

SYMPOSIUM ON APOCALYPSE

Apocalypse, the Radical Left and the Post-political Condition*

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The explosion of the BP Deepwater Horizon rig in April 2010 killed eleven men, injured seventeen others, and spilled five million barrels of crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico. Although thousands of barrels of oil are spilled daily into the Amazon, the Niger Delta and many other places, and around 80 million barrels of oil are “spilled” into the atmosphere as CO₂ and other gasses, the BP oil spill rekindled the urgency of an oil-free future. Yet, the number of drilling rigs across the world continued to increase—including in the Gulf of Mexico. Less than a year later, in March 2011, the Japanese nuclear plant in Fukushima exploded, and with it the questionable promise of a more ecologically safe mode of energy generation. Three reactors went into full meltdown, releasing iodine-131 and cesium-137 isotopes into the atmosphere at levels that exceeded the Chernobyl disaster in 1986. And the bad news kept coming, prompting some governments to put nuclear power expansion on hold, though without, halting the construction of new nuclear power plants that were already in the process of being built. The Greenland ice sheet collapsed in July 2012. Climate scientists reported that 97 percent of the ice sheet surface showed some thawing. Two months later satellite imagery in the Arctic revealed that summer melt reduced frozen sea ice to an area less than 2.2 million square miles, leading some scientists to predict an ice-free Arctic in the summer months within two decades.

What do we make of these socio-ecological disasters? For many, such incidents do not represent isolated industrial accidents, let alone surmountable political challenges. Rather, they are events that both symbolically and materially bring into the present the specter of socio-ecological annihilation—signs of the apocalypse. A web search of “Fukushima” and “apocalypse,” to take one example, returns 1.3 million hits that include, roughly in equal numbers, religious and quasi-religious end-times rants, wonkish renderings by technopolicy experts, and reports by mainstream and alternative media outlets all proclaiming an apocalyptic present that threatens human existence on earth. Despite the fear and anxiety, few, at least in the West, appear capable of imagining a political solution to the current socio-ecological predicament. In other words, few among those concerned with the ecological future of the planet have been capable, or willing, to pose the ecological problem as a political problem, to question the political economic arrangements that might have produced it or exacerbated it and accordingly contemplate political responses that challenge those arrangements.

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One variant of the current socio-ecological predicament has occupied center stage, the problem of climate, displacing other socio-ecological questions and hinging the future of the earth and human civilization on finding technical solutions to the problem of carbon emissions and the warming of the atmosphere. For a long time the public debate was hijacked by wrangles over whether or not climate change is anthropogenic, i.e., induced by “human” activity, not to mention the fatuous debate over whether the climate is in fact changing. On another level, those who have accepted the inevitability of a world (already) radically transformed by climate change—a tacit acceptance of the inability to avert the catastrophe—have been bent on finding and devising ways to endure the apocalypse and adapt to the new environment. Very little has been said, or done, to challenge the given political and economic mechanisms of dealing with catastrophic climate change—the same mechanisms that appear to be at the root of the present socio-ecological predicament. This is not to say that the hegemonic discourse on catastrophic climate change, and the Sisyphean plans to avert it, have not gone unchallenged—resistance is often expressed *in practice*. Yet, we find ourselves stuck in the morass of a politics beset by contradictions between opposing certainties: the socio-ecological apocalypse has come upon us, but we must find ways to forestall its happening; the socio-ecological apocalypse will bring about the annihilation of the planet, but we must find ways to adapt to it.

There is a real urgency in the problem of climate change: the climate is changing and the global environment is transforming in ways that are detrimental to large populations of human and other beings. Climate catastrophism, however, displaces and defers the real urgency of socio-ecological disaster with the false urgency of an apocalyptic rhetoric that effaces the current plight of the marginalized and the disenfranchised, and negates the uneven consequences of climate change with the rhetoric of one planet, one destiny. “We’re all in it together,” the faithful preach. Well, we might be, which is perhaps the source of anxiety and insecurity of the wealthy and powerful about the threats of climate change.

But in climate catastrophism we see different forces at work. The apocalyptic rhetoric forecloses the possibility of radical democratic politics by evacuating politics from the debate about climate change and entrusting our presumed common destiny to the imaginations of wealthy individuals like Richard Branson and the non-democratic techno-managerial apparatuses of state bureaucracies, the military, the corporations, and the global institutions that represent their shared interests, such as the International Energy Agency and the World Bank—the agents of capitalist accumulation and the guardians of the power of the moneyed classes. Despite the failures of governments and markets since the Rio Summit of 1992 to achieve “consensus” on the path to a “sustainable” future—that is, a capitalist future that would be immune to anthropogenic interference with the earth’s climate—the transnational bourgeoisie has been bent on removing capitalism itself from the debate on climate change. Instead it presents capitalist expansion as the only imaginable, viable solution not only to the problem of climate change, but also to other socio-ecological problems such as food, water, and energy shortages. We know that capitalist mechanisms, both techno-managerial and economic, cannot resolve the crises of capitalism; but we also know that the environmental crisis, caused as it were by the logic of capitalist accumulation, will not on its own bring down the capitalist mode of accumulation—indeed, in some instances capitalist accumulation has been spurred by environmental and other disasters.

“To be radical is to grasp things by the root,” the young Marx remarked, and the struggle for alternative socio-ecological futures and the opposition to bourgeois sustainability requires a radical rethinking of the environment—rethinking that politicizes the environment and calls radical, collective political subjects into being. We invited six radical scholars to reflect on this problem: how can the radical Left articulate an alternative, decidedly antagonistic politics of nature that goes beyond the simple negation of bourgeois sustainability and the uncritical re-appropriation of the apocalyptic socio-ecological discourse as if it were inherently political, radical? This is, in our view, a critical question of our times, because the depoliticization of the socio-ecological environment is what makes its governance through the seemingly apolitical, techno-managerial mechanisms of capital possible and, consequently, the governance of a thoroughly depoliticized environment a critical matter of radical politics. Environmental politics is not in itself necessarily radical, but the radical Left cannot ignore the environmental problem in its two facets, both the socio-ecological disaster brought about by the imperative of incessant capital accumulation as well as the problem of leaving it to governments, financiers, and the technologists and technocrats of capital to define the environmental crisis and establish the conditions of possible socio-environmental futures. Climate change is already catastrophic; the bourgeois responses to climate change may be even worse.