Climate “Post-Apocalypse” and the Utopian Imperative

written by Brian Tokar | August 4, 2025

Images of climate-driven disaster have come to dominate our awareness on nearly a weekly basis. This is true even in North America, which was one of the last places on earth where climate disruptions were widely seen as a problem for future generations. Images of rural towns and urban neighborhoods devastated by wildfires across California may now be permanently etched into our minds. Places once seen as climate refuges, from Vermont to North Carolina and beyond, have experienced repeated cycles of destructive flooding. The intensity of tropical storms, tornadoes, and even midwinter blizzards sometimes far exceeds our accustomed norms. And we know these experiences are matched throughout the world, from raging wildfires in Greece to flooded towns in parts of central and western Europe, flooded major cities across south Asia and persistent droughts from the Middle East and East Africa to Central America and Australia.

Satellite data spanning many decades now confirms what advocates for climate justice have been saying for some time: that the onset of climate-driven disasters and excessive heating, which arrived relatively recently to the global North, occurred decades ago in the world’s most vulnerable regions. We now know that the signal of climate disruptions was perceptible in the Caribbean, East Africa, and East Asia as long ago as the 1970s, arrived in much of the rest of the global South in the 1980s, and then came to affect much of the North during the mid-1990s to 2000s.[1] Not always a commonly shared view among climate activists, it is now widely understood that those who contribute the least to excess emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases are by far the most impacted by climate changes, and that this has been true for many decades.[2] Furthermore, the climate attribution of weather-related disasters has evolved from a broad conjecture into an almost routinely measurable quantity—it is no longer possible for honest commentators to claim that we cannot determine whether or not calamities experienced by people on earth are consequences of broader climate-related disruptions.[3] There is also no longer significant doubt that today’s extremes of global heating surpass anything the world has experienced in at least a hundred thousand years, and that current carbon dioxide concentrations in the atmosphere are likely higher than at any time in at least two to three million years.[4] It is also now clear that today’s climate disruptions are unfolding amidst the unraveling of other so-called planetary boundaries that help assure the integrity of life on earth—declines in measurable parameters such as the diversity of species, integrity of water resources, viability of land use patterns, and the cycling of biologically essential elements such as nitrogen and phosphorus.[5]

For several decades, climate activists believed that once the evidence for anthropogenic climate

changes and their impacts became widely apparent, public alarm would be aroused and viable climate solutions would be legislated into effect. This happened to some extent, with the emergence in the 2010s of global campaigns such as Extinction Rebellion, the student-led Fridays for Future movement, huge demonstrations in major U.S. and European cities, and the significant albeit insufficient scaling up of climate-protective policy measures. Building new renewable energy installations now costs less than even maintaining existing fossil fuel infrastructure in many regions, and power generation from the wind and the sun frequently displaces fossil fuels rather than simply adding to the total power supply.[6]

An emerging global climate justice movement has brought together voices from Indigenous and other land-based peoples experiencing extreme climate impacts with environmental justice communities fighting toxic contamination and global justice advocates working to expose the roots of the climate crisis in the structures of global capitalism.[7] That movement has also aroused awareness of vast inequities in the responsibility for climate-damaging pollution, both among the world's countries and especially due to inequalities within countries. Research from several sources has revealed that the wealthiest 10 percent of the world's people are responsible for roughly half of all climate-damaging carbon dioxide emissions, while the poorest half of the world only emits a few percent of the total.[8]

Unfortunately, though, the popular response to continuing climate disasters has become disturbingly muted, especially in the aftermath of the global Covid-19 pandemic. Following a precipitous fall in energy consumption at the height of the pandemic, fossil fuel use began to rise beyond previous record levels, most notably in the United States, where oil and gas production now exceeds past levels and the country became one of the world's top fossil fuel exporters in the early 2020s.[9] It is apparent that falling prices for renewable energy are far from sufficient to reverse this trend, as renewables' heightened dependence on the vagaries of capital markets stands squarely in the way of their profitability—which matters far more in a capitalist context than their cost.[10] The political discourse in many countries has also drifted onto an increasingly threatening path, toward a redoubled push to scapegoat immigrants and other marginalized people, conspiracy theories around supposed weather manipulations, and the global rise of neo-fascist regimes and political parties that aim to dismantle the modest climate progress the world has made thus far. In just the first few weeks of the second Trump presidency in the United States, the administration moved to cancel international climate commitments and dismantle climate science, energy information, and environmental justice policy, along with countless other essential public services. Combined with post-Covid supply chain problems, AI-driven leaps in power consumption, concerns about expanded mining to build solar, wind, and battery installations and the increasing skepticism of capital markets, the potential for an organized transition to a renewable energy future sometimes appears to be slipping away before our eyes.

Predicting Collapse

In the climate movement today, as well as in popular culture, the turn toward dystopian images of chaos and collapse sometimes appears overwhelming. It's far from a new tendency, but rather one that was well established by the time the global climate movement began to take off in the early 2010s. The rise of popular dystopian fiction and cinema was well underway by the era of *Blade Runner* and *Waterworld*, of *Children of Men* and Bong Joon-ho's *Snowpiercer*, along with Octavia Butler's visionary novels and countless others. By the early 2010s, authors such as Derrick Jensen and John Zerzan had come to dominate many conversations among radical environmentalists with their dire warnings of the collapse of civilization, fabulist notions that such a collapse would be the only viable path toward an ecological future, and suggestions that radical hopelessness had become the last viable expression of human agency.[11]

A related but distinct intervention was launched in the late 2000s by a UK-based group calling itself the Dark Mountain project, advocating a more psychological and literary-focused approach to the idea of civilizational collapse. "[H]uman civilization is an intensely fragile construction," its founders wrote in a widely circulated manifesto. They continued: "It is built on little more than belief: belief in the rightness of its values; belief in the strength of its system of law and order; belief in its currency; above all, perhaps, belief in its future."[12]

They called for a new literary movement that breaks "the last taboo … the myth of civilization," and went on to publish a couple of dozen volumes of writing in an effort to launch such a movement. The project's persistence may affirm the salience of their prediction of a declining belief in the future. By the mid-2010s, the project's primary founder, Paul Kingsnorth, announced his withdrawal from active political engagement, but then went on to endorse Britain's withdrawal from the European Union and embrace a politics of overt ethnic nationalism, framing it as a supposed antidote to globalization.[13]

In 2018, an unpublished paper that had apparently been rejected by several leading "sustainable management" journals began circulating even more widely online. Authored by the British management studies scholar Jem Bendell, the paper insisted on the absolute inevitability of near-term social collapse. Bendell's assessment of current climate science led him to foreground the views of critics who believed that such a collapse was not only virtually certain, but likely to occur within the next one to five years. He proposed that ongoing efforts toward climate adaptation should place equal emphasis on "psychological resilience" and an attitude of "relinquishment"—akin to how people respond to receiving a terminal medical diagnosis—along with more typical ecological restoration efforts.[14]

These are only some of the more popular expressions of a broadly dystopian outlook that has gained increasing support in recent decades. This is understandable in a world where climate-driven catastrophes are all around us, and where already-inadequate mitigation measures are being dismantled. But what does this mean for the future of climate advocacy and movements for climate justice?

Utopia or Catastrophe

Historically, the most effective social movements have complemented struggles to overturn an oppressive status quo with a longer-range view of a liberated future. More than sixty years ago, well before the emergence of an organized environmental movement, the leading theorist of social ecology, Murray Bookchin, advanced the idea that ecological science is inherently both critical and reconstructive in character.[15] A decade later, he and Dan Chodorkoff, already an activist anthropologist and student of utopian thought, founded the Institute for Social Ecology to teach a mix of social ecological theory and hands-on praxis in renewable energy technology, agriculture, and ecological building.[16]

In its early years, the Institute recruited hundreds of students and activists to spend entire summers at an innovative experimental farm in central Vermont, creating one of the first public demonstration sites for ecological technologies. Its approach had an important catalytic role in the emerging movement against nuclear power throughout New England and across the country, which emerged as a network of decentralized local alliances committed to nonviolent direct action and a reconstructive vision of ecological, solar-powered communities. Publications like *Rain Magazine* from Oregon and the *Coevolution Quarterly* (later renamed the *Whole Earth Review*) from northern California brought this synthesis to a much wider readership. The vision was fleshed out by small but influential groups of green architects and urban designers, visionary horticulturists and permaculturists, backyard inventors, creative artists, and a wide array of social activists throughout

the 1970s and 1980s. This synthesis of oppositional and reconstructive thinking significantly influenced the global justice movements of the 1990s and early 2000s, Occupy Wall Street and its numerous offshoots in the 2010s, the first decades of climate justice activism around the world, and the emergence of solarpunk as a visionary new cultural movement. Even today, it can inspire us toward a world beyond fossil-fueled capitalism, where we can all achieve a higher quality of life once freed from the stultifying cycles of ever-increasing capitalist production, consumption, and accumulation.

Despite these developments, however, more pessimistic outlooks still frequently come to dominate public discussions. Facing an earlier wave of popular collapse discourse in the climate movement and beyond, a circle of mostly west coast writers published an important collection of essays in 2012 under the title, *Catastrophism: The Apocalyptic Politics of Collapse and Rebirth*.[17] Without underestimating the dire seriousness of the emerging climate crisis, they offered a searching critical outlook on popular "catastrophism" among environmentalists, in movements of both the left and the right, and in popular culture. For one of the contributors, Bay Area scholar-activist Eddie Yuen, apocalyptic scenarios serve as "a kind of 'substitutionism,' in which a miraculous event … transforms consciousness, wipes the slate clean and abruptly changes the world [without] the need for difficult organizing and conflictive politics."[18] Over a dozen years ago, it was already predictable that forecasters of ecological collapse could be far more likely to fuel right-wing, anti-immigrant fanaticism than to facilitate a progressive awakening. Real solutions "must be prefigurative and practical as well as visionary and participatory," wrote Yuen, appealing to "community and solidarity" rather than "austerity and discipline."[19] Writer and filmmaker James Davis described in detail how apocalyptic visions and a siege mentality are "central to the propaganda and ideology of the modern right,"[20] from Christian millenarians to militia members craving an all-consuming race war. He concluded, with striking resonance to recent political campaigns on both sides of the Atlantic, that "fear and paranoia serve a rightist political predisposition more than a left or liberal one. Authoritarian politics benefits more than left politics from fear."[21] Media producer Sasha Lilley demonstrated in her chapter how expectations by left theorists that worsening social conditions would advance revolutionary movements have frequently led to just the opposite result.

More recently, the Iceland-based philosopher Ole Martin Sandberg offered a pointedly pragmatic argument against succumbing to climate despair, describing how times of crisis often advance an ethic of competition over cooperation, a heightened obedience to authority, and a distressingly Hobbesian view of society.He writes,

> Exaggerating the threat of social collapse is more likely to make us cling to the social system that exists, to make us want to preserve the status quo and the system of domination and exploitation that is causing the crisis. Panic is easily exploitable by authoritarian figures that promise to maintain order.… Seen this way, the narrative of social collapse might be part of the problem, leading to counterproductive and even harmful affective states and behaviors.[22]

Sandberg cites a variety of alternative, prefigurative currents, from Common Ground Relief in post-Katrina New Orleans to the Occupy movement's response to Hurricane Sandy in New York City, as offering the counterpoint of a "lived and 'concrete utopia' [a phrase borrowed from philosopher Ruth Levitas], which can give us the hope and trust necessary to break the paralysis caused by an overpowering fear of climate induced societal apocalypse."[23] The movements he cites are in the spirit of those memorialized a generation earlier by Richard Flacks, a sociologist and frequent advisor to New Left formations, who chronicled the numerous ways that popular movements demonstrate

> that people are capable of and ought to be making their own history, that the making of history ought to be integrated with everyday life, that [alienated] social arrangements … can

> and must be replaced by frameworks that permit routine access and participation by all in the decisions that affect their lives."[24]

Ernst Bloch, the celebrated mid-twentieth century chronicler of the "principle of hope" throughout Western history, offered a nuanced rejoinder to later views of hope as an inherently false and pacifying emotion, pointing out in the opening pages of his three-volume epic that, "Fraudulent hope is one of the greatest malefactors, even enervators of the human race, [while] concretely genuine hope its most dedicated benefactor."[25] At the turn of the millennium, the New York Public Library and Bibliothèque national de France collaborated on a comparably impressive exhibition titled *Utopia: The Search for the Ideal Society in the Western World*. A large-format book that accompanied the exhibit features a catalog of images of utopian art from ancient times through the twentieth century, together with the writing of seventeen prominent historians and social critics. Alain Touraine, once a leading French historian of social movements, explained in his contribution that the idea of "Utopia was born only when the political order separated from the cosmological or religious order."[26] He went on to describe utopian thought as an inherent product of secularization and modernity, coming to the fore as millenarian religious views were supplanted by more secular visions of a revolutionized social order. Political theorist Lyman Sargent's essay quotes the early Dutch futurist Frederick Polak, who argued that our images of the future invariably affect how the future will unfold, writing in 1961 that

> if Western man [*sic*] now stops thinking and dreaming the materials of new images of the future and attempts to shut himself up in the present, out of longing for security and for fear of the future, his [*sic*] civilization will come to an end. He has no choice but to dream or to die, condemning the whole of Western society to die with him.[27]

Toward Post-Apocalypse?

We know that the utopian impulse is often central to the long-term sustainability of social movements, and can see how it may be an essential feature of society as a whole. So how are we to sustain such a utopian imperative in the current social and political climate? As I am writing these words in early 2025, the memory of the wildfires that ravaged many diverse Los Angeles neighborhoods is still fresh in our minds. The world has experienced an entire year of global temperatures averaging over 1.5 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels, exceeding the predictions of the most reliable climate models.[28]

The limited but essential legacy of environmental and civil rights protections in the United States is now highly endangered in the United States, along with the entire edifice of institutional safeguards nominally aimed at protecting society from the whims of would-be autocrats. An unelected 400-fold billionaire, with an apparently boundless ego matched only by the president's, has begun to apply a kind of video-game sledgehammer to regulatory agencies, publicly funded science, civil servants' employment safeguards, and numerous elements of our fragile social safety net. The reactionary and thoroughly racist insurrectionary impulses of the now-pardoned January 2021 US Capitol rioters now threaten nearly every public institution, and those who stormed the Capitol building on that day—or wish they had—can now cheer on the results from the safety of their computer or television screens.

How can hopes and dreams for a better world be sustained amidst this overt authoritarianism, disruption, and chaos? Can social movements prefigure a more lasting response to worsening climate conditions? We will briefly examine the views of some current European social movement researchers on these questions, and then consider how the radical legacy of mutual aid might help us navigate a way forward.

In one recent paper, researchers from the United Kingdom and United States argue for a clear distinction between "climate doomism" and "climate realism," with the latter view emphasizing that catastrophe represents a *potential* future that can still be "assessed and guarded against."[29] They caution against the view that our options are limited to total apocalypse or its complete prevention, as often expressed within movements like Extinction Rebellion, while embracing the existential otherness and "epistemic humility" that can be aroused by some of the best climate fiction.[30] Swedish sociologist Carl Cassegård argues that we are already living in a "postapocalyptic" era, with severe climate-related disruptions very much a part of our present reality.[31] While such a view can be seen as inviting hopelessness, fatalism, and passivity, he describes a series of interviews with fifteen collapse-minded activists whose approaches are far more nuanced. His informants' views are placed along two distinct axes, assessing people's sense of hope and their inclinations toward or away from political confrontation. Those who lack hope but don't fear confrontation often redouble their efforts to live morally meaningful lives, whereas those who are somewhat hopeful but more confrontation-averse often convey a deep engagement with their natural surroundings and with collective efforts to live better on the land.[32]

Dutch political scientist Joost deMoor has profiled proactive climate adaptation efforts in five northern European cities, frequently led by people with a postapocalyptic outlook. The most impressive is in Antwerp, Belgium, where people are countering their despair by greening neighborhoods, practicing agroecology, and "imagining the city of the future."[33] Joe Davidson in the United Kingdom, one of the authors of the first "climate realism" paper cited earlier, elaborates on how postapocalyptic narratives "pique the imagination" and can further efforts at social rebuilding vs. mere fatalism.[34] He warns, however, that this approach often carries a distinctly Eurocentric bias, failing to acknowledge the experiences of people throughout the global South who have been contending with the ravages of extreme climate-related social disruptions for many years.

Finally, British geographer and social critic Erik Swyngedouw similarly warns against the superficial universalization of climate threats, as well as the tendency of many commentators to fall back on technocratic false solutions. While it may already be too late for those around the world who "already live in the post-apocalyptic interstices of life," acknowledging this reality can also be the harbinger of a new politics.[35] He embraces the rising demand for "system change not climate change" among radical climate activists and the potential for the present crisis to aid us in "constructing a real 'humanity'," a view that resonates with Murray Bookchin's earlier insistence that our response to ecological crises can uphold humanity as an ethical and potentially revolutionary historical subject, rooted in community and able to reach beyond the limits of both class- and identity-based politics.[36]

Mutual Aid and the Future

Popular responses to the Covid-19 pandemic brought unprecedented public attention to the legacy of mutual aid, an approach rooted firmly in anarchist theory and praxis that draws on the strongest human capacities for empathy, solidarity, and proactive community care.[37] While many Covid-era mutual aid efforts felt more like short-term, emergency band-aids than systemic challenges to an inherently inequitable and dehumanizing social order, others were firmly linked to political education and longer-term community organizing efforts. They introduced people to anti-hierarchical, horizontalist forms of praxis and countered the often stultifying hegemony of what is often described as the "non-profit industrial complex."

Several of these projects have directly fed into longer-term programs of organizing and action, such as those of the Woodbine Center in the outer boroughs of New York City (based in Ridgewood, Queens) and Food Not Cops in Burlington, Vermont, which still provides daily free meals to those in

need and also supported a fall 2020 encampment in a park across from the local police headquarters, demanding the firing of officers with documented histories of brutality.[38] A network organized as Mutual Aid Disaster Relief came to master the art of diverting commercial supply chains to facilitate the movement of essential goods to where they are needed the most.[39] In the sprawling city of Los Angeles, a Covid-era mutual aid effort spawned a neighborhood-based electoral campaign and a series of People's Movement Assemblies, inspired by a process rooted in the 2010s-era U.S. Social Forums. Local groups involved in worker co-ops and debates over housing development on public lands, among others, founded an organizing project called Los Angeles for All, inspired by ongoing municipalist efforts in cities as diverse as Jackson, Mississippi, and Barcelona in Spain.[40]

Cheryl Rivera, a participant in a Brooklyn-based mutual aid group that arose during the pandemic, describes the difficulties of sustaining the more system-challenging dimensions of mutual aid amidst the difficulties of day-to-day fundraising, distribution of goods, etc., but maintains a guardedly hopeful outlook:

> Mutual aid can be transformative in a way that moves beyond crisis response and survival when it is consistent, militantly political, and when it creates community space out of a mere place.… What is less certain is whether the mutual aid networks we've built can help us go beyond crisis mode and become a tool for actually getting free of the exploitative structures of capitalism that undergird all of the basic functions of society.[41]

At its best, local mutual aid efforts can nurture new organizing methods and help inspire radically democratic approaches to community governance, beginning to fill in the gaps left by the failures of larger public institutions and ultimately enabling bolder directly democratic confederations throughout our cities and regions.[42]

Similar efforts have emerged across the Atlantic as well. Tadzio Mueller, a prominent German climate justice organizer and researcher, has become increasingly discouraged by the movement's perceived failures and proposes a movement for a "just collapse," rooted in the knowledge that climate chaos has arrived, that routine aspects of life can no longer be taken for granted, and the urgent need for resolutely antifascist, collective responses to emergencies.[43] He has highlighted the activities of a Swedish group called *Preppa Tillsammans* ("Prepping Together") that seeks to transform the typically hyper-individualistic "prepper" outlook into a program for cooperative, neighborhood-centered mutual aid.[44] Mueller and others have called for a different kind of European climate camp, a "Kollapscamp," with a combined focus on resilience and resistance. Their call for August 2025 proclaims that

> even under these difficult conditions, we can build, protect and expand places of good living. There are role models and possibilities not to stop at the acceptance of collapse, but to use it to retain our collective agency in a darker future. Even in collapse, our struggle for the best possible world for all does not stop.[45]

The world we are now experiencing can require us to sustain two apparently contradictory outlooks at the same time: first, that the current situation is dire and that some horrifically devastating outcomes appear inevitable; and, second, that the legacy of mutual aid and community repair remains a harbinger of a more forward-looking and even utopian outlook on the future. Public health advocate Brad Stulberg, writing in the *New York Times* not long ago, called for a sense of "tragic optimism": "Recognizing that we maintain agency fuels hope, and maintaining hope reminds us that we have agency."[46] Acclaimed education theorist and social critic Henry Giroux, reflecting upon the deep-seated culture of cruelty that typifies the actions of the Trump administration—and its resonance with a fascistic politics of humiliation and "perpetual insecurity"—concluded that, "Hope,

in this context, is not naïve optimism but a call to organized resistance—a refusal to accept the conditions of cruelty as inevitable."[47]

In a recent article in *Orion* magazine, environmental justice researcher and disability advocate Sunaura Taylor echoed the caution against viewing the climate future only in terms of apocalypse or salvation, as described earlier. We need to acknowledge, in Taylor's words, "that nature has been altered and damaged in profound and serious ways," and that we are experiencing the "mass ecological disablement of the more than human world."[48] In her book *Disabled Ecologies*, exploring the consequences of a plume of toxic chemicals that spread over a five-mile span around Tucson's international airport through decades of military aircraft production, Taylor wrote that we are now in an "Age of Disability," one that "exposes how systems of power rely on, benefit from, and produce disability in and among human people…[,] ecosystems and nonhuman species."[49] She calls for a "vast coalition of an environmentalism of the injured," which draws on the lesson of critical disability studies that "with access to health care, social supports, and community, disabled life can be not just livable but flourishing."[50]

In a report on their immediate response to the flooding that devastated the city of Asheville, North Carolina, in the fall of 2024, members of the Firestorm radical community center noted, "It's a strange paradox that the utopia we dream of becomes most visible in the dark."[51] Hope is "an act of defiance," in the words of Rebecca Solnit in her now-classic work, *Hope in the Dark*. The book's first chapter insists that: "To hope is to gamble. It's to bet on the future, on your desires, on the possibility that an open heart and uncertainty is better than gloom and safety. To hope is dangerous, and yet it is the opposite of fear, for to live is to risk."[52]

This is the kind of risk and "dangerous hope" that our movements will need to embrace if we are to find a sane and humane way through what are sure to be difficult times ahead.

This essay will appear as a chapter in ***Climate Collapse? Calls to Action from Around the World***, edited by Matthew Azoulay, to be published later this year by Arkbound books in the UK.

notes

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44. See Preppa Tillsammans.

45. From Kollapscamp, via Google translation, with wording clarifications from M. Suter of Netzwerk für Kommunalismus.

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