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Climate X or Climate Jacobin?

A Critical Exchange on our Planetary Future

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Abstract: In *Climate Leviathan*, Mann and Wainwright address the political implications of climate change by theorizing four possible planetary futures: Climate Leviathan as capitalist planetary sovereignty, Climate Mao as non-capitalist planetary sovereignty, Climate Behemoth as capitalist non-planetary sovereignty, and Climate X as non-capitalist non-planetary sovereignty. The authors of the present essay agree that the depth and scale of destabilizations induced by climate change cannot be navigated justly from within the present social-political-economic system. We disagree, however, on which of the non-capitalist orientations is best suited for generating viable alternatives to the worst dystopian futures. The paper thus stages a debate to elucidate the theoretical and political divergence between Climate X and Climate Mao (renamed Climate Jacobin).

I: Introduction

According to prevailing predictions, anthropogenic climate change will precipitate a major ecological crisis in the next few decades. This will result in drastic and unevenly distributed shortages of basic resources, the large-scale movement of climate refugees, and unprecedented weather emergencies.¹ Glimpses of the coming crisis are already upon us. The United Nations estimates that 22.5 million people have been displaced by climate related events since 2008.² Coastal communities worldwide are already facing significant destabilization and land loss, especially in the Far North. Extreme and unprecedented weather events (forest fires, droughts, heat waves, hurricanes, flooding, polar freezes, etc.) have intensified in recent decades.³ These realities, only the tip of the (melting) iceberg, indicate the scope and severity of the ecological

¹ The 2018 IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) report focusses on the consequences of a 1.5° C raise in average temperature. Such a raise could occur as quickly as 11 years and certainly within 20 years without major cuts to global emissions and poses significant risks to “health, livelihoods, food security, water supply, [and] human security” (IPCC, 2018). See also Scranton, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*, 16-17.

² See United Nations Refugee Agency, “Climate Change and Disasters” and “Figures at a Glance.” Though causal claims are difficult to prove beyond question, there is some evidence that unprecedented drought in the Syrian countryside brought on by climate change contributed to the eventual outbreak of the Syrian civil war. See Fischetti, “How Climate Change Hastened Syria’s Civil War,” and Gleick, “Water, Drought, Climate Change and Conflict in Syria.”

³ See Center for Climate and Energy Solutions, “Extreme Weather and Climate Change,” and Climate Communication Science and Outreach, “Current Extreme Weather and Climate Change.”

and social disruption on the horizon if global greenhouse gas emissions maintain their current rates. They also present us with a burning question: how do we theorize the unprecedented?

What exactly is unprecedented can be understood in two ways: (i) climate change as a planetary phenomenon leading to the proposed new geological era known as the Anthropocene,⁴ or (ii) the effects of such a planetary phenomenon on extant social and political institutions and theories. In *Climate Leviathan*, which we hope will become a seminal text, Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright address the second question and envision four possible political responses to our dire ecological future. The global scale of the coming crisis, they argue, is poised to provide the necessary catalyst for a form of *planetary sovereignty*. This could take capitalist or anti-capitalist forms, which they call “Climate Leviathan” and “Climate Mao,” respectively. A *capitalist planetary sovereign* would extend present international capitalism to include a global governance structure, the bracketing (or co-opting) of liberal-democratic institutions, and the suspension of civic safeguards and constitutional rights, all in the name of necessary rapid adaptation and mitigation. Climate Leviathan would utilize the rhetoric of “saving the planet” as a means “to allow capitalist elites to stabilize their position amidst planetary crisis.”⁵ Think of it like “emergency politics” on a mass scale, or as a permanent state of exception at the global level.⁶ Climate Leviathan is contrasted with the *anti-capitalist planetary sovereign*, Climate Mao: a kind of left-wing authoritarianism in which a transition from capitalism to a sustainable socialist economy would be accomplished through coercive state control and centralized planning. Climate Mao “expresses the necessity of a just terror in the interests of the future of the collective...it represents the necessity of a planetary sovereign but wields this power *against* capital.”⁷

Mann and Wainwright also consider capitalist and anti-capitalist forms of *anti-planetary sovereignty*. The former they term “Climate Behemoth”: an ethno-nationalist backlash that resists centralized integration but along reactionary lines. Here, climate change is framed as a

⁴ The Anthropocene marks the acknowledgment of large-scale human industrial activity as a major and unprecedented influence on global climate. The literature on its implications and applicability is profuse and rapidly growing. For genealogies of the concept, see Crutzen, “Geology of Mankind,” or Steffen et al., “The Anthropocene: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives.”

⁵ Mann and Wainwright, *Climate Leviathan*, 15. Calls for a global governance structure in the face of climate change are not always accompanied with this insight into the prevailing dynamics of neoliberal governance. See, for example, Kitcher and Keller, *The Seasons Alter*, especially chapter six.

⁶ For reflections on these concepts, see Honig’s *Emergency Politics* and Agamben’s *State of Exception*. This intellectual lineage can be traced back to Schmitt’s *Political Theology*, and from there to Hobbes’s *Leviathan*.

⁷ Mann and Wainwright, *Climate Leviathan*, 38.

“national security risk” and state policy turns into what Christian Parenti has called the “armed lifeboat” strategy. This framing leads to “preparations for open-ended counter-insurgency, militarized borders, [and] aggressive anti-immigrant policing.”⁸ The rise of nationalist rhetoric in the United States, Brazil, and throughout Europe is an ominous portent of this possibility. Climate Behemoth is contrasted with an “admittedly utopian”⁹ alternative form they call “Climate X,” emphasizing the extent of its unknown variability. This would be both *anti-capitalist* and *anti-planetary sovereignty*.¹⁰ Climate X departs from charted models for sovereignty (whether leftist or rightist) within mainstream political theory, suggesting that climate change necessitates the transformation of our very conception of the political, of “what counts as political, and what kinds of things politics can or cannot change.”¹¹

“Our thesis,” write Mann and Wainwright, “is that the future of the world will be defined by Leviathan, Behemoth, Mao, and X and the conflicts between them.”¹² Just like climate change itself, this political reality is not a distant imaginative projection: countries like the United States, Great Britain, and Australia are already instructing their military and intelligence apparatuses to prepare for a form of “green security.”¹³ For anyone concerned with social justice and egalitarian politics in the broadest sense, Climate Leviathan and Climate Behemoth are frightening and unacceptable prospects: sooner or later, both terminate in a world of gated survival compounds of the rich and powerful who, immured with technological and virtual escapisms, convince themselves that the tragedy outside their gates is the unavoidable result of a neo-Darwinist human nature, selfish genes, and a natural order of winners and losers. That leaves us with Climate Mao and Climate X as “competing revolutionary figures in the worldly drama.”¹⁴ Mann and Wainwright, apprehensive about the totalitarian tendencies of the former, push their readers toward the latter. But as Harry van der Linden notes in his review of the book, X has organizational and programmatic difficulties to match any of the legitimate worries about a

⁸ Parenti, *Topic of Chaos*, 225. See also Scranton, *Learning to Die*, 14-17, and Dyer, *Climate Wars*.

⁹ Mann and Wainwright, *Climate Leviathan*, 48.

¹⁰ Behemoth still pursues an agenda of *national sovereignty*; so, for it, the prefix ‘anti’ only applies to the ‘planetary’ aspect of planetary sovereignty.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 79.

¹² *Ibid*, 30.

¹³ See Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 138-141, and Parenti, *Tropic of Chaos*, 13-20. See also Chaturvedi and Doyle, *Climate Terror*.

¹⁴ Mann and Wainwright, *Climate Leviathan*, 30.

return to statist Leftism; “our best hope,” he concludes, “may lie between Climate Mao and Climate X.”¹⁵

Both authors of the present essay agree that a global capitalism predicated on unlimited economic growth and the continued extraction and consumption of carbon based fuel sources cannot be maintained.¹⁶ Moreover, we agree with Mann and Wainwright that the depth and scale of the destabilizations induced by global climate change cannot be navigated justly from within the present social-political-economic system. It is therefore incumbent upon political theorists and philosophers to take seriously the task of conceptualizing alternatives. The incipient ecological catastrophe calls for a radical response, rather than ad hoc adaptations or bland mitigation strategies. Such ad hoc responses, as Mann and Wainwright point out, will fall short of a genuine climate justice and function instead to maintain prevailing neoliberal conceptions of governmentality, coupled with the underlying framework of global capitalism and the disparity of wealth it generates. We also agree that if the dominant political imaginary remains unchanged, then Climate Leviathan appears the most likely outcome.

The two authors of this essay *disagree*, however, on which of the non-capitalist orientations described by Mann and Wainwright is best suited for generating viable alternatives to the worst dystopian futures. In what follows, we stage a debate that we hope will elucidate the theoretical and political divergence involved in these two alternatives. In section two, Duvernoy advocates for Climate X. In section three, Busk makes the case for a form of Climate Mao (renamed “Climate Jacobin”). In other words, the first-person plural of the introduction and conclusion becomes two different first-person singulars in the two substantial argumentative sections. The crux of this paper is thus a critical exchange between two theoretical dispositions in the wake of anthropogenic climate change—both concerned with social justice and both anti-capitalist, but diverging sharply in their respective visions of the way forward.

At a descriptive level, we believe that van der Linden is right when he suggests that a hopeful climate future probably lies somewhere between Climate X and Climate Mao. The path toward such a future is hardly clear, however. As a normative intervention, this essay offers

¹⁵ van der Linden, “Climate Change and Our Political Future,” 375.

¹⁶ On the incompatibility between capitalism and a habitable climate future, see: Foster et al., *The Ecological Rift*, Angus, *Facing the Anthropocene*, Hornborg, “Cornucopia or Zero-Sum Game?”, Klein, *This Changes Everything*, Davis, “Who Will Build the Ark?”, and Schweickart, “Capitalism vs. the Climate.” In “Ideological Obstacles to Effective Climate Policy,” Gunderson et al. argue that advocacy of “green growth” and other kinds of “sustainable capitalism” amounts to a form of climate denialism.

competing cases for the answer to the question of which torch to follow as we stumble around in the dark. While these beacons represent largely opposed visions for ordering priorities, both remain in many respects ideal. If there is a possibility for some hybrid future that lies between their poles, it is not our intention here to theorize its genesis, but rather to more clearly distinguish the differences within which it would have to arise.

II. For Climate X (Duvernoy)

Theorizing alternative and just climate futures is both a call for and crisis of imagination. It is a crisis because lack of imagination reinforces fatalistic apathy that perpetuates and entrenches status quo narratives. This “atrophy of imagination under late capitalism,” as Adrian Parr puts it, reinforces negative feedback loops of despair, quietism or eschatological withdrawal.¹⁷ The call then is for an active imagination of alternatives. As Amitav Ghosh writes, “to imagine other forms of ...existence is exactly the challenge that is posed by the climate crisis: ...to think about the world as it is amounts to a formula for collective suicide. We need, rather, to envision what it might be.”¹⁸ Such imagination is not fantasy or denial, but rather one theoretical means for developing narratives towards actualizing a different future. Of the orientations outlined by Mann and Wainwright, Climate X is the best suited for this work.

Climate X combines Mann and Wainwright’s sense that climate change necessitates a changing conception of the political itself with Mike Hulme’s suggestion to “approach[ing] climate change as an idea” to “see what climate change can do for *us* rather than what *we* seek to do, despairingly, for (or to) climate.”¹⁹ Of course, as Mann and Wainwright recognize, without critical inspection the language of “we” is likely to fall short of genuine climate justice.²⁰ In this case, the opportunity of climate change will be leveraged by dominant powers for more of the same: Climate change as the newest growth industry, climate change in the service of

¹⁷ Parr, *Birth of a New Earth*, 177.

¹⁸ Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 128.

¹⁹ Hulme, *Why We Disagree about Climate Change*, 340-341, emphasis added. Hulme’s proposal is in no way intended as a denial of the physical reality of climate change: there is “powerful scientific consensus about the *physical transformation* of the world’s climate” and “this is a reality I [Hulme] believe in” (325, emphasis added). As such, Hulme distinguishes between “lower case climate change” and “upper case Climate Change”: where the former refers to the physical reality of greenhouse gas emissions effects on planetary climate systems and the latter to how this geophysical situation intersects with social, cultural, and political patterns.

²⁰ Mann and Wainwright, *Climate Leviathan*, 11-13.

profiteering, securitization, domination and land grabs. The preservation of life will continue to mean the preservation of the lives (and consumptive pleasures) of some (a global elite) at the expense of others, both human and nonhuman.

My advocacy for Climate X sees it as a way to use the destabilizations of climate change in the service of the creation of a more just and ecologically sustainable future. In many respects Climate X *could* be a kind of global socialism unpinned from the assumption of a centralized state authority. Formally, the fundamental question revolves around the state as the sole presumed form of viable sovereignty. As Mann and Wainwright write: “Must we have a sovereign? Is a nonsovereign entity impossible?”²¹ Given the hold of the state form on the political imagination, such a question can seem to border on the fantastic. The viability of a politics not grounded in a state sovereign would require radical change at levels of infrastructure, institutions, and for many, lifestyle. Such changes do not happen overnight or all at once. But they could be one way of understanding opportunities enabled by the severity of destabilization likely to result from climate crisis.

Mann and Wainwright also gesture towards positive resonances in content between different contemporary trajectories: namely that of an anti-capitalist Marxist left and the emergence of constellations of Indigenous resurgence and resistance.²² The challenge that defines Climate X is that of “bringing together [these] two trajectories” without merging or subordinating one to the other.²³ Indigenous political traditions in North America offer models for non-state alliances that are horizontal rather than vertical and that are not based on private property.²⁴ These traditions also extend the domain of the political to include nonhuman forms of life. Such extension challenges the unquestioned metaphysical assumption of human superiority that enables the predatory logics of domination, resource extraction, and profit as the sole arbiter of value that have generated the crisis in the first place.

Mann and Wainwright offer three guiding principles for theorizing a Climate X that is global but non-statist and anti-capitalist: equality, dignity and inclusion, and solidarity in

²¹ Ibid, 190.

²² See for example: Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus*, and Leanne Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*.

²³ Mann and Wainwright, *Climate Leviathan*, 189.

²⁴ Recognition of this resonance dates to Engels’s *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*. Though burdened by a reductive and racist terminology of “primitive” and “civilized,” Engels draws on independent ethnologist Lewis H. Morgan’s 19th century work on Iroquois social and political structures as a resource for thinking alternatives to industrial capitalism.

composing “a world of many worlds.”²⁵ To these should be added the principle of reciprocity as a means of alliance creation which they correctly locate as central to Indigenous political theory.²⁶ Indeed, reciprocity also informs an alternative conception of value. As Anishinaabe scholar and activist Leanne Simpson has observed: “My Ancestors didn’t accumulate capital, they accumulated networks of meaningful, deep, fluid, intimate collective and individual relationships of trust. In times of hardship, we did not rely to any great degree on accumulated capital or individualism but on the strength of our relationships with others.”²⁷ Reciprocity as a principle is inherently contextual, since a particular relation is a function of the specificities of place and affordances and capacities of the relevant agents. However, this does not mean that there is no place for a recognition of solidarity that extends beyond personal or particular community interests. The great difficulty in negotiating between isolated interests and a larger whole is of course one source of the attraction to the global sovereign alternative, whether Leviathan or Maoist. But if there is a pluralism in the insistence on reciprocity, it does not mean necessarily accommodating all individual voices or interests as such. Rather, as a principle, reciprocity is oriented towards creating networks of solidarity across different places and life-forms. It is not the only principle necessary for this task. Equally as important is a principle of consent between different forms of life, different communities, and different individuals. Consent in this context means that change cannot be forced or imposed, it must be agreed upon through processes of communication and negotiation.²⁸ While this raises a question of how to adjudicate disagreements between perspectives in this work, the best way of answering that question is through on-the-ground conversation between and across differences.

Both principles (consent and reciprocity) require some larger sense of shared purpose or context. Indeed, a pluralism that rests on tolerance without a shared purpose is all too easily

²⁵ Mann and Wainright, *Climate Leviathan*, 175-6.

²⁶ For exploration of reciprocity as ordering principle, see Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*. She also adds consent, noninterference, respect for self-determination, and diversity as equally important ordering principles (140). Atleo’s *Principles of Tsawalk* also emphasizes reciprocity and consent between different forms of life as crucial principles for rethinking sustainable community.

²⁷ Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 177. It should be noted here that these others include nonhuman animals and plants.

²⁸ Atleo observes that this principle follows a general metaphysical consensus that “reality is characterized by purposeful diversity” (Atleo, *Principles of Tsawalk*, 93). Consent therefore acknowledges the possibility of diverse purposes and roles and the “belief that each individual is unique and that this uniqueness requires free expression” (95). Crucially, this freedom of expression is not limitless, since it “cannot be inconsistent with creating balance and harmony within the diversity of community” (95). Furthermore, consent applies “to everything that is self-organizing, whether human, plant, or animal” (95).

coopted or rendered complacent. But where does such a shared sense of purpose come from? How can it be fostered while at the same time understanding reality as inherently diverse? The challenge lies in allowing a shared sense of purpose to emerge organically through natural processes of self-organization rather than imposing a single vision. This is a delicate, but crucial, line in imagining a politics capable of an authentic depth of transformation suitable for meeting the imperatives of climate change in a just and sustainable way. Indeed, Hannah Arendt declares that without some conception of larger shared world beyond one's individual interests, there is no authentic political life. Arendt uses "world" in a technical fashion such that the world is not just given, but rather must be both created and sustained. Part of the work of human life is the construction of a *shared world*. Because of her commitment to a classical European humanism however, Arendt locates the source of world in human-constructed "things": "the things of the world have the function of stabilizing human life...[humans] can retrieve their ...identity by being related to the same chair and the same table."²⁹

Can we expand a conception of world so that its shared sense is collective dependence upon the Earth? The creation of this world would no longer be oriented towards a pretense of removing the human from the natural, but rather a recognition that all forms of life participate within the same geophysical environments. Could we ground a shared sense of world by recognizing fundamental relations to the same river, the same mountain, the same sea, the same forest? The temporal dimension of such a world is crucial. As Adrian Parr points out, the endurance of Arendtian world is held together by the capacity for promise that traverses the three times of past, present and future: "A promise stirs forth a future held in common that is realized by remembering a past commitment."³⁰ Climate X is predicated on a promise to the Earth in recognition of the nature of the human presence as dependent on Earth, not authoritarian over it. Such promises are place based and extend beyond the present to include future generations. People work to preserve and restore ecological health in the place where they are, while also noting that places cannot be ultimately healthy in isolation from the health of other ecosystems.

²⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 137. This commitment leads Arendt to define "world" in contrast to "nature": "Without a world between men and nature, there is eternal movement, but no objectivity" (137). My suggestion above denies this essential separation.

³⁰ Parr, *Birth of a New Earth*, 186. In another example of unexpected resonance, Jerry Martien's unorthodox but illuminating study on the role of Wampum in maintaining the delicate political balance of the northeastern Iroquois confederacy shows how these beads functioned as visible forms of "promises" made between groups and extending into the future. Martien shows how the early colonial capture of Wampum as merely a form of money completely misunderstood this complex political function (Martien, *Shell Game*).

In working to imagine a future held in common, this promise must also reckon with the grave injustices, violences, and harms constitutive of colonialism and globalized capitalism in the past and present. Such reconciliation is part of the work of building and restoring community that takes many forms. Kyle Whyte (Potawatomi scholar-activist) notes that place based efforts at the conservation or restoration of native species, something best understood by those who have lived attentively in a place for a long time, is a *political* action, “These multispecies engagements are not aimed solely at avoiding the physical loss of certain species or ecosystems, but also at building people’s appreciation of what it means to share local places in light of how they are implicated in more regional and global forces such as industrial settler colonialism.”³¹ In such restoration projects, the possibility of cross-community understanding is mediated through a shared engagement with responsibility for local place: “The sturgeon, wild rice, and water restoration programs feature public events that bring together indigenous people and members of settler society to learn about how humans are entangled with other species and with the environment.”³² This further enables the potential for “reconciliation among people so that they come to have sufficient appreciation of their different histories and can share responsibilities and be accountable to each other.”³³ Simpson and Glen Coulthard connect such decolonial and indigenous resurgence projects with an anti-capitalism that doesn’t seek to take over the state, but rather refuses to recognize the state as legitimate locus of power. While “resurgent organizing...is necessarily place based and local, ...it is also networked.”³⁴ The principle of such networking is horizontal and decentralized rather than vertical and centralized.

Undoubtedly, a challenge of the Climate X approach is the extent to which it requires a rethinking of the question of value. This is necessary because capitalism is not only a system of material production, but also a system that produces subjectivities that continue to desire and perceive as necessary an unceasing stream of disposable goods.³⁵ Part of capitalism’s destructiveness follows from its eradication of place based difference in the name of universal reductive value (quantitative profit) functioning through the logic of equivalence. If Marx first

³¹ Whyte, “Our Ancestors’ Dystopia Now,” 214.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 178. Simpson includes numerous examples of networked organizing. To name just a few: “Indigenous intellectuals giving talks in the prison system in a coordinated, nation-based way...a network of urban breakfast programs highlighting Indigenous food systems and alliances between reserves and cities...a network of land-based freedom schools for all ages, ...a series of coordinating, rotating blockades and camps across Turtle Island that challenge extractivism” (178).

³⁵ Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*.

posits equivalence as an operational necessity to enable exchange, equivalence now becomes the operation for the reduction of all forms of value into one. A “global market destroys specific value systems and puts them on the same plane of equivalence: material assets, cultural assets, wildlife areas, and so on.”³⁶ A key philosophical question for Climate X therefore involves the mode of power and how power is valued – can we create an ecologies of power that do not function according to one single conception? Seizing control of the modes of production alone is not likely to engender such a radical transformation in how we think, understand, and perform power. It is not just *who* is controlling these modes but *what* is being produced, *why*, and *how*.

Where a Climate Mao approach implicitly supports a univocal conception of power’s function, a Climate X approach understands social, political, and economic functions and powers on an ecological model. Rather than focus exclusively on the possession of power construed primarily through the lens of existent structures (even if the call is to topple or change control of these structures), an ecological model of power multiplies the sites of power and complicates its dynamics. Part of this is strategic. Capitalism has shown remarkable elusiveness in its ability to co-opt, capture, and incorporate forms of direct resistance. The beast has become so big, so all consuming, that we must get creative in finding tactics of slaying it from the inside out. This means thinking how alternative forms of value can be encouraged and intensified, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari put it, “within the pores” of the existing systems so as to eventually overwhelm those systems.³⁷ This doesn’t mean giving up on solidarity, but rather working to create it in particular ways. This is what Brian Massumi means when he writes, “The question of the ecology of powers *cannot be separated from the critique of capitalism* and the Imagineering of postcapitalist futures.”³⁸ Massumi considers cryptocurrencies, local currencies, and sharing economies as all indicators of current experiments towards “an ecology of alter-economic endeavors.”³⁹ While these alone are not enough, they are indicators of ways that a Climate X future might be generated through different local engagements, *provided these are not captured by the value of economic profit alone*. This requires learning to value differently, a process that can take different forms at different levels of subjectivity and society. The challenge is avoiding the capture by one dominant value (equivalence and profit).

³⁶ Ibid, 20.

³⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 226.

³⁸ Massumi, *99 Theses on the Revaluation of Value*, 54.

³⁹ Ibid, 24.

A final point of divergence between Climate Mao and Climate X has to do with the imperative of temporal urgency. Climate change (in Hulme's capital C-sense) is structured by a temporality of prediction that remains primarily oriented towards the future in its invocation of anxiety and fear (even as they function in the present). Such anxiety and fear lends itself to panicked exceptionalisms easily adapted by the "state of exception" that Giorgio Agamben and others have identified as the perpetual logic of the 21st century security state.⁴⁰ Given the hold this logic has on military and security complexes of Western nation states, stoking the fires of climate anxiety can reinforce destructive feedback loops if it fails to attend to its complicity in the unfolding of the potentials it diagnoses. Activation of fear alone, even if well intended, potentially feeds into the system that must be overcome. Indeed, the futural structure of climate anxiety is not unrelated to affective ways that capitalism perpetuates itself. The leveraging of debt and scarcity and the incumbent fear and anxiety that this produces serve to constrain subjectivities and the possible articulation of alternative forms of value.⁴¹ As Massumi puts it, "Ultimately, *it is the future that is captured by capital*. The capture of the future is the capture of potential, change, becoming."⁴² Anxiety about the future may reinforce a capitalist response (stockpiling, the drive to be a global 'winner' so as to be impervious to climate change). Capitalism in this sense functions to capture and constrain life itself: "Capital is the economic lever of the time of potential. ...it captures the future of vitality...it captures life's potential...[and thus] operates directly as a mechanism of power."⁴³

Imagining alternatives to this capture doesn't mean pretending the crisis is not real or that the temporal horizon of current predictions can simply be ignored. But it does mean being particularly careful about the way that the logic of temporal urgency is used to justify extremities. Worries that 'we don't have time' for the constructive work of alliance building with place and community based movements are easily co-opted in the name of a unilateral vision of progress that presumes a single temporal dimension to the crisis. But as Mann and Wainwright observe, "the world's peoples live in a multitude of geo-ecological times despite our planetary 'simultaneity,' and the forces that have helped shape these worlds are not reducible to

⁴⁰ Agamben, *State of Exception*.

⁴¹ Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man*.

⁴² Massumi, *99 Theses on the Revaluation of Value*, 38.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 17.

‘humanity’ in general, but to particular natural-historical social formations.”⁴⁴ Panic about a lack of time, though a powerful existential temptation, has the unintended effect of placing an apocalyptic dystopia into the future and thus failing to recognize the way that colonialism and industrialized capitalism enact a dystopia in both present and past. Lawrence Gross writes, “Native Americans have seen the ends of their respective worlds...Just as importantly, though, Indians survived the apocalypse. This raises the further question, then, of *what happens to a society that has gone through an apocalyptic event?*”⁴⁵ Whyte adds, “reflecting on why our ancestors would have perceived the present as dystopian provides guidance on how to live under post-apocalyptic conditions.”⁴⁶

While fear of global collapse may spark action, it can also provide justification for authoritarian control that I doubt can truly realize a just climate future. This enables a unilateral and non-ecological conception of power to continue. An alternative sees the grave destabilizations of climate change as “an intensification or intensified episode of colonialism.”⁴⁷ From this perspective, univocal and global seizure of power would appear as the latest iteration of the logic of colonialism. The challenge of Climate X is imagining and activating alternative narratives to a univocal language of collapse—what is collapsing? Is it life itself? Or is it a certain image of life, a certain range of behaviors, and a certain set of norms and values based on core premises of capitalist subjectivity: the accumulation of capital as wealth, the standardization and homogenization of equivalence as sole metric of value? What can be reborn in the space opened by such collapse? In order for that to happen, we have to build psychic and social resilience that accepts precarity and vulnerability as conditions of ecological life that cannot be legislated or engineered away. Developing narratives that accept the reality of destabilization as the consequences of ongoing capitalist behavior might mean not rushing to resolve these consequences in a way that presumes one dominant linear narrative, even as it also means showing up where one is to work on fostering alternative anti-capitalist ways of being in the present.

III: For Climate Jacobin (Busk)

⁴⁴ Mann and Wainwright, *Climate Leviathan*, 188.

⁴⁵ Gross, *Anishinaabe Ways of Knowing and Being*, 33, emphasis added.

⁴⁶ Whyte, “Indigenous Climate Change Studies,” 160.

⁴⁷ Whyte, “Indigenous Climate Change Studies,” 155.

By designating the statist Leftist possibility “Climate Mao,” Mann and Wainwright evoke both the tyrannical history of the Maoist regime and the environmental failings of contemporary China. Of course, nothing in the ideal of a socialist international state power implies either of these things (the cult of personality must be considered anathema, and China’s economy is capitalist anyway).⁴⁸ They might just as easily have called it “Climate Jacobin” (or even “Climate Comintern”), which, while not leaving out the potentially intimidating historical legacy, suggests what is actually implied in a statist Left position: that we must take and wield state power in the interest of a global socialist project. This perspective insists that the reality of anthropogenic climate change requires a centrally directed, enforceable, internationally coordinated restructuring of the economic system along socialist lines, and that, because our window of time for action is closing so rapidly, institutions that stand in the way of the realization of this project must be forcibly suppressed. As for the best way to accomplish this, or how exactly to implement it, or what exactly it would entail, I offer no manual; what is possible or prudent at any given time or in any given space will depend on a myriad of circumstantial specificities.⁴⁹ We are talking about politico-theoretical orientations for climate futures, not about programs for immediate action—though, hopefully, the former will inform the projects of the latter. By rejecting statist Leftism, Mann and Wainwright conform to the prevailing animosity against revolutionary politics, tacitly accepting what Slavoj Žižek refers to as “our post-modern era of ‘emergent properties’, the chaotic interaction of multiple subjectivities, of free interaction instead of centralized hierarchy, [and] of a multitude of opinions instead of one

⁴⁸ They do acknowledge that this alternative “lies at the end of the red thread running from Robespierre to Lenin to Mao” (38). They insist, however, that this possibility is distinctly Asian for geographical as well as theoretical reasons: only in this part of the world is the combination of established revolutionary ideology, powerful states, and masses of dispossessed agricultural and industrial workers sufficient to bring forth something like an anti-capitalist planetary sovereignty (41-42). I do not argue this point in terms of likelihood, but insofar as Mann and Wainwright’s project is prescriptive and not merely descriptive, there is no reason to preclude the possible rise of a statist Leftist imaginary elsewhere—as I will argue below, this is certainly no *less* likely than the emergence of Climate X in the Euro-Atlantic world. Furthermore, by designating this alternative with proper name(s)—something unique among the possible climate futures—Mann and Wainwright have already stacked the deck, suturing statist Leftism to the cult of personality.

⁴⁹ For some, this is enough to muzzle the conversation. Corneo’s *Is Capitalism Obsolete?* imagines nine possible alternatives to capitalism, and concludes that each has respective opportunity costs that render it inferior to the system it intends to replace. He argues for a market economy with a partial public shareholding, along with a robust welfare state—“capitalism with a human face” (226). Climate change is not mentioned once in the book, and one is left to wonder how the balance sheet would look with Climate Leviathan or Climate Behemoth, followed by extinction, added to the accounts. Cf. Li, “The Twenty-First Century: Is there an Alternative (to Socialism)?”

Truth...”.⁵⁰ They also participate in what Antonio Vázquez-Arroyo calls “an increasingly prominent theoretical temperament, where conviction becomes a synonym of authoritarianism while fuzziness has become identified as democratic.”⁵¹ If I advocate something like Climate Jacobin over Climate X, it is because I think the present situation demands a shift in our thinking away from these theoretical dispositions. In other words, I think it is incumbent upon those of us invested in a habitable climate future to reconsider our aversion to what “Climate Jacobin” represents and, conversely, our complementary attraction to what Climate X represents.

The case for Climate X over and against statist Leftism is essentially a case for the *politics of form* over and against *the politics of content*—in fact, the distinctive feature of Climate X is that it has no content. This tendency has become very common in critically minded social and political theory. We reject ‘totalizing explanations,’ without asking whether or not a given explanation is adequate to the object under discussion. Because certain totalizing explanations have been wrong, or have been used to justify violence and domination, we reject the *form* of the totalizing explanation and not the *content* of particular explanations. We talk about the proliferation of alternative subjectivities and modes of community, but do not say very much about what these subjectivities or modes should look like. It is another one of our articles of faith: we cannot and should not determine what ‘modes of community’ should be ‘in advance’ (it cannot be ‘pre-determined’). But we do not seem to realize that *new* and *different* subjectivities, modes of community, multiplicities of becoming, and “practices of disruptive countersovereignty” do not necessarily coincide with *good* politics—something can be new and different and yet still be hideous and violent. What some of us want, and what even advocates of ‘Climate X’ gesture toward, is *anti-capitalist, anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-heterosexist, anti-imperialist* (etc. etc.) politics. So why not simply say that? We do not really want the creation of alternative subjectivities and modes of community *as such*, at the level of form; we want political developments that conform to the ideals we have established, through reason, through dialogue, through experience, through work.

The same can be said for the prevailing theoretical allergy to ‘top down’ enforcements of ‘unilateral visions of progress.’ Imposing politics ‘from above’ commits the same error: it breaks the rules on a *formal* level, prior to any questions about the content of this ‘top down from

⁵⁰ Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, 159.

⁵¹ Vázquez-Arroyo, “Agonized Liberalism,” 14.

above' administration. If Hitler, Pinochet, or Mao went wrong, it was in the presumption that they had found the 'right answer' to politics, supposedly based on objective criteria, and were willing to impose it on others using force if necessary. According to prevailing theory, the wrongness lies in this ambition, not in the *content* of the politics they were trying to enforce. But we do not have to look very far to find cases in which we as Left-leaning or progressive thinkers would side with the 'top down administration' against the 'local community.' The Cuban government, for example, was recently forced to remove a clause from its constitution that would guarantee marriage equality (i.e., rights for LGBTQ communities) when masses of citizens took to the streets in protest.⁵² Would we read this as a form of "disruptive countersovereignty" contesting a 'top-down' totalitarian regime trying to impose its standard of normativity 'from above'? It fits the form like a glove. Should we then be on the side of the protesters, rather than the government? If we wince at this conclusion, it is because what is actually important to us is the *content* (LGBTQ rights) of the politics and not the *form* (top-down administration v. popular contestation). You may say: ok, but the thing to do is cultivate a recognition of LGBTQ rights among the populace through 'on the ground practices' hoping to form of symbiotic agreement through processes of creation. Three cheers for all of this. But in the meantime, before this process of re-subjectivation has occurred, are we going to let the LGBTQ population suffer? Or should we support the government's original decision, and encourage it to enforce this norm 'from above'? The history of federally enforced race policy in the American South is another example; from abolitionism to desegregation, Southern leaders protested in the name of local self-determination, but the federal government intervened anyway. You might object: these were steps to protect vulnerable communities. Quite right. But if we are prepared to bracket our formal commitments against 'imposition from above' and 'single universal standards' in cases where certain communities are threatened, then why should we hold fast to them when it comes to climate politics, which threatens life itself?

If we agree, as more and more scholars are arguing and as at least some advocates of Climate X seem to believe, that capitalism is incompatible with a sustainable climate future, then a particular political proposition presents itself: *we must dismantle and replace capitalism*. This does not mean that this project is a sufficient condition for a habitable and egalitarian future (capitalism might be replaced with a far worse system), but it is a necessary one. It also does not

⁵² See Associated Press, "Cuba removes support for gay marriage in new constitution after protests."

necessarily imply a political myopia—even if all are inseparable from it, not all of the world’s problems are reducible to capitalism. But insofar as dismantling and replacing capitalism is necessary for a livable climate future, this seems like a straightforward political objective *qua* objective. If this stated objective is ‘totalizing’ or ‘single register’ or a ‘metanarrative,’ then so be it. Why would we want horizontal and decentralized organization if we have recognized that a livable future would require an emphatically *macro* change of a *specific* kind? What we are confronting is a system, and so our response needs to be systematic. “In climate politics,” as Andreas Malm says, “singling out that root cause is not a matter of intellectual satisfaction. It is a matter of life and death.”⁵³ More egalitarian distribution within the commodity economy will not be sufficient, and a shift toward renewable energy from within the present system will not be sufficient either. What is necessary is planned and strategic degrowth.⁵⁴ Given the size and the interdependence of the global economy, this cannot be accomplished without centralized organization (this is what an “ecological model” actually suggests, not decentralization). I do not mean by this that the U.S. (or other Euro-Atlantic powers) should assume control to unilaterally enforce this process; but given the enormous military and economic leverage wielded by this state apparatus, no habitable climate future is likely to be realized without its cooperation.

Once we have recognized that capitalism must be dismantled in order to secure a sustainable climate future, the question of what will replace it becomes decisive. Insofar as Climate X articulates a negative moment while refusing to fill-in-the-blank when it comes to a positive political project, it runs the risk of tearing down the capitalist scaffold without leaving any support for the global economy that, for worse and occasionally for better, it has created. There are no longer “many worlds”; there is only one world. Will the millions of people (in the U.S. and around the world) who make their living directly or indirectly from the fossil fuel industry support a transition to renewable energy without confidence in a new economic model overseen by a strong state? Will a given community, or nation, or confederation of nations be able to green its economy without support from the geopolitical center of power and its control over finance and resources? Consider the billion automobiles and tens of thousands of airplanes driving and flying around the world today: will the indeterminate, horizontal, networked, ‘bottom-up,’ local, and spontaneous forces of Climate X be able to oversee the transition away

⁵³ Malm, *The Progress of this Storm*, 112.

⁵⁴ For a defense of this position over and against ‘green growth’ perspectives, see Burton and Somerville, “Degrowth: A Defense.”

from fossil-powered transportation? No—this would require a vertically organized, centrally directed plan to fashion a new economy based on a logic of sustainability rather than a logic of accumulation. In other words, it would require socialism. Of course, the question of how to achieve and implement this objective must be discussed, researched, and tested with the greatest attention paid to geographical and socioeconomic specificity. My advocacy of Climate Jacobin is an advocacy of *statist Leftism*; it needn't look exactly like China, or like any other existing example for that matter, but it does need to be socialist and it does need to have recourse to state power. The reality of anthropogenic climate change demands a politics of content, not a politics of form. It is not 'totalizing' reason *as such* which has engendered this problem and 'pluralism' *as such* that will address it, but, respectively, the necessities of capitalist society and its transformation into a socialist society. Imagining 'new forms of politics' is not enough; we must imagine a socialist future and what it will take to get there.

You might object: but given that tearing down and establishing a new system would require new forms of oppression and coercion, are we really any better than the current oppressors and coercers? If 'new coercion' provides a habitable climate future and a more egalitarian social order, then the choice between that and the 'old coercion' is no choice at all. But this is the crux of Climate X: why choose between coercion A and coercion B? Why not try to cultivate new forms of subjectivity outside of the logic of coercion? Following Simpson, we could "refuse to recognize the state as legitimate locus of power" rather than "seeking to take [it] over." Our acknowledged adversary (global capitalism), being insensitive to these moral niceties, is not likely to be overcome this way, and a categorical opposition to vertical organization, to coercion and targeted violence—i.e., to *taking power*—ensures our perpetual defeat. We might have our moral superiority, but they will have the world. Perhaps, against all odds, the cultivation of alternative subjectivities will create some sort of chain reaction that will reach some kind of critical mass and global capitalism will collapse without any 'holistic' or 'monolithic' organization. But it is difficult to imagine how the kind of ecologically sustainable practices necessary for climate change mitigation will be implemented and enforced on the necessary scale (perhaps an imaginative failure on my part); as Malm says, "in the warming condition, every local site is a plaything in the hands of the earth system."⁵⁵ We have seen what happens to resistance at local or even regional levels—capital flight makes it difficult to maintain

⁵⁵ Ibid, 148.

an economy; when Wal-Mart employs most of the town, “indigenous resurgence” cannot go very far. We have also seen what happens when resistance at a national level comes from the periphery—the imperial center will sanction (or coup or invade) until the resistance comes to seem like a bad idea in the first place. The Zapatistas—whom it is high time we stopped fetishizing—still use plastic and still deforest,⁵⁶ not because they are indifferent to or ignorant of climate change, but because they are forced by the exigencies of their situation. Disruptive counter-sovereignty will always come up against the hard limits of an interdependent and heteronomous global economic system. We simply cannot change the world without taking power.

Even if we grant the possibility of a networked constellation of localities gradually reversing the course on climate change, *we do not have that kind of time to spare.*⁵⁷ Granted, a mass anti-capitalist movement does not seem to be on the horizon either (though it does seem closer than it did ten years ago), but given that this decentralized awakening is certainly no *more* likely than an organized socialist turn, our normative contribution as critical political theorists should be on behalf of the latter. Of course, theory does not contribute all that much, but to cite Malm once again, at least it should not “be part of the problem.”⁵⁸ Bearing this in mind, it is time for critical political theory to reconsider its fetishization of ‘the local’ and the ‘decentralized.’ Even Mann and Wainwright argue that in ceaselessly deferring to ‘local battles’ “we are tempted to rationalize our marginality as an inevitable product of the world in which we are forced to live” rather than owning up “to the enormity of the political and ecological challenges of the future.”⁵⁹ At a time when any attempt to nationalize or even compulsorily purchase fossil fuel corporations would be blocked as ‘unconstitutional,’ the fetish of decentralization and the categorical refusal of planetary sovereignty may do more harm than good.

The politics of form, where vertical organization and centralized control *as such* are considered problems, owes a substantial debt to the political philosophy of liberalism, in spite of its radical, indigenous, and even anti-capitalist overtones.⁶⁰ It also draws its appeal from well-

⁵⁶ See Sethness-Castro, “Neo-Zapatista Autonomy.”

⁵⁷ The urgency of swift and rapid action cannot be underestimated, even if this urgency is often utilized for reactionary ends. See Spratt and Sutton, *Climate Code Red*.

⁵⁸ Malm, 16.

⁵⁹ Mann and Wainwright, *Climate Leviathan*, 166.

⁶⁰ Isaiah Berlin: “The criterion of oppression is the part that I believe to be played by other human beings...in frustrating my wishes. By being free in this sense I mean not being interfered with by others. The wider the area of

entrenched currents of democratic thinking: the people—understood either as an aggregate collection or as a multiplicitous and unpredictable series of contestations—are sovereign, not some authority imposed from outside, even if that authority is ‘reason’ or ‘the common good.’⁶¹ But as theorists like Philip Kitcher, Parr, Malm, and even Mann and Wainwright have pointed out,⁶² the democratic form in no way guarantees anything resembling policies indicative of a habitable climate future—in fact, as long as climate skepticism and general political ignorance define the character of the *demos* (understood in either sense described above), it will most likely have exactly the opposite effect. As Parr puts it: “The power of the people...is not inherently emancipatory.”⁶³ Despite this, our theoretical impulses still rely on a wisdom which is all too conventional, and so we must ask if the ‘failure of imagination’ charge applies more readily to Climate X than to Climate Jacobin. The statist-Leftist imaginary has been so thoroughly desecrated—not only by liberal-democratic political theory but also by the ‘radical’ and ‘critical’ traditions—that theorists who attempt its rehabilitation (such as Jodi Dean or Žižek⁶⁴) now appear as more original and novel than those who constantly enjoin us to imagine the unprecedented for reasons that actually coincide with the mainstream political hosannas of the day. If climate change demands that we think differently, and indeed it does, then we should recognize that Climate Jacobinism is actually a more decisive departure from the prevailing ideological ethos than Climate X.

In *Windfall: The Booming Business of Global Warming*, McKenzie Funk speaks of “humankind’s mix of vision and tunnel vision” in dominant responses to climate change, i.e., that we only seem capable of approaching the problem from the point of view of profitability--the very point of view exacerbating the problem every day.⁶⁵ Even as climate change and its underlying causes become clearer (vision), we remain ensconced within the law of the value form (tunnel vision). The same could be said about our refusal to rethink our liberal-democratic

non-interference, the wider my freedom.” See “Two Concepts of Liberty,” 195. Cf. Berlin’s criticism of “positive freedom” (203-206) with the present climate crisis (and with Climate X).

⁶¹ This democratic objection against planetary sovereignty is capable of giving pause to otherwise sober and unromantic commentators—see Delina, *Strategies for Rapid Climate Mitigation*, 161-162.

⁶² See Kitcher, “Plato’s Revenge,” Parr, *Birth of a New Earth*, 75-84, 202-203, Malm, *The Progress of this Storm*, 152, and Mann and Wainwright, *Climate Leviathan*, 182. See also my own critique of democracy as a critical category, with climate skepticism foregrounded, in *Democracy in Spite of the Demos*.

⁶³ Parr, *Birth of a New Earth*, xviii. Popular climate skepticism is not a uniquely American problem, either. See Dunlap and McCright, “Challenging Climate Change,” 318-320.

⁶⁴ See Dean, *Crowds and Party*, and Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*.

⁶⁵ Funk, *Windfall*, 6.

articles of faith at the level of theory. Our vision should tell us that addressing a problem as serious and as systemic as climate change requires an organized and consolidated utilization of state power, which may not respect pluralism (all ‘sides’ need to be accounted for), autonomy (each community should determine itself as it sees fit), or a litany of negative freedoms (no one should be coerced into doing what they don’t want to do, or into giving up their property, etc.). But our tunnel vision tells us that abstract concepts like ‘domination’ and ‘totality’ are to be avoided at all cost, regardless of any specific content, and so we remain within the world of liberal democracy. “But,” Funk asks, “what if the world as we know it goes on even as the Earth as we know it begins to disappear?”⁶⁶ His question is as relevant to the conceptual world of liberal democracy as it is to the economic world of profit maximization (and between these two there is, of course, more than an accidental relation).

It will be objected that the kind of statist Leftism I am advocating here is ‘obsolete,’ out of date, just no longer relevant, etc. We should learn from past experience, the story goes, and the experience of statist Leftism in the twentieth century was a political, economic, and humanitarian disaster. There are good reasons to be skeptical of this historical narrative.⁶⁷ But in any case, the question is poorly posed. In addition to asking what the past can teach us, we should also ask: *what can the future teach us?* We should measure the possible calamities involved in ‘repeating past mistakes’ against what Ann Kaplan has insightfully called our “pretrauma.”⁶⁸ Is the incipient reality of an untrammelled global capitalism brutally dealing with an insurgent climate crisis—with only sporadic, disorganized, and ineffective pockets of resistance to challenge it—more or less frightening than a ‘totalitarian’ Left government that stands a chance of ensuring the conditions for the sustained survival of the species? Will the moral comfort of not having taken power be worth the scorching of the planet? With a glance cast toward the future, it is in fact the liberal-democratic ethos—which courses through the veins of Climate X—that is ‘obsolete.’

IV. Conclusion

⁶⁶ Ibid, 7.

⁶⁷ Conveniently, the devastation, slavery, and war that has accompanied the capitalist economic form around the world is seldom attributed *to* capitalism. To scratch the surface of capitalism’s body count, see Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts*.

⁶⁸ See Kaplan, *Climate Trauma*.

Both Climate X and Climate Jacobin recognize that climate change is not a logistical problem to be solved by the twin saviors of technological innovation and the ‘free market.’ They both point to the constitutive complicity between capitalism and the social structures, behaviors, and values that continue to impede the emergence of non-pathological alternatives to a dystopian planetary future. When poet C.D. Wright asks with a shudder, “What if this is just *middle* capitalism?”⁶⁹, she prompts us to realize that the displacements, deaths, and destruction caused by climate change are not enough *on their own* to foster the ideological and economic changes necessary for avoiding even more inequitable social and political scenarios. It is clear that conditions of life in the Anthropocene will not continue complacently along patterns of the past and that, one way or another, a global economy based on the extraction and consumption of fossil fuels as the primary source of energy will end. What is less clear is whether this end will involve large scale violence, warfare, and the suffering of millions, or whether we can find ways to navigate this transition less chaotically.

The division between Climate X and Climate Jacobin comes down to the question of how best to navigate. By seizing the currently existing state form and marshalling its powers towards an ecological socialism, or by a more gradual fostering of radically different forms of decentralized sovereignties? Through centralized control and the hard fist of authority, or through horizontal networking and place based alliance building? Using the iconography of the historical Left, or trying to construct new political imaginaries? A decisively articulated endpoint (with the specifics up for further study), or an articulation of principles as means for fostering an alternative future whose endpoint cannot be fully described at present? *Sovereignty or counter-sovereignty?*

We can put the question in pragmatic terms: given the likelihood that *no* theoretical orientation can predict socio-political outcomes with certainty, which is more likely to generate a livable climate future? This admits that the concrete future will differ in its precise details from either of these two exclusive orientations and opens the possibility for some hybrid that combines elements of each. The details of such a combination are not the goal here, however, precisely because they must emerge based on the practical contingencies and unforeseeable events of particular future situations. What we have offered instead is two different theoretical lures. While both invite further thought, they also clearly articulate different priorities for how to

⁶⁹ Wright, *The Poet, the Lion...*, 32

strategize and prioritize choices of action. While we disagree about the best way to negotiate the implications of climate change's temporal urgency, this is not because of any disagreement about the severity of the challenge. The time for a 'wait and see' complacency is definitively finished. The theorist must confront the future from the standpoint not only of observer, but also of participant in the emergence of collective actions that, together, work to reroute the ship of humanity from its current course of suicidal myopia. Climate X and Climate Jacobin plot different courses; it is our hope that this essay has communicated a meaningful case to be made for each.

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