to illustrate a particularly dramatic example of the general principle: capitalist crisis results in systemic violence against both nature and humanity.

Just as in 1914, and again in 1939, we are now standing at the crossroads between two alternatives: 1.) We can move past capitalism (or at least mitigate its worst practices) or 2.) We can suffer the results of our inaction. In phrasing it as such, I doubt that I have preserved any illusion of ambiguity as to my preference, but academic rigor requires a clear analysis of both options. The first, of course, presents its own issues, and the specifics will need in-depth consideration. But for now, we will set that discussion aside for the chapter three. First, I will use the following pages to make a case against inaction. As it stands, our current economic organization—which we will refer to as neoliberalism—contains all the seeds of a nascent fascist movement; seeds which will readily germinate in the turmoil of ecological crisis. I take it as self-

evident that this outcome would best be avoided—I do not think it is controversial to claim that fascism is *unpleasant*—but it is contentious to claim that its necessary conditions are already present in liberal-capitalism. As such my case against inaction rests in a proof of the latter.

The argument will be undertaken in four main steps. First, we will explore how modern neoliberal capitalism arose out of the historical industrial form as it is described in chapter one. The primary contradictions present in the latter still persist now, but they have taken on a novel expression, as a result of broader historical trends. Then I will discuss how neoliberalism weakens the capacity of the state to address crisis by privatization, and how this mentality affects us on the individual level. Following this, I will closely examine the base-superstructure relation that explains how economics can become ideologies. Finally, I will conclude the chapter by dissecting the modern economic approach to identify the specific constituent parts that are likely to form the core of a new fascism.

## **2. Development of Neoliberalism**

In the previous chapter we saw that capitalism seeks to constantly expand its reach, and therefore, it will eventually come into conflict with the limits of the natural world; however, before it reaches those lengths, it is first restrained by the borders of the nation state. In any given country, there is a strictly limited stockpile of natural resources available to the industry of that state, and often, what is present is not of an ideal composition. Hence, expanding industry must look beyond the limitations of borders for greater access to resources. Historical examples of this behavior far pre-date capitalism. The Roman Empire dominated the ancient world, garnering vast sums of wealth in the form of slaves and raw materials. The Spanish monarchy was motivated by the demands of mercantilism—the odd half-step between feudalism and capitalism proper—to plunder the new

world in a desperate search for gold. In each case, the cravings of productive forces pushed the state to reach outwards in pursuit of satiety.

Though it is essentially similar, what differentiates capitalist imperialism from this more primitive form is a matter of its impetus. In the case of the Romans and Spanish, the search for resources was primarily at the behest of state institutions. It was the emperor who governed the distribution of new lands and slaves, and it was the Monarchs who held the newfound gold. Capitalist imperialism is instead undertaken directly for the benefit of private industry. By the late 1800's European capitalism had centralized into a few primary monopolies, and, with a lack of options to expand internally, capital had begun to transcend national borders. Hence, the development of industry—particularly the extractive kind—was now focused on colonial holdings in Africa and Asia, to which capital was exported and from which profits were gathered. It is this specific relation of investment and exploitation that typically defines imperialism in Marxist theory.<sup>48</sup>

Before World War One, the geopolitical sphere was inhabited by many smaller national capitalisms, all vying to out compete one another; after World War Two, those powers coalesced into a single international capitalism which stood as opposition to the communist East. The two could not coexist; where the communists held control the capitalists were denied expansion. It is no coincidence that the fiercest battles against socialism occurred in Asia, Africa, and South America, places that had been divided among and occupied by Western imperialists. Hence, alliances like NATO, represented not only military co-operation but economic centralization. The weapons of that war were sanctions and strict economic isolation, which slowly suffocated the

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<sup>48</sup> Kitching, Gavin. 1981. "The Theory of Imperialism and Its Consequences."

major communist powers and continues to do so in the few Cold War holdouts that remain. With the fall of the Soviet Union, and the economic liberalization of China, what remains is a global capitalist hegemony, where the world powers exercise free control of the global south.

Commonly called 'late imperialism,' the current order of global capitalism offers a distinct advantage over its previous configuration by avoiding the tensions of international competition. Whereas all but the largest companies had been historically restricted to their respective domestic markets, it is now possible for even small business to operate with an international scope. However, the distinction between *late* and *historical* imperialism does not describe a fundamental change in the core relationships involved. As explained by John Bellamy Foster,

“Imperialism, Magdoff argued, was inherently complex and changing in its configurations, reflecting both the centripetal and centrifugal forces governing the system. Where U.S. imperialism was concerned, it had to be interpreted in such a way that the “essential one-ness” between economic, political, and military-strategic objectives/tendencies was revealed. The role of multinational corporations abroad could not be separated from the role of U.S. military bases spread across the planet or the need to control oil and other strategic resources.”<sup>49</sup>

The alliance between the forces of capital and the military capacity of the state remains in the new imperialism; its only delineating factor being the degree of power consolidation.

This brief exploration of imperialism is necessary to understand the originating question of neoliberalism: once you have the world, where are you to expand next? As it turns out, the answer

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<sup>49</sup> Foster , John Bellamy. 2019. "Late Imperialism."

is quite simple: totalize your dominance. While by the mid 1980's global capitalism had begun to consolidate its political control, its focus returned to profitable opportunities that it had previously overlooked. The Western world had spent decades competing with the communist powers, and in doing so had established a great deal of state-run infrastructure along with some basic protections for labor. The New Deal, passed by President Roosevelt, had established the United States welfare state to mitigate the suffering of the Great Depression; and a couple of decades later, President Eisenhower approved the construction of the immense interstate system, to offer future logistical support for military defense. In both cases, massive government projects had been undertaken to defend the continued function of capitalism in the U.S. In the first case it was necessary to avoid complete systemic collapse resulting from unemployment and general societal discontent. The second was not only vital for strategic logistics in the case of possible invasion; but, more importantly, established the economic circulatory system of the modern United States. The United Kingdom underwent similar development in the process of post-war reconstruction; not only modernizing infrastructure, but also establishing an incredibly robust welfare state of their own. The British efforts also included the nationalization of healthcare, and—owing to a more militant labor culture—better worker protections.

However, be it British or American, these programs represented lost opportunities for profit; and, as the Cold War was drawing down, they quickly found themselves to be the targets of capitalist expansion. U.S. President Ronald Reagan, and U.K. Prime Minister Margret Thatcher, captained the assault on these government programs by developing a political doctrine that we now know by the name neoliberalism. The central maxim was simple: deregulate and downsize wherever possible; allow market forces to operate without inhibition. In the U.S., Reagan's budgetary policy included a \$44 billion cut to government spending: affecting all areas (excluding

defense and policing) but primarily focused on defunding welfare and public services.<sup>50</sup> Thatcher's government did much of the same, lowering income taxes on the rich by 23% and dramatically cutting government expenditures.<sup>51</sup> Hence, we can identify neoliberalism in practice by the joint presence of tax cuts for business and private capital, and massive privatization or elimination of public services.

The relation between neoliberalism and liberalism is analogous to that of late imperialism and historical imperialism. In both cases—neo or late—the core relationship remains unchanged, and the prefix only denotes particular differences. The organization of industrial capitalism as described in the previous chapter operates under an implied central dogmatic belief in the rationality of the market; however, what distinguishes neoliberalism from this historical liberalism, is that faith in the market is made explicit. Nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated than in the academic work of Chicago economist Milton Friedman. A close friend of Thatcher, and the architect of Reagan's economic policy, Friedman was known to evangelize his belief in the inherent rationality of free market economics. As he himself puts it, "there is one and only one social responsibility of business—to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits so long as it stays within the rules of the game, which is to say, engages in open and free competition without deception or fraud," a statement so blatant that it borders on parody.<sup>52</sup> The intellectual engine of the neoliberal project had made no true advancement; what is novel about his theory is merely the explicit and pseudo-religious enshrinement of an already implicit logic.

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<sup>50</sup> Danziger, Sheldon, and Robert Haveman. 1981. "The Reagan Budget: A Sharp Break with the Past."

<sup>51</sup> Coutts, Ken, Roger Tarling, Terry Ward, and Frank Wilkinson. 1981. "The Economic Consequences of Mrs. Thatcher."

<sup>52</sup> Friedman, Milton. 1970. "A Friedman doctrine-- The Social Responsibility Of Business Is to Increase Its Profits."



However, the essential nature of dogmatic belief leaves neoliberalism—or Friedmanism as we might call it—blind to the material reality of its surroundings and thus prone to self-injury. Take, for example, the destruction of the welfare state. Using corporate taxes to support the poor appears irrational to the profit-blind neoliberal logic. Yet, the welfare state provides a necessary social function for the capitalist. Currently, “12 million wage-earning adults (ages 19 to 64) enrolled in Medicaid... and 9 million wage-earning adults in households receiving food assistance from the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP),” are employed by some of the country’s largest private companies such as Walmart and McDonalds.<sup>53</sup> Without access to these programs, most of these workers would be unable to afford to feed, house, and care for themselves, and, therefore, would be unable to reproduce their labor power. Therefore, the U.S. welfare state allows these employers to maintain wages far below the socially required minimum without severe consequence; in practice, this artificially lowers labor costs, and increases profits. Much the same can be said of U.S. transportation infrastructure. Without reliable high-quality roads nearly all commerce would quickly grind to a halt.

Regardless, the capitalist class as a whole still seeks to decimate and privatize government programming; the totalizing pursuit of profit, so clearly visible in the early industrial stage, has not abandoned modern capitalism. Increasing privatization has pushed socially necessary infrastructure like healthcare, energy, transportation, and housing to the absolute breaking point. Admittedly, Friedman was right, free market economics does increase the efficiency of society as a whole; however, he missed one key consideration: efficiency is relative. By enshrining the heretofore underlying assumptions of capital as central maxims, Friedman had further intensified

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<sup>53</sup> United States Government Accountability Office. 2020. *Federal Social Safety Net Programs: Millions of Full-Time Workers Rely on Federal Health Care and Food Assistance Programs*.

the blindness of society by profit. We might generally believe efficiency to imply effectiveness and stability, but neither of these considerations makes much money. Neoliberalism has built a society that is one small stumble away from crisis at any moment.

To illustrate the function of this framework, let us take a brief look at the failure of Texan energy infrastructure during the winter storm of 2021. In 1999, twenty-two years before massive power outages resulted in the loss of over 200 lives,<sup>54</sup> the Texas legislature passed Senate Bill 7 (SB7), which decoupled the Texan power grid from the rest of the United States.<sup>55</sup> This move was supported by the typical neoliberal logic: “deregulation will make the energy market friendlier for business,” and “higher profits will mean cheaper energy for Texas citizens.” However, federal regulations requiring energy infrastructure to be properly winterized had good reason to exist, even in the otherwise warm climate of Texas. Previous winter storms in 1989 and 2011 had resulted in the need to institute rolling blackouts across the state; therefore, it is blatantly dishonest to argue that the events of 2021 were unprecedented.<sup>56</sup> While the bill did marginally lower consumer costs, its key success was cutting the leash on capital and increasing the profitability of energy markets. This singular case elucidates the general principle; neoliberal policy had achieved its only goal—the maximization of profits—at the expense of societal stability, and ultimately, worker’s lives.

### **3. Capitalist Realism: The State and the Self**

We now are left with a seeming paradox: If crisis undercuts the stability of a society—and therefore the stability of profits—why then does the capitalist encourage its development? Simply put, crisis offers opportunity. As explained by Naomi Klein in her book *The Shock Doctrine*, Friedman’s

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<sup>54</sup> Svitek, Patrick. 2022. *Texas puts final estimate of winter storm death toll at 246*.

<sup>55</sup> The Texas Legislature. n.d. *Senate Bill 7: Bill Text*

<sup>56</sup> Eiserer, Tanya, and Jason Trahan. 2021. *30 years of warnings to winterize Texas power plants, yet they still froze. Will Austin finally require it?*

push for freer markets relied on the inevitability of capitalist crisis to advance policy un-resisted; or, as Friedman himself puts it,

“Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic functions” to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable.”<sup>57</sup>

Change, by way of crisis, offers an opening for capital to capture what had previously been held dear by the public; crisis means possible profit, and, therefore, market forces make no effort to avoid them. In effect, crisis is analogous to chemotherapy. The latter works by attacking all the cells of the body, killing cancerous cells which are more vulnerable than healthy ones which it merely damages. Crisis destroys state institutions and smaller companies, which can then be consolidated by the more robust capitalists. While crisis undercuts profits in the short term, it can be massively more profitable over time for the largest economic interests.

Klein calls these “orchestrated raids on the public sphere...combined with the treatment of disaster as exciting market opportunities, ‘disaster capitalism’,” or, when referring specifically to the political tactics involved, “shock doctrine.”<sup>58</sup> The word ‘shock,’ is expressly intended to evoke the imagery of so-called electro-psychotherapy (though it would be better described as torture). As described by Klein, the work of Scottish-born psychiatrist Donald Ewen Cameron—whose research directly inspired the handbook of torture techniques used by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency—attempted to develop a regimen of electrical shocks, sensory deprivation and

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<sup>57</sup> Klein, Naomi. 2008. *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. Pg. 6

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

psychoactive substances that could be used to “wipe the mind clean” and offer a blank slate on which to rebuild.<sup>59</sup> In practice this left his un-consenting experimental subjects psychologically shattered, and deeply traumatized; but the practices developed by Cameron are still used by intelligence agencies across the world in prisons like Abu Ghraib. And as Klein argues, they are similar to those used by Friedman’s disciples to achieve their political goals. Rather than painful shocks or LSD, the “treatment” sought by the practitioners of shock doctrine are natural disasters, wars, and economic depressions.

As the book was published in 2007, Klein’s go-to example of the shock doctrine in practice is the privatization of New Orleans after the devastation of hurricane Katrina, but for our purposes, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is a much more timely example. In the United States, the pandemic is now entering its third calendar year, and—despite the development of vaccines—the emergence of new increasingly dangerous variants suggests that it may remain for some time yet. In the initial weeks of the pandemic, fear of mass casualties and federal pressure to take precautions resulted in the second worst recession of the last fifty years.<sup>60</sup> Since then, federal restrictions have loosened, and the majority of the population has returned to work; however, the long-term symptoms of the virus (circulatory issues, cognitive impairment, and difficulty breathing) have removed millions from the workforce, resulting in a historic labor shortage.<sup>61</sup> These difficulties are further exacerbated by the strain of the pandemic on both domestic and international logistics networks, which has resulted in an ongoing supply chain crisis, lowering manufacturing output

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<sup>59</sup> Klein, Naomi. 2008. *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. Pg. 25-40

<sup>60</sup> Bauer, Lauren, Kirsten Broady, Wendy Edelberg, and Jimmy O'Donnell. 2020. *Ten facts about COVID-19 and the U.S. economy*.

<sup>61</sup> Picchi, Aimee. 2022. *A cause of America's labor shortage: Millions with long COVID*.

and raising the price of consumer goods.<sup>62</sup> Consequently, it seems likely that we are currently living through the largest global crisis since the end of World War Two.

Yet, despite the current state of affairs, capital appears to be flourishing. The recession of 2019 was quickly followed by record highs in the stock market, as investors used the crisis to consolidate profits. As the periodical *Monthly Review* explains it,

“The result was that—just as social distancing and lockdowns were being instituted and unemployment was soaring to the highest levels since the Great Depression, reaching almost seventeen million—the U.S. stock market experienced its biggest increase since 1974 in the week of April 6 to 10. Wall Street profits rose in the first half of 2020 by 82 percent over the year before. The total wealth of U.S. billionaires skyrocketed by \$700 billion between March and July 2020, even as the number of those dying from COVID-19 in the United States continued to mount and as millions of U.S. workers found themselves hit hard by the crisis. Amazon centi-billionaire Jeff Bezos experienced an increase in his total wealth by more than \$74 billion in 2020, while Tesla megacapitalist Elon Musk saw his wealth increase in 2020 by \$76 billion, making him too a centi-billionaire.”<sup>63</sup>

This is the harrowing effectiveness of capitalist shock doctrine. In Tesla’s case, U.S. economic policy aimed at mitigating the 2019 recession allowed the company to generate record profits from their stock portfolio. In the case of Amazon, restrictions on brick-and-mortar commerce allowed

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<sup>62</sup> Goodman, Peter S. 2022. *A Normal Supply Chain? It’s ‘Unlikely’ in 2022.*

<sup>63</sup> Foster, John Bellamy, R. Jamil Jonna, and Brett Clark. 2021. "The Contagion of Capital: Financialized Capitalism, COVID-19, and the Great Divide."

Amazon's already massive e-commerce empire to further centralize the market on all kinds of consumer goods. If the enterprise was large enough, COVID-19 was not something to be feared; rather, it was simply an effective drug with some unpleasant side-effects.

Still more insidious are the effects of shock doctrine on the normative beliefs of a population. Early in the pandemic it was common to see workers push back against the careless COVID-19 policies of their employers. While wealthier white-collar employees were given leave or allowed to work at home, so called "essential employees"—grocery clerks, nurses, bus drivers, and the like—were forced to maintain their schedules; consistently exposed to infection and left without proper personal protective equipment (PPE). In these policies it was easy to see the contradiction between the essential nature of their work, and the low pay and dangerous conditions to which these employees were subject. Yet, in response to the justified grievances of these workers, the national media narrative began to call them "heroes," who were "willing to work through the danger of a pandemic to keep society running," and a few of their employers gave them temporary "hero pay"—meager raises to compensate for their now life-threatening labor. Nowhere in the process did anybody ask those workers if they were truly willing to risk their lives, nor did anybody acknowledge that the highest paid strata of laborers seemingly performed non-essential functions. Instead, the shock of this crisis had established a new normative belief in popular culture: it is now considered explicitly acceptable to sacrifice the lives of the poor, as long as it keeps the economy running.

It is in this second case that the subtle brilliance of Klein's nomenclature is revealed. The imagery of torture evoked by *Shock Doctrine* not only applies to the economy at large, but also to the individual worker. A crisis like COVID-19 is another jolt to our collective psyche, further erasing our personal expectations of dignity and safety, reprogramming us to better fit the new

paradigm of “disaster capitalism.” If you had suggested sending children to school during a deadly pandemic merely 10 years ago you would have been justly castigated by any rational citizen. In fact, I do not need to make this point on conjecture, as during the H1N1 outbreak of 2009—an insignificant threat by comparison—over 700 schools were closed to stop the spread of infections, and remained closed while the possibility of outbreak remained.<sup>64</sup> Now however, many parents seem more than willing to send their children into active hotbeds of COVID-19, even going so far to publicly protest for schools to reopen.<sup>65</sup> And for those who are not so zealous, they have little choice; a primary function of the U.S. education system is to provide childcare for working parents. If they must be at work, then their children must be at school; the neoliberal state has systematically destroyed all other possibilities.

Engels, in his 1845 study entitled *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, refers to the capitalist tendency to disregard the health of the working class as “social murder.” Quote:

But murder it remains. I have now to prove that society in England daily and hourly commits what the working-men's organs, with perfect correctness, characterize as social murder, that it has placed the workers under conditions in which they can neither retain health nor live long; that it undermines the vital force of these workers gradually, little by little, and so hurries them to the grave before their time. I have further to prove that society knows how injurious such conditions are to the health and the life of the workers, and yet does nothing to improve these conditions. That it knows the consequences of its deeds; that its

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<sup>64</sup> Klaiman, Tamar, John D Kraemer, and Michael A Stoto. 2011. "Variability in school closure decisions in response to 2009 H1N1: a qualitative systems improvement analysis."

<sup>65</sup> Blume, Howard. 2021. *L.A. parents demand schools reopen, saying science and improved conditions are on their side.*

act is, therefore, not mere manslaughter, but murder, I shall have proved, when I cite official documents, reports of Parliament and of the Government, in substantiation of my charge.<sup>66</sup>

While he worked from the reports of the British Parliament we may just as easily demonstrate the same principles by way of the Center for Disease Control, or the United States Congress. We have known full well that the only effective policy to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic was a total lockdown of the country to inhibit the spread of infection. By observing the effects of the virus in China and Italy, we had months to prepare for what we knew would eventually come. But the United States government refused to act, and is therefore at fault for the murder and mutilation of every COVID victim. Yet, social murder is not only limited to the extremes of pandemic, it also occurs every time someone cannot afford the healthcare they need, every time a homeless worker freezes to death, and every time an unarmed child is murdered by police. The institutions of capital kill without remorse, consuming lives to create profit.

The objective of shock therapy is not only the destruction of one's original identity but also includes the establishment of a new one. In the context of this discussion, this new identity is the cultural belief that capitalism is nothing less than natural law: the expectations of a relatively recent economic system misconstrued as the governing principles of history. Using the name "capitalist realism," British theorist Mark Fisher describes this phenomenon of normative realignment as a change in the "atmosphere" of a society that "[conditions] not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and [acts] as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action."<sup>67</sup> As we have seen in the examples discussed above, human suffering is

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<sup>66</sup> Engels, Friedrich. 1943. *Condition of the Working Class in England*. Pg. 95

<sup>67</sup> Fisher, Mark. 2009. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Pg. 16



necessary to preserve the system, but desire to preserve has been assumed without question. The essential workers are “heroes” for exposing themselves, and the children need to be back in classrooms. Any suggestion that the situation could have been avoided by systemic change is neatly avoided.

Capitalist realism is the artificial limitation of our expectations for the function of a society into the limited framework of only that which is achievable by market forces. That is to say, we are only allowed to expect positive change where it contains the possibility to profit. Even a tacit familiarity with the current conversation around climate policy shows the disturbing pervasiveness of this “business ontology.”<sup>68</sup> The relatively moderate reforms included in the Green New Deal recently proposed by the small caucus of American Social-Democrats are considered by the political mainstream to be radically anti-business and its proponents have been met with pejorative allusions to the “totalitarianism” of the Soviet Union and the Chinese Communist Party. Its fiercest critics do not care that the proposal of the Green New Deal largely focus leveraging the profit motive to distance the economy from fossil fuels. In a state possessed by the delusions of capitalist realism, the Green New Deal represents a possible threat to future profits; therefore, it is to be treated as an intolerable threat to capital akin to that embodied by the propagandistic cultural fictions attributed to the Soviet Union, or the Communist Party of China.

Capitalist realism is not limited to the realm of governance, it is more often embodied in the social expression of the individual. A capitalist “culture” is little more than a collection of atomized individual consumers whose identities and beliefs become encapsulated in the methods and objects of their consumption. The neoliberal affliction of business ontology results in

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<sup>68</sup> Fisher, Mark. 2009. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Pg. 17

overarching cultural trends that are devoid of any meaningful collective emotion. Rather what exists is a perverse democracy of conspicuous consumption, where one signals their cultural allegiances through loyalty to companies whose marketing material is an incoherent amalgamation of superficial ideological indicators. This perverse democracy also recreates absurdist representations of wider political conflicts. While United States Republicans appeal to conservative Christianity in an effort to repeal legal protections of queer communities and undo the accomplishments of feminist activism, their voting base boycotts Starbucks Coffee to signal their disagreement with the company's espoused social views. For those individuals, both actions are equivalent expressions of political will, consumption becomes not only a social expression but an ideological one.

Just as the capitalist becomes the avatar of capital, the worker—who can only construct their identity through conspicuous consumption—also comes to embody the will of capital. Thus, neoliberalism, which was at first restrained to the narrow existence of public policy, has leveraged the systematic application of crisis to expand its reach. With each shock, the underlying expectations of a capitalist society are further modified. Where once the citizen might have expected government intervention in the face of a global pandemic, power grid failure, or environmental catastrophe, now it is simply assumed that the capitalist “has it under control.” Of course, a lucid observation of reality would quickly dismiss this notion. It is readily apparent that capital has eroded the will of the state and the individual, and crisis has accordingly increased in frequency and intensity. Yet, capitalist shock therapy has remedied our “affliction” with such observations. *The patient has been molded into a realist, and now no longer questions the natural order of things.*

#### 4. The Economic Origins of Ideology

While we may accept that capitalist realism has come to dominate both the social and the individual consciousness, we have yet to answer a critical question: how does the economic doctrine of capitalism transform into ideology? Again, we may return to Marx for our answer.

Marxist theory (generally) maintains that societies are constructed of two interdependent components. First is the “base” which refers to the character of the economy: *i.e.* who owns the means of production, the organization of labor, etc... Second is the “superstructure” which entails all the cultural and institutional structures that grow from the base. The church, government, or even art are all represented by this second group. Together they establish a reciprocal relationship in which each expresses and reinforces the other, and, as each is largely controlled by the dominate class, the reinforcing effect tends to be conservative.

The mechanism is best explained through an example, so let us examine the role of racism in modern American slavery, by which I am referring to the prison industrial complex. The 13<sup>th</sup> amendment to the United States Constitution reads:

Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.<sup>69</sup>

This amendment ended the practice of chattel slavery which pre-dated the founding of the country, but it offers a specific endorsement of penal slavery. As one might expect, the use of slave labor is incredibly profitable, as it minimizes the amount of capital required for production. Accordingly, the sale of prison labor for menial work has become a multi-billion-dollar industry. Of course, we

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<sup>69</sup> 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: Abolition of Slavery (1865), 2022

(hopefully) all agree that slavery is bad; however, by restricting it to a punishment for criminal behavior it becomes far more palatable. Yet, we also live in a society that disproportionately imprisons the same ethnic minorities that were historically the victims of chattel slavery; these actions are only tolerable because the institutions responsible appeal to a pervasive and subtle cultural racism, or (if we are to be generous) willfully obfuscate the racism implicit in their actions. Thus, the considerations of the base (the pursuit of profit) become embodied in the superstructure (the criminal justice system).

As French Marxist Louis Althusser rightly notes in his essay on the subject, “no production is possible which does not allow for the reproduction of the material conditions of production: the reproduction of the means of production.”<sup>70</sup> In our above example, it is the implicit racism of the prison industrial complex that allows the abhorrence of slavery to be reproduced in the modern context; thus, by Althusser’s definition we may call racism an “ideology.” Put more formally, the Althusserian conception of ideology is that which “interpolates individuals as subjects.”<sup>71</sup> Our description of racism as an ideology, therefore alludes to the action of racism placing the objective existence of the other into a broader conceptual narrative and to enforce its assumptions. The criminal justice system is harsher on African Americans because it *falsely* attributes criminality to the inherent character of that population. Furthermore, the justice system is blind to its own bias because it engages with each defendant as an atomized individual who commands complete control of their actions. Objectively speaking, there is nothing inherently criminal about black communities, and material analysis shows that it is poverty and systemic oppression that drive

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<sup>70</sup> Althusser, Louis. 1971. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Pg. 128

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.* Pg. 170

crime, but the ideology of American law enforcement must obfuscate the material reality of crime to justify its abuse.

Returning to neoliberalism, its function as an ideology is to reduce the concrete reality of economics into the subject of faith in the market. In the first chapter, we discussed the inherent irrationality of capital at length, and any who would undertake such an investigation could clearly see that the reality of capitalism is inherently non-functional. Yet, when the Friedmanite puts their faith in the divine wisdom of the market, they only engage with capitalism as an ideological subject which does not contain the fatal contradictions of its material counterpart. Ideology is a mask that obscures reality by recasting facts as incomplete illusions; it simply offers an alternative to reality. This too manifests in the individual worker, who, by accepting the ideology of capital, sees that the murder of both their class and the whole natural world at the hands of capital is justified.

## **5. Seeds of Fascism**

We have now established the mechanism by which neoliberalism establishes itself in the psyche of both a nation and an individual, and so we now turn to the critical question of the argument: does capitalist realism contain the constituent components of a nascent fascism? One definition for fascism, offered by historian Michael Parenti, is that “fascism is nothing more than a final solution to the class struggle, the totalistic submergence and exploitation of democratic forces for the benefit and profit of higher financial circles.”<sup>72</sup> Given the analytical framework we have so far constructed, the application of this definition is almost trivial. Neoliberalism is a political philosophy which guides liberal democratic states to privatize and deregulate the economy, which

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<sup>72</sup> Parenti, Micheal. 2001. *Black Shirts and Reds: Rational Fascism and the Overthrow of Communism*. Pg. 17

is in direct opposition to the class interests of the workers. From a material perspective the two political doctrines share a common goal.

What then distinguishes fascism from neoliberalism is the former's "rational use of irrational images," to adhere a revolutionary mask to fascism's otherwise reactionary political doctrine.<sup>73</sup> In a fascist "revolution" the capitalist class still maintains its stranglehold on the economy, aggression is instead directed at perceived enemies. In Germany the revolutionary spirit was directed as "Judeo-bolshevism," an antiemetic conspiracy theory insisting that Jewish communists were secretly in control of the German government. Thus, when the fascists achieved control, they claimed that they had successfully revolted, and would now represent the average German worker. Such a narrative is irrational. Jewish communists had never actually controlled the government, and the fascist had no intentions of representing the German working class. Yet, the fascists had successfully employed the irrational image to rationalize their actions. I would argue that much the same might be said of capitalist realism. We have seen in the previous chapter the inherent irrationality of market forces, and thus the enforcement of capitalist realism represents the neoliberal ideology as a rational application of irrational premises. Hence, it appears that delineating neoliberalism from Parenti's fascism would be prohibitively difficult.

Though I prefer it, I suspect that many readers might find the above definition of fascism to be disagreeable in its simplicity. So, to further reinforce the argument, I will now turn to the much more widely accepted framework presented Umberto Eco's seminal essay *Ur-Fascism*. Eco's analytical definition of fascism posits fourteen possible criteria for the identification of a fascist state. However, these observations are not to be treated as a simple checklist; Eco explicitly

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<sup>73</sup> Parenti, Micheal. 2001. *Black Shirts and Reds: Rational Fascism and the Overthrow of Communism*. Pg. 16

states that parts of the system contradict others. Rather, the essay is intended to provide a collection of observed symptoms, and it is left to the reader to construct their own diagnostic differential in any given case. While I believe that strong arguments can be made for ten of the fourteen points, we will—for the sake of brevity—limit our exploration to the three symptoms listed below, and only as they are embodied in the United States.

1. The protection of a syncretistic faith
2. Irrationalism
3. Fear of the other

The central conceit of German fascism was the belief in a pseudo-historical cultural mythology that enshrined the German people as racially superior, but currently oppressed. In Italian fascism, the ideological core of the movement was an appeal to the lost glory of Rome. Therefore, when novelists or script-writers attempt to depict an “American fascism” they often center their depictions around perversions of the cultural myths that surround the founding fathers, and the U.S. Revolutionary War. I believe that this is a mistake. While both Germany and Italy are the products of thousands of years of history, the United States is an especially young and ethnically diverse country. Hence, the strong sense of national identity required by a German or Italian fascism is much weaker in the U.S. Instead, I would argue that the ideological core of an American fascism will be the religious appeal to the divine guidance of free market economics: its orthodoxy is embodied in the work of Milton Friedman and the policy he inspired.

Recently, appeals to American fascism have become synonymous with the right-wing populism of the Trump administration, but I think this is a reductive strain of the broader critique. I will readily grant that shift in political rhetoric created by the Trump campaign has emboldened the worst American reactionaries. Furthermore, the United States’ position as a cultural hegemon

has also infected other countries with this novel brand of politics (*e.g.* Bolsonaro in Brazil). Yet, I am hesitant to adopt the seemingly popular position that Trumpism *is* the American Fascism. Instead, my position is that Trumpism is merely a *continuation* of the United States' fascist tendencies, but *devoid of any obfuscation*. The migrant detention centers that feature so heavily in critiques of the Trump administration started under the previous Obama administration and, at time of writing, have continued under the Biden government. These detention centers also echo previous internment camps for the Japanese under Roosevelt, or the Native American reservations that have continued since 1851. Trump's worship of the military is not unique either, a casual glance at any presidential administration will reveal nationalist appeals to the might of the military. McCarthyism has already systematically destroyed the American left during the cold war. The persecution of Hispanic and Asian immigrant's dates back even further, and the systemic oppression of all ethnic and religious minorities existed at the exact instant of European settlement. All told, I do not see what is *materially* unique about Trumpism; its only real break with modern political rhetoric is that it refuses to acknowledge or be ashamed of this history. What Trump signals in politics is an ideological acceptance of the worst abuses of capitalism. In practice, it is no more fascist than any other point in American history; it just does not care about maintaining the comfortable illusion of rationality.

If we understand faith to mean dogmatic belief that disregards all refuting evidence, then what is neoliberal policy other than an act of faith? For the capitalist, such policies are an act of self-interest which result in higher profits. Yet, time and time again, deregulation and privatization leads to crisis, and crisis leads the suffering of the working class; yet support for such policies is still upheld by the majority of the voting population. According to polling data, 37% of U.S. citizens are against government run healthcare, and another 26% still maintain that private



insurance should still be available in addition to a hypothetical national program.<sup>74</sup> 52% of Americans support easing COVID-19 restrictions with half of that group supporting the removal of *all* precautions.<sup>75</sup> It does not matter that private healthcare restricts access to the poor, or that an insufficient response to COVID has resulted in nearly a million dead (and countless more maimed), the American people still hold a belief in the “rationality” of the free market. A particularly illustrative example of this phenomenon is the tendency for U.S. conservatives to label anti-capitalists with the pejorative “anti-American.” Capitalism is so fundamental to the American national identity that questioning faith in the market is seen as an attack on the nation.

In the context of this argument, the most damning component of Eco’s framework is fascism’s inherent “irrationality” or rather its insistence on “action for action's sake.”<sup>76</sup> In his explanation of this criterion, Eco describes the fascist obsession with “action being beautiful in itself,” and how, “it must be taken before, or without, any previous reflection.”<sup>77</sup> Does this description not perfectly embody the spirit of the capitalist? As I have demonstrated in the previous chapter, profit is and can only be the product of human labor, and labor is simply another word action. Thus, by the application of hypothetical syllogism, we can modify the statement. Capitalism is “profit for profit’s sake,” its unyielding pursuit is the valorization of capital. To question the sustainability or the underlying logic of the system is to become an apostate to the “cult of action” that rests at the heart of capital.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Jones, Bradley. 2020. *Increasing share of Americans favor a single government program to provide health care coverage.*

<sup>75</sup> Jackson, Chris, Mallory Newall, James Diamond, and Jocelyn Duran. 2022. *Americans increasingly want to move on from COVID-19.*

<sup>76</sup> Eco, Umberto. 1995. "Ur-Fascism."

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

Hence, the anti-capitalist is othered by the capitalist hegemony, and becomes an oppositional force against which the ideology can define itself. As Eco explains it, “Ur-Fascism grows up and seeks for consensus by exploiting and exacerbating the natural fear of difference.”<sup>79</sup> Fear of social and political ostracization is used to enforce the prevalence of dogmatic faith in the market. During the Cold War this was accomplished by framing anti-capitalists as Soviet agents seeking to undermine American democracy; a narrative that allowed the U.S. government to pass the Communist Control Act of 1954 which outlawed membership in communist parties and purged communists from union leadership.<sup>80</sup> These days the ideological othering of anti-capitalists takes a much more subtle form. Mass movements like Occupy Wall Street and the more radical elements of Black Lives Matter, are treated as unrealistic, idealist, or utopian, and such infantilization makes their politics easy to compartmentalize and ignore. Otherness is socially constructed in service of maintaining faith in the dogma.

The anti-capitalist is not the only other established by the nascent fascism of neoliberalism. The political reaction to immigration is perhaps the most obvious example of our cultural fear of the other. So-called “illegal” immigrants are confined to massive detention centers, separated from their children, and are slated for deportation. Previous President Donald Trump campaigned on the promise of building a wall along the southern border in a (largely symbolic) attempt to quell the flow of misplaced people seeking to settle in the United States. In support of the harsh crackdown on immigration, Republicans and Democrats alike cite concerns of violence, lack of jobs, and organized crime. As Eco describes it, “The first appeal of a fascist or prematurely fascist movement is an appeal against the intruders.”<sup>81</sup> However, none of this should come as a surprise to those

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<sup>79</sup> Eco, Umberto. 1995. "Ur-Fascism."

<sup>80</sup> Click, Kane Madison. 2009. *Communist Control Act of 1954 (1954)*

<sup>81</sup> Eco, Umberto. 1995. "Ur-Fascism."

familiar with the political history of the United States, as the same arguments were also used against Chinese, Japanese, Irish and Italian immigrants less than one-hundred years ago. In each case these populations were some of the most heavily exploited workers, and their social otherization typically forced them into labor considered undesirable or beneath the majority population.

Typically, liberal theorists will explain this reaction by way of simple prejudice, but this view is ultimately reductive as it ignores the class character of racism. In the case of the Irish and Italians, the first waves of these diaspora were driven by poverty to seek a new home. However, as these communities established a foothold, they quickly climbed the socio-economic structure and joined the American middle class; and, at the same time, their classification as a non-white ethnic group was quickly forgotten. Hence, it becomes obvious that whiteness—or rather membership to the social in-group—is a function of wealth. Adherence to the logic of the free market posits that individual material wealth is the sign of the worthy few, and, by extension, that the poor should be rejected social membership. Whereas the idealist might argue that the existence of poverty alongside opulent wealth would be a sharp indictment of any economic system, the capitalist realist is not bothered by the juxtaposition. Rather, they observe the conditions of poor minority communities and ask questions like, “why do they not make better choices?” or “why do they not work harder?” Such questions are absurd appeals to the absurd fiction of free market meritocracy and would be quickly dismissed should one have any actual investment in the reality of these communities. But racial prejudice and class prejudice go hand-in-hand to justify the suffering of marginalized groups, by dehumanizing those *people* and reducing the harrowing circumstances of their lives to the object of passing speculation.

In the current capitalist state, we are asked to act without reflection, to fear the critic and the pauper, and ultimately to rest our faith in the divine guidance of the market; therefore—while we may have yet to tip into fascism—it seems our societies contain the seeds of that movement. But we still have to address one final question: why do we slide into fascism in the first place? In the first chapter we explored how the selective pressures of capital ensure that those capitalists who reside at the top of the hierarchy are the purest possible embodiment of the system as a whole, but these pressures do not constitute a sufficient explanation for the actions of the working class. Membership to the laboring strata is the default mode of existence, and therefore does not require fierce competition. The interaction between economic shock therapy and capitalist realism contains some explanatory power but is still unsatisfying. It is difficult to imagine that these social changes could have begun without an initial foothold in the psyche of the population.

As Wilhelm Reich observes in study on the psychology of fascism, most Marxist literature also falls short of providing a satisfactory answer to this crucial question.<sup>82</sup> Marx himself predicted that the worsening conditions of the working class would necessarily produce a genuine revolutionary movement against the forces of capital, but history shows the difficulty in guiding that energy and the ease with which it may be corrupted.<sup>83</sup> It is not a controversial opinion to reject fascism, and almost every United States citizen is at least tacitly familiar with fascism's greatest atrocities. Hence, it would be reasonable to expect that pointing out the nascent-fascist character of neoliberal social policy would encourage a political reckoning; however, it is more likely that such critiques will be met with confusion or outright hostility. Clearly there is something deeper at play that the grand, sweeping social analysis we have entreated on so far has yet to touch on. It

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<sup>82</sup> Reich, Wilhelm. 1946. *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

is the simplest explanation that I think is the most revealing: life under capitalism requires the destruction of our empathy.

This is my answer to our final question. Fascism can only take hold where the bonds of empathy have been degraded. The lack of empathy for nature causes inaction on climate change. The lack of empathy for the other leads to the abuse of the marginalized and social isolation of the self. The lack of empathy for the self opens us to accepting abuse and degradation where we would otherwise resist. Consequently, any viable political alternative to our current trajectory must begin with a doctrine of radical empathy as it is only by reforming those broken connections that real change can occur. This will be the focus of Chapter 3.

## Chapter Four: A Politics of Codified Empathy

In order really to understand what one ‘reads’ and studies in these theoretical, political, and historical works, one must directly experience oneself the two realities which determine them through and through: the reality of theoretical practice (science, philosophy) in its concrete life; the reality of the practice of revolutionary class struggle in its concrete life, in close contact with the masses. For if theory enables us to understand the laws of history, it is not intellectuals, nor even theoreticians, it is the masses who make history. It is essential to learn with theory – but at the same time and crucially, it is essential to learn with the masses.<sup>84</sup>

(Louis Althusser, 1968)

### 1. Introduction

In the first chapter of this project, we explored the economic logic of capitalism, and how its irrational growth is inherently inseparable from economic and environmental crises. In the second chapter, we saw how that irrationality manifested itself in the neoliberal ideology that dominates the world, and how that ideology contains the essential components of emerging fascism. Neither are acceptable outcomes, as both would result in untold human suffering. Something needs to be done. Yet, it is not enough to simply do *something*. Action merely for the sake of action is what has placed us in this precarious position, and to push for unguided political change is ineffectual at best, and, more often, disastrous. Our crisis demands *guided change*: political action that is founded on stalwart principles. Chapters 1 and 2 suggest promising candidates for such guidance,

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<sup>84</sup> Althusser, Louis. 1971. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Pg. 20

in the form of social-metabolic balance and anti-fascist humanism, but each may be reduced to a more fundamental component. To fully address the climate crisis, as it represents both ecological destruction and political violence, I suggest a political doctrine centered on empathy.

In the following pages, I will outline this theory of political change in 4 steps. First, I will begin by developing a three-part framework for empathy by using the work of phenomenologist Edith Stein. Second, I explore how empathy can be centered in the development of ideology by using the description of ideological evolution developed by Althusser. Third, I will continue with Althusser to describe how ideology is made into material political change by the efforts of militant labor organizations. Finally, I will conclude the chapter by exploring our proposed framework for empathy-centered political action, by seeing how it is embodied in the recent conflict surrounding the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline.

## **2. The Phenomenon of Empathy**

Before we can set about a discussion of tactics, we must first establish exactly what empathy is, how it has been deteriorated by the institutions of capitalism, and what it means to practice a politics of empathy.

For the first and second problems, let us turn to the work of phenomenologist Edith Stein whose theory of empathy is broken down into the following 3 steps. Step 1: the object of my empathy, typically the experiences of another person, “emerge to me as meaningful in my perception of the target.”<sup>85</sup> Step 2: I then come to understand these emotions by, “following them through in an imaginative account guided by the target.”<sup>86</sup> Step 3: finally, I “return to a more

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<sup>85</sup> Svenaeus, Fredrik. 2016. "The Phenomenology of Empathy: a Steinian Emotional Account."

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

comprehensive understanding of the experiences of the other.”<sup>87</sup> To this I will append a 4<sup>th</sup> step: the new understanding motivates me to act. The entire process can be exemplified in a simple, everyday interaction. If my colleague spills coffee on her white shirt minutes before she is to give a conference presentation, she will likely be flustered by the unwelcome surprise. I perceive this reaction (step 1) and then imagine how I would react in this situation (step 2). I know that I would be embarrassed by the stain being obvious to the audience, and therefore, conclude that she is likely anxious about that embarrassment (step 3). I may then be motivated to ameliorate her worries by lending my jacket (step 4), as I would find an ill-fitting suit coat less embarrassing than a soiled shirt.

Of course, each step of this empathy-action complex is contingent on certain prerequisite factors. Step 1 assumes that I am capable of perceiving my colleague’s emotional state (or that I care enough to notice). Steps 2 and 3 require that I be able to imagine myself in the situation of the other, and that this imagined experience is emotionally evincing. Then to motivate action, I must value the object of my empathy. The assumptions of step 1 present the least issue. Even if my coworker is especially stoic, I may still feel empathetic embarrassment without observing signs of such a reaction from her. Moreover, it is hard not to reflexively care about the experiences of another that you recognize as human. Steps 2 and 3 present greater difficulty as the imaginative process requires one to identify with the other. Suppose I am a misogynist (only hypothetically, mind you), and I think myself to be essentially and irresolvably different than women; I would be unable to imagine the emotional state of my coworker in any detail, as I do not believe we share any similarities of thought. The transition from step 3 to action presents the most difficulty as it introduces the specifics of judgment into the framework. To assume that I would wish to mitigate

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<sup>87</sup> Svenaeus, Fredrik. 2016. "The Phenomenology of Empathy: a Steinian Emotional Account."



her suffering is to assume that I value her happiness. For example, if I had seen her be cruel to some of her students, or if I am simply wearing my favorite jacket, I may choose inaction: believing the embarrassment to be just retribution, or not wanting coffee in my suit lining, respectively. At each step of the empathy-action complex assuming the motivation to undertake the next grows increasingly tenuous.

For our purposes, we need to apply this framework to three types of relationships which we will tackle in increasing order of complexity: The bond of empathy between one individual and another, that between the individual and themselves, and, finally, that between society and nature. In the first case, we may adopt Stein's model without modification, and move directly to its antagonisms with capital. In the second and third cases, we will first need to refine our proposed empathy-action complex to better fit the specific situation.

Capital's tendency to atomize social structures is its chief antagonism with empathy as expressed between two individuals. In a tribal or feudal village, the baker knows the mason who built his oven, the farmer who grows his wheat, and the miller who grinds his flour; these social relations are an essential component of those historical methods of production. The division of social needs into trades, and the subsequent interlocking of these trades, forged interpersonal empathetic bonds between inter-reliant professions. If a given community only had one tanner and one cobbler, the effective conduct of business relied on the two maintaining a positive relationship. Should the two despise each other, the village would go without shoes. The development of cities weakened the relationship—now the cobbler might have access to multiple tanners—but a given neighborhood maintained something of the village: each district embodied a close-knit economic subunit within the whole of the city. The business ecosystem of the slums is distinct from that of the wealthier districts; of course, capital is continuously exchanged between the two (in both labor

power and rent), but the shops, bars, and inns frequented by the residents of one were distinct from those of the other. Then as production underwent industrialization and was further centralized, the restricted circuit of the village or the district had been subsumed into the larger marketplace of capital. The average person no longer knows the name of their baker, farmer, or cobbler: in fact, those roles are no longer individuals at all. Food and shoes both emerge from the factory, completely unattached from their producer. The consumption of capitalist commodities is fundamentally different than historical consumption; whereas the purchase of medieval bread required an acknowledgment of the baker, the purchase of industrially produced bread does not allow recognition of the factory workers who produced it. Thus, by changing the mode of production, capitalism has atomized the relations of production. Accordingly, the recognition of the other—step 1 in our model of empathy—cannot occur between the consumer and the producer under industrial capitalism; the social experience only exists at the level of individual consumption.

The degradation of the second empathetic relation, which is between one and oneself, is more complex, and, to properly understand the effect of capital, we must make a slight alteration to Stein's model. By conventional interpretation, empathy is a phenomenon that may only be directed externally. Hence it might seem quite odd to suggest one may feel empathy for the self. Surely, I need only feel directly, and do not need to imagine my own feelings; however, this assumption hinges on the meaning of self. I argue that the self (as used generally) is an external and artificial person, or rather, it is our self-image as viewed from the outside. Should we accept the view typical of phenomenology about identity (namely that the individual is merely a bundle of experiences) the direct perception of the self would be impossible; self-perception would be merely a single component of the amorphous and emergent structure that is an individual. To make

generalizations, that mound of writhing phenomena must first be externalized—each wriggling experience frozen in a momentary snapshot of existence—so that coherent evaluation can be made. It is impossible to accurately describe an object in constant flux; one’s concept of self may only be developed by analyzing a static, and thus artificial, self-image. We might say that the self is a constant companion that is distinct from us and mirrors our very being, changing as we change but freezing still whenever gazed upon. As an external object, it is also a valid target for the empathy-action complex described above.

Despite the strong kinship we naturally share with our mirror, the productive structures of capital obfuscate the bonds of empathy here as well. Recall now our discussion of social metabolism in chapter 1. It is in this relationship where Marx identifies the *Gattungswesen*, literally the “species-essence,” of humanity: our drive to produce for ourselves and our communities and to express ourselves in that production. If we recognize ourselves as humans, it follows that the *essence* of our species would be an *essential* component of our self-conception. Yet, as subjects of capital, our material existence is not conducive to the practice of our human nature. The industrially produced loaf of bread contains no trace of the baker; running one machine in assembly line is possible for any worker and thus its products are generalized to the whole mass of workers. This phenomenon—referred to as alienation by Marx—results in a loss of empathy for the self. Our essence yearns to produce and to express itself through production, but any given snapshot of the self contains no material embodiment of that yearning. Hence the two images, otherwise identical in the first instant of examination, contain a fundamental contradiction: viewed externally, the self who is a worker is indistinguishable from the machine it operates. Therefore, empathy (which in step 2 requires the recognition of similarity with the target) cannot form a bond between one and one’s self-concept.

The third relationship, between society and nature, has already been discussed briefly in chapter 1, but let us now return to it with the present analysis. Again, we are required to modify Stein's framework for our ends, as both the subject and the object of this relationship exist beyond the individual. For a simple solution let us substitute "the social structure" with the "meta-individual." I use meta-individual here in the literal sense, as *above or transcending the individual*. We have seen previously how the relations of production are abstracted into ideology, and how that ideology is then given material form through social structures; we may then conclude that societal action is an expression of aggregate belief. Hence, concerning the empathy-action complex, we may treat society as a rough average of its citizens, or, in other words, as an individual actor emerging from trends in collective belief. However, I must insist on an important caveat: the meta-individual is the aggregate of the dominant social group, not the society as a whole. This framework is not fundamentally different than the structuralist theory addressed in chapter 2 but is simply a useful abstraction for our discussion of empathy.

Nature, as implied by its usage as a singular noun, is a meta-individual of a different type. Whereas the social meta-individual is the aggregate belief *of* a society, the natural meta-individual is the aggregate of beliefs *about* nature; the former is emergent, and the latter is projected. Classically, we can see nature given meta-individual status in the form of animistic gods or, more subtly, in the Abrahamic God. The random actions of nature are there ascribed to the will of these gods: fortuitous weather indicates their favor, disaster, their wrath. Faith of this kind reflects the close ties that pre-industrial populations held with their local environment. Most humans had long been occupied with cultivation; it is no surprise that their gods were those of rain and earth. Yet, as capitalist industrialism urbanized the population, faith in the will of nature became increasingly tenuous. The majority of farmers had now become factory laborers, and their religion of harvests

had now been replaced by a religion of unyielding economic “progress.” The traditions of that lost faith—empathy-motivated action to win Nature’s favor—have yet to reemerge. They have been replaced by the rituals of science; nature has become a loosely associated set of phenomena without a central will. Shadows of the past remain (“Nature” is still a singular noun, and our stories still contain some reverence for its spirit), however, the meta-individual character of nature has lost its effectiveness as a target of empathy.

The final concern of this section is to clarify what I mean by a “politics of codified empathy” and, here again, we return to the evergreen model of structuralism. Above I have discussed how the structures of capitalist production are anathema to empathetic practice, and we might be tempted to stop the discussion there. Why not simply do the opposite? Why not just be empathetic and wash our hands of the matter? Sadly, it is not that simple. To practice empathy requires one to fully break from the influences that inhibit it; it is hard to fully cool a pot without turning off the stove. Empathetic politics is above the realm of individual action, it requires the working class to resist the dominance of capital, and to instead insist on a new society. It is only then that we may codify empathy as a central tenant of governance and production. To practice empathy is to pursue that end.

### **3. The Role of Philosophy**

I expect that it is contentious to claim that philosophy is necessary to the effort of instilling a politics of empathy. Sure, it is easy enough to say that philosophy is vital “to define empathy” or to “ensure empathetic institutions,”—granted, these are important jobs for philosophers—however, the role of philosophy in political change is more fundamental than idle commentary. In 1845, when Marx penned the *Theses on Feuerbach*, he concluded with one final declaration: “The

philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.”<sup>88</sup> With this statement, Marx had sharply denounced his forebears as idle speculators; instead, Marx demands that our philosophy be critically engaged with the world, working to address the problems that had so far only been passively observed. In the struggle against climate change, we see the importance of Marx’s challenge. It is easy to identify the problems presented, yet action proves more elusive than critique. Thus, we are left with another question: how does philosophy create political change?

For an answer, let us turn to Althusser’s explanation of theory, which he first decomposes into three distinct categories: Theory, *theory*, and ‘theory.’ I will be the first to admit that the scheme is confusing, and so we will substitute our own nomenclature for the sake of clarity. First is *theory* (what we will call theory<sub>1</sub>) which Althusser describes as “any theoretical practice of a scientific character.”<sup>89</sup> This is best explained as vulgar science, or that which is without any rigor or systemization. When that scientific practice is then further developed it adopts a ‘theory’ (theory<sub>2</sub>) which is “the determinate *theoretical system* of a real science.”<sup>90</sup> Using physics as an example, the theory<sub>1</sub> of physics is its observation of events and the subsequent attempts to explain them; its theory<sub>2</sub> is the accepted explanation of any given observation: *e.g.*, the bending of light is attributed to gravity by the theory (read: theory<sub>2</sub>) of general relativity. Third is Theory, (theory<sub>μ</sub>) which is explained by Althusser as “the [theory<sub>μ</sub>] of practice in general, itself elaborated on the basis of the [theory<sub>μ</sub>] of existing theoretical practices (of the sciences).”<sup>91</sup> Put simply, theory<sub>μ</sub> is the ideology that emerges from the practices (theory<sub>2</sub>) of the various sciences (theory<sub>1</sub>). Returning to our previous example, the theory<sub>μ</sub> of physics is the belief that empiricism is a reliable and

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<sup>88</sup> Marx, Karl, and Engels Frederick. 1986. *Marx/Engels Selected Works: Volume I*. Pg. 30

<sup>89</sup> Althusser, Louis. 1969. *For Marx*. Pg. 168

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

objective epistemic methodology; moreover, this is the assumption made by all modern scientific practice. Like my previous usage of meta-individual, the Greek letter  $\mu$  here is used to suggest the overarching position of theory $_{\mu}$  in relation to theory $_1$  and theory $_2$ .

The Althusserian model of theory comes to ideology by way of science, which he also deconstructs into three sequential stages. The process of science begins with the “first generality (which I shall call *Generality I*) constitutes the raw material that the science’s theoretical practice will transform into specified ‘concepts’. That is, into that other ‘concrete’ generality (which I shall call *Generality III*) which is a knowledge.”<sup>92</sup> Generality I and III, as used here, denotes the assumptions of their respective science and are “of an ideological nature.”<sup>93</sup> Accordingly, Althusser soundly rejects the objectivity of scientific practice, contending that science’s, “particular labor consists of *elaborating its own scientific facts* through a critique of the *ideological facts*’ elaborated by an earlier ideological theoretical practice.”<sup>94</sup> Generality II represents the intermediate step in-between Generalities I and III, and is application of theory $_2$  upon Generality I. Taken all together, we may describe the process in simple terms. First, an observation is made (*e.g.* the path of light is bent around stars); second, the old understanding (Generality I) of the behavior contradicts the observation (light should travel in a straight line); third, the current understanding (theory $_2$ ) is instead applied (general relativity suggests that gravity bends space); finally, a new understanding (Generality III) is produced (Light is affected by gravitational distortions). This new scientific ‘fact’ is then integrated into the theory $_2$ , and will be applied to future contradictions.

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<sup>92</sup> Althusser, Louis. 1969. *For Marx*. Pg. 183

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.* Pg. 184

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

Althusser's framework breaks with more traditional models of science, in that it describes science not as an objective search for truth, but instead as an ongoing dialectics of ideology. The contradictions that drive the development of the sciences arise in conflicts between their respective theories<sub>μ</sub>: that is, between their respective ideological assumptions. Ideology is the purview of philosophy, and its evaluation is the philosopher's role. Modern science could not have developed without Sir Francis Bacon's work on empiricism; ancient science similarly relied on the work of Aristotle. Science is philosophical, and, conversely, the work of philosophy is often scientific.

Additionally, Althusser's scientific model is not only restrained to what we might consider the academic sciences but is also applicable to anything scientific in character, including politics. As he explains it:

“World outlooks are *represented* in the domain of *theory* (science + the ‘theoretical’ ideologies which surround science and scientists) by *philosophy*. Philosophy represents the class struggle in theory. That is why philosophy is a struggle (*Kampf*, said Kant), and basically a political struggle: a class struggle. Everyone is not a philosopher spontaneously, but everyone may become one.”<sup>95</sup>

To explain by example, let us examine the French Revolution of 1789. The traditional governments of Europe feature the centralization of power in the hands of a single monarch (old theory<sub>2</sub>); an arrangement justified by an appeal to the divine (old theory<sub>μ</sub>). This was true in the specific instance of French King Louis XVI, who held absolute rule over the state (Generality I). Eventually, resistance arose as the work of enlightenment philosophers like Voltaire and Rousseau advanced new ideologies of the state (new theory<sub>μ</sub>) which, in turn, spread among the populace and inspired

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<sup>95</sup> Althusser, Louis. 1971. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Pg. 18



novel political doctrines (new theory<sub>2</sub>). When the old and the new were then drawn into conflict by crisis (Generality II), the success of the revolution codified the new political doctrine (now Generality III) in the place of the old. Thus, as Althusser's model of science can be extended to politics, so too can the revolutionary character of philosophy within that model.

We have now established *how* philosophy can help create political change, and so we now ask *how that change may embody empathy*. More specifically, how does the critique developed thus far manifest empathy in relationships of one to oneself, one to another, and society to nature? This time we will address each example in inverse order.

Yet, before we can address each relationship, it is expedient to pre-emptively address an argument that has been growing in popular discourse. Primitivism (as we will call it here) refers to a rough grouping of political tendencies that wish to address the problems of capitalism by reverting production, and by extension society, to a pre-capitalist form. This is a troubling suggestion for two reasons. On the logical end, it would not solve any problems, only delay them. As we have demonstrated in the first chapter, modern industrial capitalism is the current instantiation of an ongoing evolutionary process. Thus, should we assume that it is possible to revert to an earlier stage in production (impossible in practice), the material dialectic will eventually redevelop capitalism as it is the natural progression of the market; the hypothetical reversion would only delay the inevitable. On the practical end, the proposition of reversion would spell death for many. Despite the oncoming climate crisis, capitalism has clear advantages over its predecessors. Industrial agriculture has significantly decreased the frequency of famine; improvements in medicine allow many (such as insulin-dependent diabetics) to live full lives; all modern science relies on specialized tools which can only be produced by our advanced manufacturing. To cast off capitalism for what came before is to reject all of modernity, both good

and bad. Primitivism is at best lazy and at worst cynical. Granted, what follows capitalism may well revive some facet of the past, but a full regression ought not to be in consideration.

Having addressed primitivism, we may now freely resume our inquiry, starting with the relationship between the social and the natural. Above, I presented the historical character of this bond as essentially religious, however, it is unlikely to reemerge in this form. While many maintain a faith, the culture of the developed world is largely secular. The artifacts of religion stay with us—biblical allusion is maintained in our laws, Abrahamic archetypes in our stories—but the ideological shadow of religion has passed from the theory<sub>μ</sub> of science and, to a lesser extent, politics. In United States politics many conservatives may gesture towards Christianity, but their actions contain little evidence of those values beyond what is politically convenient. The structures of power have traded the church for a new focus: profit disguised by the costume of objectivity and ‘progress.’ I expect that this secularization is, at least in the short term, irreversible; hence, my suggestion is to substitute our own secular conception in the place of profit, for which the theory of social-metabolism is a perfect fit. It is simultaneously intuitive, scientific, and evocative of lingering animist imagery. Should social metabolism ascend to theory<sub>μ</sub>, the theory<sub>2</sub> it produces will seek to balance production and sustainability by reestablishing the human-nature relationship cleaved by capital.

Concerning the relationship between one and another, Marxist theory encourages empathy by establishing class consciousness. There is already some instinct among workers that searches for belonging in the broader group, but, when undeveloped, this inclination is easy to lead astray among the trappings of nationalism or racism. It is the role of philosophy, as the shepherd of ideology, to dismantle these traps. In Althusser’s words:

A proletarian class position is more than a mere proletarian ‘class instinct.’ It is the consciousness and practice which conform with the objective reality of the proletarian class struggle. Class instinct is subjective and spontaneous. Class position is objective and rational. To arrive at proletarian class positions, the class instinct of proletarians only needs to be educated.<sup>96</sup>

When developed into full class consciousness, that class instinct not only resists its own entrapment but actively seeks to free others. Climate Change will be inevitably accompanied by a massive migration away from the Global South as shifts in weather will render many tropical, subtropical, and desert climates unlivable.<sup>97</sup> This will be the largest refugee crisis in history, and, if the European reaction to Syrian refugees or the United States’ reaction to South American migration is any indication, the backlash of nationalist racism will be severe. Yet, most of these migrants are working-class themselves, and, should class consciousness be commonplace, one could feel nothing but empathy for their plight. Furthermore, this empathy would motivate many to action, supporting the displaced and defending them from nationalist reprisal (as evidenced by the work of organizations like Food Not Bombs). It is by recognizing one’s membership in the working class that one may learn empathy for the whole world.

Class consciousness also allows one to redevelop empathy for the self. As an alienated and atomized worker, it is impossible to see yourself in the products of your labor. Yet, once you become aware of your place in a whole body of labor, the contradiction between your self-image and essence becomes surmountable. The alienation will not disappear without a change in the mode of production, but the psychological suffering it causes may be mitigated. The dissatisfaction

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<sup>96</sup> Althusser, Louis. 1971. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Pg. 13

<sup>97</sup> Masson-Delmotte, V., et al. 2018. "Global Warming of 1.5C: Summary for Policymakers." Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

that troubles the worker is less painful when it may be identified. By acknowledging my role as a productive member of my social class, I can find some relief in contributing to a better future in whatever way I can. The self-expression desired by my species essences is made concrete in the political action of my class, and I can find dignity in the struggle.

#### **4. The Role of Labor Militancy**

Philosophy alone cannot generate change; intellectual victory means little until that triumph of ideology is made concrete by the material victory of class action. This intractable reality is what Althusser references when he says, “it is essential to learn with theory – but at the same time and crucially, it is essential to learn with the masses.”<sup>98</sup> Thus, we now turn our examination to the masses to see how the militancy of labor will be vital in building a politics of empathy;

However, before we explore its actions, we first need to establish a clear definition of militancy and see how that definition may be applied to the working class. The *Oxford Dictionary of Human Resource Management* defines the term as,

the propensity of a trade union or group of workers to engage in strike action and other forms of industrial action. A militant orientation on the part of a union is often counterposed to union moderation or ‘partnership.’ Militancy is one of the key indicators used in definitions of ‘union character.’ Militancy can also refer to the act of striking. Although usually applied to labor organizations, the term militancy can also be used to describe the behavior of employers,

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<sup>98</sup> Althusser, Louis. 1971. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Pg. 20

particularly when they engage in union-busting or seek confrontation with their workforce.<sup>99</sup>

This definition tells us little besides that labor militancy exists, but this inadequate description also contains some clues from which we may work. First, both unions and businesses can be described as militant which suggests the element common to each—that they are organizations operating towards a goal—is part of our definition. The workers union (ideally) represents the interests of the worker; the business represents the interest of the capitalist (and capitalism more broadly). Second, the Oxford definition suggests that the militant organization seeks conflict with others. The union wants to minimize the exploitation of the worker, the business wants to maximize it to increase the rate of profit. Thus, by combining the two elements, we can construct the following definition: Labor militancy describes when labor undertakes an *organized action in opposition to the interests of capital*.

Regardless of any formal definition we may establish, labor militancy will always carry with it a connotation of violence. The sentiment is unsurprising: the history of the labor struggle has been incredibly bloody, and, more fundamentally, militancy as a descriptor is inseparable from the organized violence of a military. The United States' cultural discomfort around militant labor has only been further exacerbated by the narratives surrounding the Cold War; the ideological detritus of McCarthyism has relegated the popular image of the American Left to either the rebellious socialist teenager, the lazy union worker, or the brutal communist dictator. For those more familiar with American history, the mention of labor militancy summons stories like the bloody Haymarket Riot (1886), or the guerrilla warfare campaign waged by striking coal miners

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<sup>99</sup> Oxford Reference. n.d. *militancy*.

during the Battle of Blair Mountain (1921). In these and a whole host of other conflicts, the militant actions of labor appear barbaric and primitive as opposed to the seeming civility of the present.

However, this discomfort with militancy ignores the reality that most organized labor exclusively utilizes nonviolent tactics. The first reaction of organized labor is to seek redress through existing institutions. For example, when unions oppose the unfair dismissal of a member, they do so by retaining dedicated legal representation and working through the courts. Where intuitions fail, the union's next move is to stop the generation of profit by commencing a labor strike. With no workers, the capitalist has no labor to exploit, and therefore must come to the negotiating table with friendlier terms. More often the capitalist will attempt to hire other non-union workers rather than capitulate to the demands of organized labor, but, where the unions are strongest, there are few adequate laborers to be found outside union ranks. Strike and litigation are the two most common tools utilized by militant labor, physical violence is only an extraordinary occurrence.

When violence does occur it is not because labor wishes for it, instead, it is a reaction to the forces of capital trying to enforce the compliance of the workers. As Michael Parenti explains:

The very concept of "revolutionary violence" is somewhat falsely cast, since most of the violence comes from those who attempt to prevent reform, not from those struggling for reform. By focusing on the violent rebellions of the downtrodden, we overlook the much greater repressive force and violence utilized by the ruling oligarchs to maintain the status quo, including armed attacks against peaceful demonstrations, mass arrests, torture, destruction of

opposition organizations, suppression of dissident publications, death squad assassinations, the extermination of whole villages, and the like.<sup>100</sup>

To support Parenti's claim, let us take a closer look at the Battle of Blair Mountain.

Life for an early 20<sup>th</sup>-century coal miner was directed by the heavy hand of the mining company. Backbreaking work was compensated by company scrip (a currency that was only valid at company-owned stores); the provided housing, education, and medical care were all extremely poor; and, company towns operated as informal prisons, trapping workers in a cycle of debt that chained them to the mines. It should be no surprise that the miners decided to unionize. It did not come easy, but, eventually, the herculean efforts of labor organizers like 83-year-old "Mother" Jones brought the Blair Mountain miners into the United Mine Workers of America in 1920.<sup>101</sup> The company's reaction was swift, firing 3000 of the miners who had joined the union, and sending the Baldwin-Felts private police to evict their families at gunpoint.<sup>102</sup> In the town of Matewan, local sheriff Sid Hatfield and a few miners resisted the evictions, and the ensuing firefight left 7 agents, 2 miners, and the town's mayor dead.<sup>103</sup> Sporadic violence dotted the following months as tensions grew between the company and the miners, coming to a head in 1921 when sheriff Hatfield (now a local hero) was assassinated while answering a court summons.<sup>104</sup>

The Battle of Blair Mountain began in earnest as West Virginia state troopers in coordination with federal troops began to crack down on the newly armed and agitated miners. Both sides of the conflict—armed with machine guns and other small arms—fought a pitched multi-

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<sup>100</sup> Parenti, Micheal. 2001. *Black Shirts and Reds: Rational Fascism and the Overthrow of Communism*. Pg. 29

<sup>101</sup> Nida, Brandon. 2013. "Demystifying the Hidden Hand: Capital and the State at Blair Mountain."

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

day battle, leaving dozens dead. In his article detailing the conflict, archeologist Brandon Nida remarks:

Throughout history the ubiquitous phrases “the hidden hand of the market” and the “silent compulsion of the market” have masked a dark reality at the center of the capitalist system. A growing body of multidisciplinary research is building evidence to show that emergence and maintenance of capital is, has been, and continues to be inherently tied to the nation state. In starker words, the hidden hand has been and continues to be the iron fist of the state.<sup>105</sup>

Our reaction to the violence of militant labor should not be distaste, but instead, it should be a recognition of that violence for what it is: self-defense, not only against the explicit violence of the police but also against the subtle violence of poverty and exploitation.

Though we have now established a nuanced understanding of labor militarism, we have yet to explain how it can create change, for which we will have to return to Althusser. In the previous chapter, we have used his definition of ideology, and above we used his analysis of theory; here again, Althusser offers us a useful analytical tool in overdetermination which he describes as the “accumulation of effective determinations... on the determination in the last instance.”<sup>106</sup> For our purposes, the “accumulation of effective determinations” alludes to the material and ideological context of a contradiction; “determination in the last instance” refers to the outcome of the specific contradiction under investigation. Althusser illustrates the principle using the Russian Revolution saying: “the [possibility of] revolution was a matter of an accumulation and exacerbation of historical contradictions that would have been incomprehensible

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<sup>105</sup> Nida, Brandon. 2013. "Demystifying the Hidden Hand: Capital and the State at Blair Mountain."

<sup>106</sup> Althusser, Louis. 1969. *For Marx*. Pg. 113



in any country which was not, as Russia was, simultaneously at least a century behind the imperialist world, and at the peak of its development.”<sup>107</sup> Using our previous example, the extraordinary nature of the Battle at Blair Mountain could only emerge from that peculiar situation. The isolation of the mining towns, easy access to firearms, and the wanton brutality of the company agents all determined, in the last instant, the savage outcome of that confrontation; had any single factor been different, the contention between the company and the miners might well have resolved quietly.

Labor militancy—through overdetermination—creates change in *two distinct steps*.

First, the proper context is arranged. On the ideological front, philosophy fights over the theory of ethics and politics, its conclusions are then disseminated through education to the working class. At the same time, labor organizations rally support and gather workers into action-oriented and defensive structures built upon said theory. Both fronts must be pursued simultaneously. On the philosophical end, it is only through the structures of militant labor that the effective education of the working class can take place. As Althusser highlights in his work on ideology, “*no class can hold State power over a long period without at the same time exercising its hegemony over and in the State Ideological Apparatuses.*”<sup>108</sup>; accordingly, it would be irrational to expect the education of the capitalist state to disseminate an ideology antithetical to its continued reproduction. The only way that the working class may be educated in the ideology of empathy and solidarity is by circumventing existing state structures and building independent institutions. Conversely, it is only by being in close contact with the working class and its organizations that

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<sup>107</sup> Althusser, Louis. 1969. *For Marx*. Pg. 97

<sup>108</sup> Althusser, Louis. 1971. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Pg. 146

the philosopher can develop an understanding for their oppression. To avoid the worst outcomes of capital, the fight must be conducted on both fronts.

In the second step, either organized labor or capital forces a crisis to occur by bringing some underlying contradiction into sharp relief. The most visible of these crises is the labor strike which—by withdrawing labor—stops the circulation of the market at production. Boycotts achieve similar ends by stopping market circulation at the point of purchase and are the most common method employed by organized labor outside a specific industry to influence its standards. The use of either may support the other, often striking workers will call for a boycott (e.g. the 2021 Frito-Lay workers strike), or the organizers of a boycott will call for the halt of production. In extreme cases, both sides may resort to industrial sabotage to destroy the means of production, but the harsh legal consequences and dispersed production of modern global capital limit the effectiveness of such tactics. Capitalists are typically only unintentionally responsible for crisis as it results in lost profits; however, in some cases, large companies will harm their immediate profits to undercut attempts at organizing labor. For example, Walmart will often close stores and fire all employees if they suspect the location to unionize.<sup>109</sup> Regardless, of its source, when a crisis does arise both sides scramble to take control of the situation, and the one with the strongest foundation (and better luck) emerges victorious.

The mechanism of labor militancy is similar to the neoliberal politician of the previous chapter: both create change by taking advantage of crisis. With climate change, the workers will not have to force a crisis, one is coming regardless; the working class must be prepared for its arrival, and have the strength to emerge triumphant.

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<sup>109</sup> Picchi, Aimee. 2015. *Union: Walmart shut 5 stores over labor activism.*

## 5. The Dakota Access Pipeline: A Modern Case Study in Political Action

To conclude the chapter, let us bring all the above analysis together by using a more recent example, which also features environmentalist elements.

In 2015, petrochemical company Energy Transfer Partners (ETP) began construction on the \$3.7 billion Dakota Access Pipeline.<sup>110</sup> Scheduled for completion the following year, the pipeline would carry 470,000 barrels of oil a day from the Bakken oil field of North Dakota to existing infrastructure in Illinois.<sup>111</sup> However, construction was delayed by protests at the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation which expressed concern about transgression into sacred tribal lands, and ecological damage to the reservation's water supply.<sup>112</sup> Though the legal battle had some early success in delaying construction, the federal courts ultimately decided to allow ETP to go forward. The Standing Rock Sioux then responded by mounting an initially peaceful protest, but events turned violent after ETP private security guards clashed with some protesters, leaving injuries including dog bites.<sup>113</sup> Five days later, North Dakota Governor Jack Dalrymple deployed over 500 members of the state National Guard to suppress protesters and “aid local law enforcement” with military vehicles, water cannons, and tear gas.<sup>114</sup> In a single night (November 20<sup>th</sup>, 2016) deployment of these tools left 300 protesters injured, with 26 needing hospitalization; the injuries included hypothermia, broken bones, internal bleeding, and partial blinding.<sup>115</sup> Despite the best efforts of the tribe, the pipeline finished construction in 2017, and within the first 6 months of its

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<sup>110</sup> Mengden, Walter H. 2017. "INDIGENOUS PEOPLE, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND CONSULTATION: THE DAKOTA ACCESS PIPELINE."

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> Hersher, Rebecca. 2017. *Key Moments In The Dakota Access Pipeline Fight.*

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> Wong, Julia C. 2016. *Dakota Access pipeline: 300 protesters injured after police use water cannons.*

operation it leaked 5 times, proving the validity of the tribe's concerns beyond all doubt.<sup>116</sup> Still, the Standing Rock Sioux continue to fight, and the federal government continues to ignore their suffering, as late last year a federal Judge sided with police in an excessive force lawsuit raised by the tribe.<sup>117</sup>

Regardless of the outcome, in the inspiring struggle of the Standing Rock Sioux, we find an informative expression of all three categories of empathetic politics. Most obvious is the expression of empathy between members of a community, as the mere act of organized protest requires one to act in coordination with and in the interest of the group. The long history of genocidal oppression inflicted on Native Americans by the United States has, is, and will continue to try to erase these cultures, but in resisting that systematic elimination, the Native American community demonstrates the tenacity of an empathetic community. Also in protest one finds an expression of empathy with the self; to resist one's oppressors is to recognize the dignity and humanity of one's own existence. This was never a conflict that should have to be fought, the ongoing devastation of Native communities constitutes a crime against humanity but we should respect the continued resistance and be inspired by our own empathy to support such struggles wherever they are found.

What is even more special about the protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline is the expression of solidarity with nature. On one hand, we may explain it as emerging from the deeper spiritual connection to nature that continues in modern Native American culture. The historical relocation of indigenous Americans to small and enforced bounds forced those contained to build a bond of empathy with their local environment. But, while I am sure that this history carries some

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<sup>116</sup> Brown, Alleen. 2018. *Five Spills, Six Months in Operation: Dakota Access Track Record Highlights Unavoidable Reality — Pipelines Leak*.

<sup>117</sup> Associated Press. 2021. *Judge sides with law enforcement in pipeline protest suit*.

influence, this answer is far too reductive and fits too neatly with common stereotypical depictions of these people. We would do well to acknowledge that a major component of the Standing Rock Sioux's misgivings with the project were materialist environmental concerns. There is an express acknowledgment of the social-metabolic relationship between the tribal community and the lands on which they live. If we ignore this component and only focus on the spiritual, we simultaneously minimize the suffering of the oppressed and cast off a vital limit demonstrated by their protest. *We should all oppose the pipeline.* It carries the lifeblood of capital, and thus, the essence of our crisis. The Standing Rock Sioux know well that we all rely on the health of our environment; why do we all not carry some echo of their passionate resistance?

Furthermore, the barbarity of the state was displayed in full force by the police and National Guard of North Dakota. The Native community at Standing Rock leveraged every suggested form of redress, beginning with a legal battle and then moving to peaceful protest, but they were still met by the iron fist of capital. Nothing has changed since the Battle at Blair Mountain; if you are a threat to profit you will be met with violence. However, such resistance should not discourage action. Even the relatively small group at Standing Rock, with little funding or support, managed to delay construction, cost ETP valuable time and money, and showed to a national audience the disguised brutality of the neoliberal state. If the protesters had not shown up, the construction would have been quietly completed and quickly forgotten; even if immediately futile, resistance may still make its mark on the future. With every strike, protest, and ideological victory, the working class pushes the dialectic of history a little further towards a better future.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion: Pessimism, Alarmism, and Normalization**

The inability to see what is in front of our eyes replicates the blindness of all past civilizations that celebrated their eternal glory at moments of precipitous decline. The difference is that life across the whole planet will go down this time. It is comforting to pretend this is not happening, to foster false hopes and fool ourselves with the myth of progress, but these illusions only tranquilize us at a moment when we should be rising in collective fury against those who are orchestrating our doom.

(Hedges, 2017)

### **1. On Tone**

To conclude our discussion, I want to address one final concern: Pessimism. I can think of no way—without being intellectually dishonest—of approaching the topic of climate change without sounding pessimistic. It is not a problem for the distant future, or a mere hypothetical. You will often hear climate change described as “on our doorstep;” this is untrue. In reality it is already in our kitchen smashing the dinner plates, many of us are just lucky enough to be upstairs and have not noticed yet. Almost nothing has been done to fight back, and—for the myriad of reasons listed in the previous three chapters—it would be foolish to expect that much else will be done soon. It is because I start from direct observation of the world that I expect the worst to happen. Pessimism is an unavoidable conclusion in the face of reality.

It is important to understand what the ‘worst’ actually is. Alarmist is a pejorative that right-wing populist movements often level at any who bring attention to climate change, examples of which can be found readily every election season. However, the label is not entirely un-earned.

Despite what alarmists might often claim, climate change is not the death of nature. It does not threaten to drive humanity to extinction, nor does it represent the end of human society. Climate change is far more mundane. It represents another stage in an ongoing mass extinction. It will demand the reorganization of politics, and de-globalization. Climate Change will harm the global south worse than the first-world and the poor more than the rich; an injustice that should dissuade any argument that it represents “deserved retribution from nature.” It will make life worse for all, but humans and their societies will adapt and continue. It should be avoided, if at all possible, but these are things that have happened before, and humanity has survived.

The distinction is necessary to address the common claim that “pessimism leads to inaction.” In reality, pessimism does no such thing: despair does. Despair is a resignation to death, and one who succumbs to its influence does so at the cost of their agency. Whereas pessimism is the natural result of taking a frank look at reality, despair results from internalizing the arguments of the alarmists. It is the alarmists who claim we will all die, that the earth will be unrecognizable, that it is already too far gone and that nothing can be done. If one genuinely believes as such, why should they act? Their fate is sealed, and nothing may be done about it. Pessimism, or rather, its grounding in striving to maintain an objective view of one’s situation, avoids this pitfall and allows us to retain our agency.

Yet, it is still somewhat puzzling why alarmism fails to motivate action. The logic seems clear enough: If the consequences are worse, why would we not try harder to avoid them? In response I would like to offer the Epicurean view that, “death is nothing to us.” Death, he argues, is the cessation of experience and one who does not experience cannot suffer. Epicurus originally intended this belief to be a foundation of a new morality, wherein our acceptance of materialist monism allowed us to escape concern for the afterlife and instead focus on maximization of

pleasure and minimization of pain (Bellamy 2000). I, however, offer it here in a different sense. We live in a materialist society, the growing dominance of scientific world-views and the degradation of religious cultural dominance has pushed large swaths of humanity to accept by default Epicurus' once radical position.<sup>118</sup> When the alarmist is believed, and death seems a guarantee regardless of action, the only logical thing left to do is ignore the problem and maximize pleasure in the meantime. However, the pessimist argument does not promise death, only suffering, which, counterintuitively, is scarier for most.

Pessimism is also often disparaged under the assumption that optimism is superior, but that too drives inaction. I use here use optimism in the sense that one has faith that the future will be better than the present. In respect to climate change this most is most often expressed in the sentiment “science will make some breakthrough and figure this out,” or, “the government is working on it, and we have to trust them.” In consideration of the facts neither seems likely, but the optimist maintains faith. In contrast the pessimist does not expect such developments, but that does not preclude hope for change. Antonio Gramsci is famous for advocating for “pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will,” by which he means “to describe the (seemingly contradictory) coexistence of a realistic description of the status quo, on the one hand, and a genuine commitment to the possibility of transforming reality, on the other,” (Antonioni 2019). The intellectual optimist is guided by faith, and in believing that positive developments will occur they believe the work to already be done. The pessimist, in contrast, is guided by hope. They do not expect positive development except that which is wrought by their own hands. It is this balance that we must seek

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<sup>118</sup> For those that still hold to religious doctrine a large majority are Christian (at least in the “western” world), but they too typically fall into this tendency to care little about dying. Nietzsche makes this critique multiple times in his writing but for space reasons I will gloss over it here.



in our approach to climate change. It is not faith in the other that will solve problems but hope in the capacity of the self.

The third and most common motivation for inaction is normalization: the simple acceptance that things are how they are, and the inability to see the possibility of a world that is any different. While both acknowledge the world for what it is, normalization differs from pessimism in two key respects: first, pessimism maintains the right to evoke change, nothing is taken as guaranteed; second, pessimism comes with a value judgment—it sees the current state of affairs as meaningfully wrong—whereas normalization is value neutral. When something becomes normalized it ceases to be the subject of thought, it simply falls into the same category as gravity: sometimes mildly interesting, but ultimately someone else’s problem to think about.

It is our fault as academics and intellectuals for pushing climate change into this category. Every conversation we have is dominated by statistics, data, and politics. For the vast majority of people this means little, and simply contributes to the storm of such things that hangs over the heads of everyone in our oversaturated information ecosystem. It does not have to be this way. Should we couch our conversation in the first-person experience by which we all engage with reality, we might draw in those that would otherwise ignore us. When I say insect populations have declined dramatically in recent years, or that winters are warmer and dryer, or that forests are being cut down for urban sprawl, it has no effect on most people. But if I evoke childhood memories of swarms of bugs in the summer, the massive snowstorms that would cancel school for weeks, or the woods outside town that have been replaced by a suburb, then people understand these changes. In the introduction, I insisted on the importance of pulling from such experiences to build a strong analytical framework, here I insist that it is also important that our findings flow back out in the

same language. People experience life in the language of poetry, not statistics, and it is critical that we speak in both.

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## **Curriculum Vita**

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